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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of International Relations

Dissertation Thesis

2023 **Martin Laryš**

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To Run the Insurgency like a Business: Self-Defeating Patronage by the Principal in Eastern Ukraine

Dissertation Thesis

Supervisor: Prof. Emil Aslan, Ph.D.
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Abstract

The dissertation draws on the literature on indirect warfare based on principal-agent theory, which conceptualizes indirect warfare as an example of delegation. Principals play an important role in shaping the rebellion and exerting control over it through the delegation used as a low-cost and deniable device for empowering the rebel proxies. However, the delegation is fraught with problems, especially when delegated to fragmented rebels.

The literature considers the fragmented rebel militias as weak non-state actors prone to rapid failure and decay. My argument focuses on the paradox of delegation to the fragmented rebel groups. I claim that such delegation is inherently costly and visible, which contradicts the original intention of delegation as a low-cost and deniable foreign policy tool. In my dissertation, I introduce the concepts of self-defeating patronage and decentralized delegation as my contribution to the discussion on indirect warfare.

The principal suffers self-defeating patronage because it must keep the barriers-of-entry low for the incipient rebel groups to overcome the collective action problem that the would-be rebels experience due to their weak social ties. Keeping the barriers low without strict control by the principal - that would raise the costs and visibility - fuels incessant fragmentation, resulting in the imminent failure that the principal has to avoid by costly and visible means, such as direct military inroads and forced merger of the rebel groups.

The literature considers the principal as a collective actor. It means that the principal is "black boxed" in the agent-centric literature. It has been discussed *why* principals delegate, but not *who* delegate within the principal's institutions. I claim that the principal's institutional subsystems, managing the delegation chains, might be driven by internal tensions, have divided interests and compete with each other. Such decentralized delegation may result in weaker control over the rebels and multiply the delegation problems, including fragmentation.

The empirical part focuses on Russia’s patronage of the rebel proxies in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in eastern Ukraine from 2014-to 2022. This dissertation is grounded in the epistemology of scientific realism and is designed as an explanatory case study using process tracing as a qualitative method when each part of the theorized causal mechanism can be disaggregated and conceptualized.

Abstrakt

Disertační práce „Řídit povstání jako firmu: sebepoškozující patronát principála ve východní Ukrajině“ čerpá z literatury specializující se na nepřímé válečnictví, která se zakládá na teorii principála a agenta, jenž konceptualizuje nepřímé válečnictví jako ukázkový příklad delegace. Principálové hrají významnou roli při utváření rebelie a vykonávání kontroly nad ní prostřednictvím delegace jakožto nízkonákladového a popíratelného nástroje pro k posílení rebelů a jejich milicí. Delegování je však plné problémů, zejména pokud je delegováno na roztříštěné povstalecké skupiny.

Literatura považuje roztříštěné povstalecké skupiny za slabé nestátní aktéry náchylné k rychlému selhání a rozpadu. Má argumentace se zaměřuje na paradox delegování rebelie na roztříštěné povstalecké skupiny. Tvrdím, že takové delegování je ze své podstaty nákladné a viditelné, což je v rozporu s původním záměrem delegování jako levného a popíratelného nástroje zahraniční politiky. Ve své disertační práci zavádím koncepty sebezničující patronát a decentralizovaného delegování jako svůj příspěvek do diskuse o nepřímém válečnictví.

Principál doplácí na sebepoškozující patronát, jelikož musí držet nízké vstupní bariéry pro vznikající povstalecké milice, aby překonal problém kolektivní akce, s níž se budoucí povstalci potýkají v důsledku svých slabých sociálních vazeb. Udržování nízkých vstupních bariér bez přísné kontroly ze strany principála – která by zvýšila náklady a zviditelnila jeho aktivity – podněcuje neustálou fragmentaci, která vede k hrozícímu vojenskému selhání povstalců, jemuž se principál musí vyhnout nákladnými a viditelnými prostředky, jako je přímý vojenský vpád a nucené sloučení povstaleckých skupin.

V literatuře se o principálovi uvažuje jako o kolektivním aktérovi. To znamená, že v literatuře zaměřené na agenta – povstalecké hnutí, je principál jakási „černá skříňka“. Literatura pojednává o tom, proč principálové delegují, ale nikoliv o tom, kdo konkrétně v rámci institucí principála deleguje. Můj argument zní, že institucionální subsystémy principála, řídící řetězce delegování, mohou být vedeny odlišnými zájmy či vzájemnou konkurencí. Takové decentralizované delegování může mít za následek slabší kontrolu nad povstaleckými milicemi a znásobit problémy s delegováním, včetně fragmentace.

Empirická část se zaměřuje na patronát Ruska nad povstaleckými milicemi v Doněcké a Luhanské oblasti na východě Ukrajiny v letech 2014-2022. Tato disertační práce vychází z epistemologie vědeckého realismu a je koncipována jako explanační případová studie s využitím metody rozboru procesů jakožto kvalitativní metody, kdy lze jednotlivé části teoretického kauzálního mechanismu rozčlenit a konceptualizovat.

Keywords

Fragmentation, Rebellion, Delegation, Donbas, Principal

Klíčová slova

Fragmentace, povstání, delegace, Donbas, Principál

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on the 15 of February 2023 Martin Laryš

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Introduction

Why do fragmented autonomous rebel proxies impose high political and material costs on their external patrons? The fragmentation of the rebel militias often impedes the weakening or defeating of the incumbent regime. The existing literature noticed that fragmented rebel militias are inherently weak and prone to rapid, often fratricidal, failure and decay. They will likely be quickly wiped out or pushed aside when facing a strong state. They are the least common type of enduring rebel militias, even though many groups rise and promptly fall as fragmented organizations. Such structure of the rebel militias is extremely vulnerable to state counterinsurgency and internal unrest (Staniland 2014).

The dissertation focuses on indirect warfare and draws on the principal-agent theory, which considers delegation as the principal's low-cost and deniable foreign policy instrument. However, the delegation to the fragmented autonomous rebel militias is problematic in terms of low costs and plausible deniability, and it often hinders the principal's preferred outcomes. In case of such delegation, the principal may be forced to reshape the structure of the rebel movement and overcome the low effectivity resulting from the rebels' fragmentation, which causes higher overhead costs for the delegation and visibility instead of preferred plausible deniability.

When it comes to rebel fragmentation, I work with the organizational theory of rebel fragmentation rooted in historical institutionalism and introduced by Paul Staniland, Henning Tamm, and Hanne Fjelde & Desireé Nilsson. Staniland came first with the idea of the social-institutional theory supplemented by Tamm, who pointed to the role of external actors/principals in the fragmentation of the rebel militias and Fjelde & Nilsson, who introduced the concept of barrier-to-entry.

The historical institutionalists have been strong proponents of an image of social causation that is 'path-dependent' in the sense that it rejects the traditional postulate that the same operative forces will generate the same results everywhere in favor of the view that the effect of such forces will be mediated by the contextual features of a given situation often inherited from the past (Hall and Taylor 1996, 939-941). The development of political institutions is described as regularized patterns and routinized practices subject to a logic of path-dependence (Schmidt 2010).

External patronage is one of the key resources the rebel militias may profit from (Byman et al. 2001; San-Akca 2016; Groh 2019; Mumford 2013; Lake 2016). Many authors elaborated on Salehyan's principal-agent-based theory of the delegated rebellion (Berkowitz 2017; Byman and Sarah E. Kreps 2010; Popovic 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Davies 2018; Bapat 2012; Petrova 2019; Tamm 2016a). The principal-agent theory stems from rational-choice institutionalist tradition. However, some aspects of the rebellion's delegation theory, which will be discussed in this work, remain understudied and unexplained. Scholars admit that the rebellion's delegation as a low-cost and deniable device for empowering the rebel proxies by the principal is fraught with problems. I argue that those problems multiply when the principal delegates to the autonomous fragmented rebel militias.

The rational step of the principal to solve the fragmentation-related problems is the forced merger of the fragmented militias as a pathway to rebel institutional change. The outcome is the principal's increased central control. My tentative theory of the self-defeating patronage is conceptualized as a causal chain when the principal forcefully merges autonomous fragmented rebel militias to keep the delegated rebellion sustainable. Such patronage goes from autonomous fragmentation to the strictly controlled centralization of the rebel movement. Overcoming the fragmentation is way more costly and visible than low-cost and deniable delegation suggested as the main advantage of the principal-agent relations in the rebellion.

Thereby, the theory of the delegated rebellion is inherently contradictory because the delegation to the fragmented militias tends not to be low-cost and deniable because such militias cannot succeed in the rebellion without additional resources from the principal. Supplies and other activities, including direct military inroads of the principal into the target state's territory, increase the costs and the visibility of the principal's patronage over the rebels. Henning Tamm noted that the delegation to a rebel commander is likely to counteract factors that increase the chance of fragmentation—such as weak social ties or severe battlefield losses—only if the level of external resources allocated to the commander is very high (Tamm 2016a).

My second argument draws on the literature on the delegation chains (Popovic 2015a, 2017), which claims that the length of the delegation chains also matters in the delegation process. However, what the extant literature fails to discuss is the problem of coherence of the principal's delegation chains. It implicitly considers the principal as a collective actor who delegates the rebellion through the centralized delegation chains. However, it is not always the case. Parallel delegation chains from more principal's subsystems (foreign ministry, secret services, presidential office) might have competing relations, tensions, and divided interests. In some extreme cases, they might spin out of the control of the state.

While Milos Popovic presents his concept that longer delegation chains increase the distance between a principal and rebels, which leads to the defection of the rebels against the principal, I introduce my concept of decentralized delegation chains, which may disrupt the delegation's efficiency and deepen the problems related to rebel fragmentation. For instance, the principal's competing state agencies may focus on weakening the competing agency's agent, which may facilitate further fragmentation. The length of the delegation chains, discussed by Popovic, is perhaps only one dimension that may impact the rebellion's outcome. The delegation chains' decentralization is shaped by the number of the principal's institutional subsystems involved in the rebellion and their mutual relations. To conclude, my work analyzes how the lack of coherence of the rebel movement and principal's delegation chains affects the delegated rebellion's outcomes.

I selected the delegated rebellion in Eastern Ukraine for answering the question of why fragmented rebel proxies turn the purportedly low-cost and deniable delegated rebellions into high-cost and visible patronage as a strong case when the principal loosely controlled the fragmented rebels in the initial stage of the rebellion, which opened the window of opportunity for a huge number of grass-roots rebel militias with no overall hierarchy. It affected rebel fighting capabilities to such an extent that the principal, the Russian Federation, had to directly attack the Ukrainian forces to avoid rebel military defeat in the summer of 2014. That turned upside down the logic behind the delegated rebellion as the low-cost and deniable foreign policy device. The relevance of such case selection cannot be overstated. Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, using coercion and force to take control of and destabilize the territories of a neighboring state, is a frontal challenge to the post-Cold War European regional order (Allison 2014).

My text is grounded in the institutionalism(s) used initially in economics and lately applied to security studies in the research of insurgencies, civil wars, or indirect warfare. In my work, I combined both institutionalist approaches because rationalist principal-agent theory is unable to explain the whole causal process of self-defeating patronage. It can explain why rebel militias are autonomous on the principal but not why they are fragmented. That's why I analyze the principal through rational choice institutionalism and the rebel proxies (agents) through historical institutionalism. Only this synthesis helps to create a final causal chain, a mechanism that would be incomplete using only one approach.

The dissertation is designed as an explanatory case study grounded in the epistemology of scientific realism and using process tracing as the research method. Scientific realists contend that social structures have causal powers, and it is possible to observe causal chains in order to explain social phenomena even if the deep structural relationships cannot be directly observed (see Marsh and Furlong 2002; Kurki and Wight 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2015). I decided to choose process tracing as the qualitative method, suitable for case studies as a proper tool to study causal mechanisms, which makes possible to make strong within-case inferences about the causal process (Beach and Pedersen 2013).

In my work, I go through all steps necessary to follow the process tracing properly: collecting empirical data, developing a hypothesized causal mechanism, making empirical evidence by evaluating the observable manifestations from the collected data and testing the empirical evidence. In developing a hypothesized causal mechanism, I start with the transformative event, which opens the window of opportunity for the principal's patronage over the rebel militias – the victory of Euromaidan and toppling the Yanukovych's regime in February 2014. That is followed by Part 1 in the causal chain – Initiation of the delegation to the loosely controlled nascent rebel proxies with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry. I identified Part 2 as incessant fragmentation, which incapacitates the rebel movement against the government forces. Part 3 is the forced merger of the autonomous fragmented rebel militias as a solution for the problems caused by fragmentation and imperfect control by the principal. The outcome of the delegation is the high-cost and visible overcoming of the fragmentation of the rebel proxies that become entirely dependent on the principal.

When it comes to terms I use in my dissertation, the simple definition of a rebel militia is a non-state actor that seeks to gain political control over territory controlled by a sovereign government by using means outside an established legal framework for transferring power. The more detailed definition is provided by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset: a rebel militia must be a nongovernmental group of people having announced a name for their formally organized group; it should have used armed force to influence the outcome of a stated incompatibility; a rebel organization's military activities must be part of consciously conducted and planned political campaigns rather than spontaneous violence; it must be involved in a military event resulting in at least twenty-five battle-related deaths per year (Woldemariam 2018, 23-24).

In this dissertation, I use the terms rebellion and insurgency interchangeably (Mampilly 2011; Eck 2010). I work with the term secessionism, which has a broader meaning than separatism or irredentism - not all rebels were separatists or irredentists, and not all of them wanted to join Russia or secede from Ukraine to create an independent state entity. The rebel demands were contradictory and confusing. Calls for the federalization of Ukraine, the independence of the Donbas, and the unification of the region with Russia were proclaimed all at same time (Maiorova 2017). In the dissertation, I use Ukrainian spelling for toponyms in Ukraine, including the rebel-held territories, which are internationally recognized as part of

Ukraine, and Ukrainian citizens, who did not participate in the rebellion on the rebel side, Ukrainian officials, and organizations registered in Ukraine. Russian spelling is used for Russian toponyms and citizens, pro-Russian secessionist movements, rebel militias and their commanders for better authenticity. In a direct speech, I use the toponyms and names in the speaker's language (mostly Russian language).

The structure of the dissertation starts with the theoretical chapter, where I discuss the evolution of the literature on rebel fragmentation and indirect warfare based on principal-agent theory. This chapter contains my tentative theoretical concepts of self-defeating patronage and decentralized delegation chains, conceptualized as my twofold contribution to the extant literature on rebellion and indirect warfare. The chapter ends by introducing the state of the art on causes of the rebellion in Donbas. The following chapter outlines the methodology of my research grounded in scientific realism and process tracing as the chosen method of my work.

Every chapter in the empirical section discusses the problem of fragmentation and the development of the situation in the Donbas, supplemented by the actions of the principal and its shaping of the rebellion. Evers chapter consists of two parts – the first one is focused on the rebel militias and the second part on the principal. The empirical part of the dissertation starts with the third chapter. It contextualizes the cause for Russia's delegated rebellion in Eastern Ukraine and identifies the unseating of Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014 as a critical juncture in the hypothetical causal mechanism. The chapter elaborates on the principal, its position towards Ukraine, and events leading to the toppling of Yanukovych's regime.

The following chapter discusses the first part of the causal mechanism: the initiation of the delegation to the loosely controlled nascent rebel proxies with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry. It focuses in detail on the weak social ties of the incipient rebel militias in Donbas, low barriers to entry that are supposed to endorse rebel fragmentation, and the principal's initiation of the rebellion. The next chapter deals with the perpetual fragmentation of the rebel militias in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the principal's delegation, which resulted in the incapacitating of the rebel militias despite increasing military supplies and other help from the principal.

The last step in the hypothesized causal mechanism elaborates on the problems resulting from the fragmentation when rebels faced imminent military defeat and the principal had to take measures that incremented costs and visibility, such as direct military inroad and forced merger supposed to get more control over fragmented rebel militias controlling different parts of the rebel enclaves. The last chapter is dedicated to the discussion on the outcomes of the delegated rebellion, its costs and benefits, and testing the empirical evidence I collected during my research on this topic.

1.) The Theoretical Explanations of the Delegated Rebellion and Rebel Fragmentation

The political theories of rebellion had been initially dominated by the relative deprivation paradigm, with social grievances as the driving forces behind the mobilization, until Mancur Olson questioned the assumption found in previous literature that individuals with common interests will join to attain these interests. Olson argued that doing so would not be rational since the common interest is a public good. That is, anyone can partake of it regardless of whether they helped to bring about the good or not. It creates a situation in which it is more rational to free ride (abstain from participation) and thereby avoid the private costs involved with participation, especially when it comes to such high-risk enterprise as rebellion (Eck 2010).

Such arguments brought the rationalist way of thinking into the literature on the rebellion, based on neo-classical economics (Wittek 2010, 688-690). The collective action and free-rider problem are one of the most important concepts in rationalist literature on rebellion. Where individuals can gain the benefits of some public good without contributing to its provision, they have incentives to free ride. If too many people free ride, the good is under-provided, and everyone is worse off. Collective action is a problem of commitment. If one can get everyone to agree that a given public good is in everyone's interest and can get them credibly to agree to contribute, then the problem is solved; but getting people to commit credibly is itself a collective action problem (Dowding 2009, 43-44). Self-interested rationality is in contradiction with group rationality. The success of movements for social change depends on people's willingness to abjure individually or organizationally profitable opportunistic behavior for the sake of the wider movement (Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2016).

The public good problems inherent in collective action are particularly true for rebellion because the risks associated with armed conflict are potentially enormous, and all collective benefits are highly uncertain and distributed in the future. Fact that a rebel militia fights for public goods but individuals involved in rebellion pay private costs creates strong incentives for rational individuals to abstain from participation and instead opt to free-ride. Grievances associated with inequality/relative deprivation are supposed to be insufficient to explain individual participation in collective action. The rationalist solution to the free-rider problem is selective incentives - private gains distributed only to participating individuals. An individual must take part in the rebellion to be a beneficiary of selective incentives. Material incentives have received the most attention of the different types of incentives. Scholars have emphasized the expected private returns to rebels, in which only active rebels share in the booty taken in a successful rebellion (Eck 2010).

Because there is a low probability of being granted the incentive, and even with success, it will be dispersed only far in the future, these models should not be as powerful in explaining participation as those in which selective incentives are granted directly after an individual begins to participate. Besides, someone has to pay for the incentives, and no one wants to devote their private wealth to dispense selective incentives in pursuit of a public good. The answers to these questions were provided by the greed vs. grievance literature launched by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. Greedy rebels capture material resources otherwise unavailable to them without the cover of war. Natural resources and their rents and the looting of civilian populations provide funding that can be used to distribute immediate selective incentives (Eck 2010).

In general, these rationalist economic viability theories are based on the notion that opportunity and economic viability are the dominant explanations for rebellion. Theorists in this school of thought argue that the risk of the rebellion is increased when there is an opportunity for rebels to make a financial gain or when there is an opportunity for rebels to generate profits through the control or extortion of natural resources such as drugs, diamonds, timber or oil (Burton 2015). The greed and grievances model focuses on conditions that favor the formation of rebel organizations, and their econometric model predicts the probability of a rebellion (Sørli 2002).

These economic viability theories, dominant throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, consisted of large-N and rational choice work modeling outcomes related to the causes, duration, and resolution of armed conflict within states. Much of this scholarship focused on evaluating how state-level attributes affect dependent variables such as conflict onset (Sørli 2002). It is based on a fundamental assumption of neoclassical economics that individuals respond to incentives. These incentives could be monetary benefits, social rewards, or some other form of compensation that is valued by the rational actor (Lidow 2016, 21).

Rational choice institutionalists in political science often draw analytical tools from the new institutional economics, which emphasizes the importance of property rights, rent-seeking, and transaction costs to the operation and development of institutions. This approach is closely linked to the principal-agent theory, which focuses on the institutional mechanisms whereby principals can monitor and enforce compliance on their agents. Rationalist institutionalism focuses on rational actors who pursue their preferences following a logic of calculation within political institutions, defined as structures of incentives. These rational actors tend to see politics as a series of collective action dilemmas (Hall and Taylor 1996, 943-945; Schmidt, 2010).

The principal-agent theory examines how states, as the principals, delegate tasks and authority to international institutions, which serve as their independent representatives (as agents) within particular issue areas (Sterling-Folker 2013, 125). The principal signs a delegation contract with the agent for the latter to carry out the wishes of the former (Dowding 2009, 44). Delegation means that a principal conditionally grants authority to an agent to carry out defined tasks on its behalf, according to its instructions, and subject to its hierarchical control (Abbott et al. 2019). Because differences arise between what states want as principals and what institutions do as agents, states simultaneously develop mechanisms for controlling organizational influence and autonomy (Sterling-Folker 2013, 125).

Models of delegation concern themselves with a principal and at least one agent. The principal decides which tasks to assign and the level of compensation. The agent then decides how much effort to spend on the task, i.e., whether to work or shirk. Faced with this delegation problem, economic theories focus on how to construct incentive contracts for controlling subordinates. The payments provided by the principal determine the benefits of a given task, which the agent weighs against the cost of effort and the value of other opportunities (Lidow 2016, 21). Those incentives should secure decisions that the principal prefers most (Gailamard 2014).

The basic ideas underlying rationalist principal-agent models are increasingly being utilized in political science. Principal–agent theory has even become a predominant approach in different fields of political science where ‘delegation’ as one particular form of organizing state activities is discussed (Braun and Guston 2003, 303). In the last decade, the principal-agent theory has almost completely dominated theorizing on conflict delegation as a form of indirect warfare (Byman and Kreps 2010; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Popovic 2017). Even scholars using alternative labels, such as beneficiary–proxy (Mumford 2013) or sponsor–insurgent (Tamm 2016a), adhere to many of its core assumptions. To Karlén and Rauta, it is fair to say that principal-agent theory has become the dominant framework through which we have come to study external support to non-state armed groups (Karlén and Rauta 2021, 11).

1. 1) The Delegation of the Rebellion as a Form of Indirect Warfare

An increasing amount of research focuses on indirect warfare, i.e., instances where a third-party government intentionally supports a rebel militia in its fight against its government (Byman 2013; San-Akca 2016; Bapat 2012; Belgioiso 2018; Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2017; Karlén 2017; Tamm 2016a; Petrova 2019; Krieg and Rickli 2019). A growing strand of this research conceptualizes indirect warfare as a textbook example of delegation, whereby principals play an important role in shaping the rebellion and exerting control over it (Salehyan 2010, 501).

The principal-agent theory has been traditionally used to explain the relations between the commanders and its membership within the rebel organization (Gates 2002). However, Idean Salehyan came with application of this theory to the external support of rebellions when the principal is the external state, and the agent is at least one rebel militia. He coined the concept of delegated rebellion to describe the rebel patronage by the principal as a cost-saving device (Salehyan 2010). The core of the theory lies in a principal's contract with rebels as a foreign policy tool. Principals expect to gain more agenda control over the movement they sponsor. They can shape rebel strategies and goals to gain bargaining leverage over a rival state at a significantly reduced cost (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Salehyan 2010; Popovic 2015a, 2015b; Byman and Kreps 2010; Hoekstra 2021).

The principal endows a rebel militia with some resources and prerogatives to carry out violence against the rival government. The rebel militia acts as a representative of its principal. In return for their support, principals expect rebels to cooperate over goals, organization, strategy, and tactics. Ideally, principals seek exclusive (restricted to other actors) and complete (regarding the sponsor's overarching goals) compliance of its agent (Popovic 2015a). Delegation is not solely the choice of the principal but a strategic partnership between the principal and the agent (Salehyan 2010).

The delegation of the rebellion to the proxies, rebel militias, is supposed to be cheaper and more convenient than direct military invasion in many aspects (Salehyan 2010; 493, 501). The state must pay the direct expense generated by the conflict, and leaders often suffer audience costs at home and abroad stemming from unpopular wars. In order to spare themselves these costs, state leaders may delegate the conflict to agents by providing military and monetary support to rebel militias challenging the target state (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014, 638). The immediate benefits for principals are deniability and low cost. Since inter-state war is a costly endeavor, the use of proxies is an attractive alternative. By subcontracting out coercion, a state can significantly reduce its costs, both materially and politically. The principal can gain a veneer of legitimacy by presenting the rebel militia as a 'domestic' actor. Since the extent and level of support and control are most likely unclear, the coercing state can circumvent a level of blame and criticism (Bowen 2019).

Many nascent rebel militias lack the capacity to independently overcome collective action for many reasons related to their weak social ties, such as a high level of fragmentation, weak resources, no authentic leadership, and lack of pre-existing militant structures. Delegation makes the rebel job easier because empowering the rebels weakens the incumbent (Bapat 2012). Tamm argues that principals usually choose to support those individuals and rebel militias whose preferences they believe to align with their own. However, principals sometimes support rebel leaders with more divergent preferences. Regardless of the initial level of preference alignment, the strategic priorities of rebel leaders and principals can change over time (Tamm 2016a).

1. 1. 1) Supply side

Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham note that sponsoring a rebel militia is a tactic that states use to destabilize target governments. External support will be driven to a large extent by foreign policy decisions and relations with the regime experiencing rebellion. While states may sympathize with opposition groups that share similar goals, they are unlikely to provide direct aid unless they have some incompatibility or dispute with the state in question since assisting rebels is clearly a hostile act. The specific goal that states hope to achieve by supporting rebels may vary. These may include gaining leverage over territorial issues, disputes over policies, and attempts to unseat unfriendly regimes. Regardless of the nature of the international conflict, empowering rebel organizations is a tactic that states employ in weakening their enemies (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 712-714).

According to Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, empowering the domestic adversaries of a rival regime is less costly than international war and can offer certain strategic advantages:

- First, inter-state war requires a commitment of material resources such as troops and armaments, and it risks the lives of government soldiers. These costs may produce weariness and discontent. Providing finances, military equipment, advisors, and so on, to a rebel militia requires much less of a resource commitment than a full-scale invasion.

- Second, the international costs of inter-state war can be quite high. The international community is likely to condemn—and perhaps impose sanctions on—countries that engage in an outright invasion of another state's territory. In contrast, support for a rebellion is far more difficult to prove conclusively and has been historically less likely to be challenged at least by strong measures.

- Third, support for rebels is often difficult to gauge since it may be conducted in relative secrecy, and governments may have an incentive to hide acts of foreign aggression from international as well as domestic audiences. States can plausibly deny complicity with, or knowledge of, bad behavior by their agents. Enlisting the help of domestic rebel militias may offer several local advantages for the principal. Domestic groups often have more legitimacy given their local ties. From a tactical perspective, such militias often have better information about domestic populations, government informants, terrain, critical infrastructure, and so on (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 712-713).

1. 1. 2) Demand side

The rebel militia must evaluate the costs and benefits of accepting external support, assuming that rebels want to maximize two things: 1) the resources they have at their disposal to challenge the state or privately consume, and 2) the autonomy they have over their own actions. All rebels have specific goals they are trying to achieve in the conflict. Some have policy goals such as a greater role in the national government or more territorial autonomy, but other militias simply desire personal enrichment and material rewards. Rebel militias are often at a resource disadvantage, particularly at the beginning of a conflict, when small opposition groups are still mobilizing and seeking the support they need to challenge better-equipped and organized states. Many nascent rebel militias have little access to the money, equipment, training, and personnel needed to mount an effective challenge to the state. For rebels to topple the regime or extract greater concessions, they need to mobilize a significant military capacity, and quickly, since such militias are often quite vulnerable at the initial stages. External patrons can provide an obvious source of funding for rebel entrepreneurs. Moreover, foreign state patrons - as opposed to private contributions - have the greatest prospect of offering substantial resources, particularly in military terms (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 713-714). In extreme cases, principals may select the rebel leader and decide where the forces will be deployed (Lidow 2016, 10).

1. 1. 3) Rebel Autonomy and Principal’s Control over the Agents - Delegation Chains

The central issue for the principal is how to delegate power without losing control because the principal cannot constantly monitor the agent's actions (Heldt 2017, 471-473). The control, or leverage, over an agent is the determining factor in the principal's ability to calibrate and direct the activities of its agent. Additionally, by creating, rather than co-opting a proxy, the principal can ensure greater alignment of interests by placing preferred personnel in key positions. However, this also increases the risks of obvious connections to the principal, diminishing plausible deniability. As a result, there is a fundamental tension between control and deniability. To achieve increased control, the principal has to exert more effort and resources, resulting in higher visibility (Bowen 2019).

Imperfect control - a high level of rebel autonomy - arises when the principal, due to considerable information asymmetries, cannot observe rebels' underlying preferences and may not be able to observe agents' behavior (Green 2016). Rebels can shirk—that is, to avoid their agreed responsibilities—because principals are unable to monitor rebel group behavior continually (Hoekstra 2021, 524). Lack of control over the agents appears to be more the norm than the exception. Principals often lack the specific battlefield information needed to direct resources efficiently and cohesively. Once the resources have been delivered, the principal thus often has little influence over where that money goes (Baylouny and Mullins 2018).

The question of control is connected to the delegation chains introduced to the extant literature by Milos Popovic. Delegation chains can be short, involving the secret services and a few persons in the rebel militia or long, extending to further principal-agent relationships within a movement. Longer delegation chains increase the distance between a principal and agents and increase the costs of supplying resources and monitoring agents' activities (Popovic, 2015a).

1. 1. 4) What can go wrong in Delegated Rebellions

Problems regularly emerge in delegated rebellions. Empowering rebel organizations by the principal entail risks, particularly those associated with agency loss. There are numerous examples where states gamble on a rebellion but face adverse consequences as a result (Bapat 2012; Hoekstra 2021; Popovic 2015b). Despite the tight control, principals frequently encounter problems controlling rebels, because: rebels' preferences often diverge from theirs; unlike sponsors, rebels often possess private information about their own aims, abilities, and activities; and sponsors can neither perfectly monitor rebels' actions, nor punish them with certainty when a transgression is identified (Popovic 2015a).

There are two most typical principal-agent problems, or agency costs, discussed in the literature — moral hazard and adverse selection. These problems are based on what the new institutional economics calls the opportunism of actors. However, the principal also has the possibility to 'shirk', a possibility not often discussed in the literature. It means that the principal may have incentives not to deliver the resources fully as agreed to in the contract (Braun and Guston 2003, 303-304). The most frequent problems with delegation, discussed in the literature (Bapat 2012; Hoekstra 2021; Popovic 2015b), go as follows:

- Agency Slacks/Moral hazard: The principal selects an agent that is unwilling to carry out the assigned task and does not know for sure if the agent will really do principal's best when delegated certain tasks The rebel militias may frequently not efficiently and effectively use the assistance they receive. For instance, instead of risking their lives on the battlefield, rebel militias may simply use the presence of a foreign sanctuary to avoid war.

- Adverse Selection: The principal usually does not have sufficient information on the abilities of potential agents to find the one best suited to do the task and may unknowingly select an agent that is unable to carry out the assigned task. That can occur when the principal's representatives overestimate a rebel group's real or potential power. It can also occur when a potential agent misrepresents itself by claiming to be stronger than it actually is.

- Agency slippage: Rebels may initially claim they will remain loyal to the principal, but subsequently pursue their own agenda upon receiving state sponsorship. Agents shift policy away from its principal's preferred outcome. Instead of using state resources to fight a war, the rebels redirect it toward other ends. Financial assistance is, for instance, spent on private consumption rather than rebel operations, and weapons are exchanged on the black market for luxury items.

- Alternative support: Having multiple principals may make the militants less sensitive to principal's sanctions because they can compensate for the loss of support. Therefore, the militants with access to alternative sources of support are more likely to defect against their sponsors.

- The behavior of rebel proxies may become so violent and damaging that the target government will punish the principal itself, using tactics such as economic sanctions or military force.

- Principal-sponsored rebels may be less willing to negotiate and may punish the principal for making deals they view as unacceptable. This threat of punishment and internal violence may prevent the principal from ever reaching a settlement and appears to render the principal non-credible in negotiation.

Navin Bapat claims that the delegation is only likely to produce positive results for two types of states. First, sponsorship may be beneficial to major powers, such as the USA, China, India or Russia, given that the support of these states can dramatically alter a conflict in favor of the rebels and given that major powers will suffer relatively less if violence escalates. Secondly, the model demonstrates that sponsorship can be beneficial to moderately weak states. Unlike failing states, moderately weak states can signal some ability to control the rebels (Bapat 2012).

Scholars note that commonalities of language and culture make monitoring the agent's actions easier and should reduce agency slacks and adverse selection (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 715). Shared preferences may deter defection, particularly when principals and rebels share ethnic or ideological ties. Ethnic ties are regarded as generating stronger bonds than other forces. Principals may draw upon these bonds to claim legitimacy to issue orders and expect rebel compliance. Therefore, common ethnicity should facilitate the sponsor’s control over rebels (Popovic 2015a).

The paradox that scholars do not discuss is that these commonalities provide incentives but also may turn into sources of agency slacks or shirking because this commonality may distract the rebels from fighting. Such ethnic, cultural or language commonalities may cause the over-reliance of the rebels on the principal. Rebels may expect that principal is going to save the situation by himself, including a large-scale direct military invasion, which is precisely the opposite of a low-cost and deniable delegated rebellion. The principal may unintendedly seed the illusion of easy victory to the nascent rebels and their supporters.

After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in February-March 2014, the principal (Russia) ignited false expectations of a Donbas “liberation” among pro-Russian militants in the streets and seized government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk. The annexation fueled emotions and hopes that the same scenario would be repeated in Donbas. It undermined the will of incipient rebel proxies in Donbas to fight, not despite cultural similarities but because of them. The comfortable feeling of having a stronger brother behind them, who would always show up to beat up the bully, arguably lowered the motivation to fight. Even the rebels admitted it in their publications (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 164, 208-210; Pinchuk 2017). They expected a quick and decisive victory thanks to the direct intervention of the principal (Kudelia 2019, 291-292).

1. 1. 5) How the Principals can Solve the Delegation Problems (Agency Costs)

The principals must be able to credibly threaten and/or impose sanctions for all agency costs in order to manage the delegation. They have several instruments at their disposal to try to control their agents (Salehyan 2010, Hoekstra, 2021; Heinkelmann-Wind and Mehlr 2021):

- Sanctions: The principal can sanction the agents by temporarily reducing or withdrawing support, including expelling rebels from sanctuaries on the principal's territory. The principal can cease providing resources to the rebel organization, leaving it vulnerable to attacks by the incumbent. In this regard, principals walk a fine line between empowering rebels enough to ensure that they can impose costs on the incumbent but not so much that the rebels do not fear abandonment nor be able to turn against the principal. For this reason, principals may give rebels just enough resources to be viable but not enough to prevail.

- Hedging: Principals may hedge their bets by sponsoring multiple rebel militias. That creates the additional benefit of providing the opportunity to allocate resources on an ongoing basis according to performance. However, rebel militias may similarly seek to negate this leverage by obtaining support from multiple principals, as mentioned above. Principals may also direct some of their support to a rival leader within the same rebel militia, who might be able to take over should the current leader deviate too much from the principal's agenda. When more than one group rebels against their government, they compete for the limited resources of the principal. Every rebel militia therefore has an incentive to report their competitors' non-compliant behavior to the principal to gain an advantage.

- “Police patrol” mechanism: Principals may embed foreign advisors (or curators) in rebel militias. However, such tools are risky, particularly if killed or captured, because foreigners tip-off domestic and international audiences.

- Joint military operations: Rebels and principal’s troops invading together in joint operations reduce agency slack significantly, but this strategy is quite costly and visible.

These control mechanisms may reduce or eliminate delegation problems, but such measures come at the price of reduced efficiency. Furthermore, they may not always be effective. Agents may still defect, ending up biting the hand that fed them (Hoekstra 2021). The capacity of the principal to impose costs upon a rebel-agent is often limited and costly, as it entails sacrificing some of the benefits of delegation. It requires a presence with the group, which undermines plausible deniability and limits the rebel militias’ autonomy, which can undermine its efficiency. Options through which to punish a rebel militia can be limited unless the sponsor is willing to get more involved itself. Also, the cost of cancelling support can sometimes be higher than retaining support for a rebel militia, even if it is acting independently. The principal often has few alternative agents to delegate to (Davies 2018).

1. 2.) Rebel Fragmentation

Rebellions are rarely simple contests between unified rebels and incumbent regimes. Rebels are often not unitary actors. Instead, rebellions usually feature fragmented rebel movements with multiple factions and militias competing over leadership, territory, resources, and fighters (Gade, Gabbay, Hafez, and Kelly 2019; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012, 67; Mosinger 2018). Eric Mosinger remarks that fragmented rebellions are increasingly common and more and more intractable than “traditional” rebellion led by a single rebel militia (Mosinger 2018). A growing case-based literature has documented how organizational cohesion, insurgency dynamics, ideology and external patronage affect rebel cohesion (Christia 2012; Kenny 2010; Tamm 2016a; Woldemariam 2018; Gade et al. 2019).

Rebel fragmentation is defined as an event where a segment of a rebel organization formally and collectively exits that rebel organization and either a) establishes a new rebel organization, b) joins an existing rebel organization, or c) joins the incumbent government (Woldemariam 2018, 24-25). The fragmentation process may unfold through two main pathways: either an additional rebel actor forms when leadership and rebel cadres splinter off from an existing organization, or an organization without clear ties to existing rebel groups decides to launch an armed struggle (Fjelde and Nilsson 2018, 553).

Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour conceptualize fragmentation along three constitutive dimensions: the number of militias in the movement; the degree of institutionalization across these militias; and the distribution of power among them. Fragmentation will have consequences for any movement that acts in the pursuit of a collective interest on behalf of a particular militia, as each organization within the overarching movement finds itself in a "dual contest": a contest in the pursuit of the common good for the militia as a whole and a contest over private advantages with other militias in the movement (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012, 265-266).

1. 2. 1) Organizational Turn and the Shift of Focus to the Rebel Organizations

The dominant rationalist position in the study of rebellions has been disrupted by the literature, which drew on historical institutionalism. The new strand of the institutionalist literature on rebellion has been popular since the late 2000s and is based on structural individualism that considers social and institutional embeddedness as major conditions affecting individual decisions and behavior (Wittek 2010). These works seek to explicitly link social factors such as social embeddedness (i.e., individuals and organizations' pre-war and wartime roles and relations) to the likelihood of individual participation in rebel efforts. The research draws on a robust body of sociological literature on collective action and social movements (Parkinson and Zaks 2018, 275-276).

Scholars have started to question the underlying assumption that rebel movements are unitary actors whose behavior results from purposive strategies reacting to their external environment. This assumption fits poorly with the empirical reality of most contemporary rebellions where the non-state side consists of multiple militias. These innovative works started to regard the rebel movement as a shifting set of actors who share a central identity but have malleable allegiances and potentially divergent interests (Pearlman 2011; Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012, 266; Staniland 2012, 2014; Fjelde and Nilssom 2019, 605). Such literature focuses on the structural characteristics of rebel militias and the dynamics within and between them rather than on country-wide factors or individual motivations to rebel (Tamm 2016b).

The focus of this new research agenda has rested on exploring the causes, dynamics, and effects of fragmentation (Brenner 2016, 44-45). As Stathis Kalyvas points out, rebellions are not binary conflicts but complex and ambiguous processes that rarely fit the descriptions of military confrontations between a government and a rebel group (Kalyvas 2003). Much of the rebel violence is perpetrated by non-state actors against each other and follows division other than the conflict's "master cleavage." Most existing literature has failed to consider this complexity by treating the rebel side as a unitary actor (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012, 605).

There are often a number of rebel militias that simultaneously pursue similar policy aims in their interaction with the government. In the shadow of its armed contest with the government, each militia is forced to take into consideration the presence of other rebel militias (Brenner 2015, 22). Academic research on rebel fragmentation has advanced rapidly in recent years, examining the causes and the effect the fragmentation has on levels of violence in rebellions. Ideological disputes, geographic separation, ethnic divisions, and economic incentives can all increase the likelihood of the fragmentation (Mahoney 2020).

An expanding body of work shows that variation in the fragmentation influences important outcomes, including the escalation from nonviolence to violence, the likelihood of attaining peace settlements, the scope of concessions within settlements and whether they forestall a return to war, internecine violence, collaboration with the state, and the political and military effectiveness of these movements. Yet, despite the centrality of fragmentation as an explanatory factor in recent research, its causes remain poorly understood. Existing work tends to examine fragmentation by emphasizing competitive, transnational, institutional, or structural factors (Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2016).

Mike Woldemariam separates the existing literature on the causes of rebel fragmentation into two strands. The first strand, the explanatory one, consists of explanations and approaches exploring how movements' core structural, ideological, and institutional characteristics shape their propensity for fragmentation throughout their lifespans. These explanations build on the traditions of the historical institutionalism and focus on the early founding characteristics of rebel militias and how they leave profound legacies shaping an organization's downstream behavior (Woldemariam 2018, 32-33).

The second strand tries to explain the timing of the rebel fragmentation. It centers around the question of "when" the rebel fragmentation occurs, for instance, when rebels suffer territorial losses or win territorial gains. There are a number of theories that are oriented in this fashion, but the most prominent ones focus on government efforts to encourage rebel defection through the provision of various political and economic incentives. In essence, time-variant state efforts at rebel cooptation serve as an external stimulus, or shock, altering the cooperative equilibrium of organized rebellion and encouraging fragmentation (Woldemariam 2018, 32-33;

Woldemariam 2014, 136).

Within this second strand, Woldemariam identifies a line of thinking that situates patterns of organizational fragmentation firmly within the shifting military contexts rebel organizations face. Stathis Kalyvas' analysis of 'ethnic defection' is an early articulation of this perspective. The logic of the argument is that there are no permanent friends in the rebellion, only permanent interests. When the tide begins to imperil the survival and well-being of the constituent units of a rebellion, they easily break previous solidarity in favor of new commitments. Kalyvas' conclusions are echoed by scholars who argue that effective state repression undermines the cohesion of insurgent organizations (Woldemariam 2014, 136).

Fjelde and Nilsson also identify two literature strands on rebels' fragmentation. One links fragmentation to low organizational cohesion: interrebel and intrarebel struggles are more likely when militias lack a strong social base or organizational integration, which in turn paves the way for feuds, defection, and noncompliance (Asal, Brown & Dalton, 2012; Kenny, 2010; McLauchlin, 2015; Staniland, 2012 and 2014). The second strand of literature highlights the external determinants of fragmentation, including state repression (McLauchlin & Pearlman, 2012; Seymour, Cunningham & Bakke, 2016), state concessions or offers of sponsorship of breakaway factions (Olson Lounsbery & Cook, 2011; Seymour, Cunningham & Bakke, 2016), and the role of external patrons (Tamm, 2016).

In this regard, I follow the Woldemariam's explanatory strand and Fjelde & Nilsson's linking of the fragmentation to low organizational cohesion. The rebel movement in Eastern Ukraine was fragmented since the outbreak of the rebellion in 2014 not as a consequence of any particular event and external determinant during the rebellion, for instance, as a result of defeat on the battlefield, state concessions or sponsoring breakaway rebel factions. The weak social embeddedness of the rebel militias within preexisting patronage structures invented by the local elites appears to be the main source of the rebel fragmentation. As discussed in the empirical section of this dissertation, incipient rebels were unable to mobilize and overcome the collective action problem without the principal's resources, even despite the initial lack of state repression.

1. 2. 2) Why the Fragmented Rebels Pose a Problem?

Internal contestation and fragmentation can undermine a group's capacity for collective action, redirect violence away from outside adversaries to inside competitors, and eventually lead to attrition and organizational demise (Tamm 2016a). Fragmented organizations are prone to rapid, often fratricidal, failure and decay. They will likely be quickly wiped out or pushed aside when facing a strong state. Fragmented rebels are more potent in the context of a weak state, but in general, a fragmented rebel movement is extremely vulnerable to state counterinsurgency and internal unrest (Staniland 2014, 32). Fragmented rebel militias controlling natural resources, drug money, or under external patronage are also characterized by less discipline, weaker military power, and more unsanctioned defiance. To Paul Staniland, thuggish rebel militias, undisciplined looters, and groups abandoning revolutionary purity for the lures of wealth arise not because of resources per se but because of the relationships between resources and social bases (Staniland 2012, 154-155).

A cohesive rebel movement typically enjoys the organizational power to mobilize mass participation, enforce strategic discipline, and contain disruptive content. By contrast, a fragmented movement lacks the leadership, institutions, and collective purpose to coordinate and constrain its members. Hegemonic groups can rely on their monopolistic position to institutionalize a rebel governance system, strengthen their legitimacy with the local population, and deter new entrants into the local marketplace of authority. When a rebel group does not confront competition for resources, it can more efficiently mobilize popular support, collecting resources and recruiting cadres to gain autonomy from the state and potential rivals (Pearlman 2011, 2; Metelits 2010, 12; Florea 2020).

Infighting is potentially one of the most significant problems related to fragmentation because it undermines a movement's capacity for collective action and diverts energy away from pursuing public and political aims and towards pursuing private advantage. It also alters the targets of violence, redirecting violence away from the state the movement is challenging and back towards rival organizations. Incentives for infighting can result from the desire of each particular organization to simultaneously achieve some private benefit, such as access to power, influence, resources, positions, or leadership within the movement (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012, 273).

Infighting can cause changes in fragmentation: violence may alter the number of organizations, shift the distribution of power among them, and erode or strengthen the institutional bonds that coordinate and constrain them. In the absence of concentrated power and strong overarching institutions, movements consisting of multiple organizations are likely to be characterized by an encompassing struggle for power and dominance. Yet because no organization is particularly strong relative to the others, violence is likely to be characterized by small-scale but widespread engagements. The weak power of these militias makes it unlikely that they will eliminate one another. The low barriers to entry in the movement are likely to see new organizations arise in their place (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012, 273-274).

1. 2. 2. 1) Measuring of the Rebel Fragmentation

Fragmented movements differ according to whether they are divided between a few or many competing organizations. Measuring the number of organizations entails identifying militias within the broader movement that recognize no higher command authority, have their own leadership and organizational structure, and actively make demands related to the group's collective aims or status. The existence of multiple militias within the same movement can suggest underlying disagreements over collective interests or the means to achieve them. The link between these organizations is that all are mobilized around a collective identity in the pursuit of interests particular to this identity and the shared interests and common fate it engenders (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012*,* 268-269).

Another key characteristic distinguishing fragmented movement from cohesive ones is the absence, weakness, or strength of institutions coordinating the actions of different organizations representing the group. Institutions can include both formal and informal rules, and all political actors can be evaluated on the degree to which they are institutionalized. The degree of institutionalization of a movement characterizes the ties between militias that it comprises. In weakly institutionalized movements, militias work alone, with little coordinated action. Strongly institutionalized movements will look more like states, with a higher degree of cooperation and more regulated interaction between militias (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012*,* 269-271).

Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour consider a movement as more fragmented when power is dispersed across multiple militias within the movement. Conversely, where a movement with numerous militias is dominated by one powerful militia, the consequences of being divided are diminished, as "weaker" militias have a limited ability to influence other militias. Movements with more centralized power will be more cohesive, but the exercise of different types of influence is contingent on the ties between militias and the larger context of the dispute (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012, 271-272).

1. 2. 3) Paul Staniland's Social-Institutional Theory of the Rebellion

The organizational strand of the literature, represented among others by Paul Staniland, focuses on the social embeddedness of the rebels. Staniland explains that a focus on state-centric variables—from GDP per capita to regime type to counterinsurgent doctrine—in the study of rebellion has overpromised and underdelivered because rebels are actors that should be analyzed on their own terms, not as pale reflections of state power and purpose (Parkinson and Zaks 2018, 280). Staniland noted that most research on rebellions takes the structure of rebel militias as a given rather than trying to explain it. His work presents a challenge to traditional state- and resource-centric approaches to understanding rebellion. Staniland explores the origins and trajectories of rebel militias by focusing on pre-war social networks—that is, systems of relations—and specifically how they link rebel leaders to each other and to foot soldiers. His resultant social-institutional theory aims to understand when rebels can generate military and political power and when rebels instead shatter into fragmentation and collapse (Staniland 2014; Brenner 2016, 24).

His works provide a micro-level analysis of the social and economic environment in which a rebel militia operates and describes how many rebel leaders appropriate existing social institutions to form the basis for a rebel militia. Founding social networks of organized rebellion are a critical variable in rebel militia' downstream cohesion and unity. Where the founding social ties within the militia are weak or coalitional in nature, fragmentation will frequently be the result. These pre-war social ties remain important during the war, even as they undergo profound transformations (Lidow 2016, 13; Waldemariam 2018, 33).

Rebel fragmentation happens along two dimensions: horizontal ties between different rebel elites, affecting information flows, trust, contestation, and cooperation among the group's leadership; and vertical ties between elites and grassroots of rebellion. The latter is crucial for building and maintaining stable support networks among local communities. Horizontal fragmentation makes the leadership of rebel militias prone to infighting and coups. Vertical fragmentation makes it challenging to sustain asymmetric warfare against a militarily superior enemy because it erodes a movement's support network. Rebel militias that fragment along both of these dimensions are susceptible to quick decay and defeat (Staniland 2014; Brenner 2016, 24).

1. 2. 3. 1) Social Embeddedness

The social embeddedness of a rebel militia exercises a significant effect on the trajectory of the rebellions (Sarbahi 2014, 1470). Social embeddedness refers to the extent to which organizations are connected to other actors via linkages of a social network or the extent to which human action occurs within a web of social attachments such as friendship and kinship. The concept of social embeddedness expresses the idea that social actors exist within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts and cannot be seen as atomized decision-makers who are maximizing their personal utility (Hess, Lang and Xi Xu 2011, 157). Structural embeddedness speaks to the extent to which individuals are integrated into webs of social relationships. It confers trust, coordination, and identity benefits to actors and provides them with certain advantages relative to structurally disembedded actors. Cultural embeddedness refers to individuals' cultural fit with respect to a given context or the extent to which they share deep-rooted beliefs and assumptions about the world. When rebel understandings and experiences of conflict – their frames of reference and the narratives that they use to describe a conflict – are in line with those of civilians, they are culturally embedded into the local conflict context. More precise indicators of cultural embeddedness might include shared religion or ideology between combatants and non-combatants; shared ethnicity; or shared traditions and customs (Moore 2019, 40-41).

1. 2. 3. 2) Weak Social Ties of the Fragmented Rebel Groups

The social base of a rebel militia dominates its leadership cadres and establishes, or fails to establish, central organizational processes to make and implement decisions and to create local institutions for disciplining and socializing influxes of new fighters (Staniland 2012, 149). Before a rebel militia takes up arms, its members may have been involved with a political party or social movement. As a result, they may already enjoy a degree of local support when the organization captures new territory (Mampilly and Stewart 2020).

The social bases that are most likely to be the pre-war core of a future rebellion include opposition political parties, underground revolutionary groups, anticolonial nationalist movements, autonomous religious organizations, peasant associations, and networks of dissident student activists. Such groups have the "ideational resources" to challenge the state, even if most or all of their activities before the war are non-violent (Staniland 2014, 19).

Preexisting networks are particularly useful because starting wholly new organizations is difficult in the face of repressive state power. Pre-war politics determine the initial organization of rebel militias. Variations in social bases can be identified by examining patterns of social connections and interactions across organizers and within local communities prior to the war. Non-violent pre-war bases can create integrated and effective rebel militias. The trust, information, and shared political beliefs embedded in these networks help organizers construct new institutions and convert old organizations to new purposes in the chaos of an escalating war (Staniland 2012, 150; Staniland 2014, 17).

Weak horizontal ties limit communication, coordination, and cooperation across localities. They make it difficult to know the political preferences of people outside a local community. Weak vertical ties exist when there are few social relations between organizers and communities. The historical roots of social bases limit the freedom of action of organizers trying to get a rebellion off the ground. The weakness of the horizontal and vertical ties leads to fragmented organizations, whose organizers are unable to draw on any kind of strong social ties to build their new militia. They desperately try to recruit from wherever they can, with disastrous consequences for their organizations. Organizers trying to mobilize rebel militias often fail because they lack the capacity to generate collective action or build any kind of control (Staniland 2014, 17, 21-24, 32).

1. 2. 4) Fjelde and Nilsson: Barriers to Entry and Fragmentation of the Rebel Militias

Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson from Uppsala University discuss the problem of why some rebel movements remain cohesive, whereas others see a number of contending militias during the rebellion. Their theoretical framework focuses on barriers to entry, that is, variations in the costs and disadvantages that must be borne by nascent rebel contenders that are not borne to the same extent by incumbent rebel militias. Their study proposes that strong social networks underpinning incumbent militias create structural barriers to entry for nascent militias by aggravating the challenges of organization building. When incumbent rebel militias have strong networks, the risk of fragmentation is lower (Fjelde and Nilsson 2018).

Authors argue that a majority of the new rebel contenders that become active in ongoing armed conflicts have no organizational ties to the existing rebel militias. They move beyond the prevailing focus on splinter groups in the literature on rebel fragmentation. Fjelde and Nilsson posit that many of the organizational challenges involved in becoming viable rebel contenders apply independently of whether the fighting cadres have defected from existing groups or not. Where barriers to entry are high, nascent rebel contenders are less likely to become viable challengers to the state, thus lowering the risk of fragmented movements. The authors theorize that structural barriers to entry exist where strong social networks underpin incumbent rebel militias and deprive nascent rebel contenders of the organizational input – for example, fighting forces and civilian support – necessary to become viable challengers to the state (Fjelde and Nilsson 2018).

Incumbent militias with strong social networks will raise the structural barriers to entry for rebel contenders. Their strong social networks directly restrict newcomers' access to resources that are crucial for effective rebel organization-building. Incumbent rebel militias with strong social networks are also likely to be more effective in building and maintaining the cooperation of civilian constituencies, deterring and punishing their defiance, and recruiting and socializing new members. Besides, barriers to entry for nascent militias may also arise from the military threat incumbent organizations represent. Since incumbents' social networks facilitate more resilient fighting organizations, incipient rebel contenders may be militarily overrun before they have the chance to establish themselves (Fjelde and Nilsson 2018).

1. 3.) Delegation to the Fragmented Rebels: Theoretical Concepts and Contribution

This section discusses historical and rationalist institutionalist traditions and their intersection in my work. Rather than a full-fledged synthesis, I strive for combinations that recognize and attempt to harness the strengths of each approach (Thelen 1999, 380). Despite their differences, historical and rational choice institutionalisms have more in common than is ordinarily realized (Katznelson and Weingast 2005). There are several "border crossers" between both institutionalisms that have resisted the tendencies toward cordoning these schools off from each other and who borrow liberally where they can answer specific empirical questions and build new theories (Thelen 1999*,* 370).

I combine both institutionalist approaches because rationalist principal-agent theory alone cannot explain the entire causal process of my concept of self-defeating patronage. The principal-agent theory of the delegation can explain why rebel militias are autonomous but not why they are fragmented or potential changes in rebel structures as a result of the delegation chains activities, such as forced merger.

The rationalist baseline of the delegation underlies that principals are rational when they choose strategies that they believe will have the optimal consequences for their interests. The expected costs and benefits of different choices are compared, and the one with the highest net value is chosen. However, it is a subjective definition of rationality - rational choice is not what will maximize an actor's payoffs (objective) but what the actor thinks will do so (Wendt 2001).

Principals with identity and interests are ontologically given prior to social action in my work. Rebels are formed from contextual dependence on social embeddedness and the action of an external actor. Rebels emerge out of social ties and patronage of the principal, which may, under specific conditions, result in autonomy and fragmentation, which, in turn, reproduce the autonomy and fragmentation due to the low barriers to entry. This is a kind of dual ontology, when one actor influences the other and therefore one, the principal, is seen in terms of a rationalist ontology, i.e., enters the social relations with interests already formed, while we need to explain change and add a social dimension to the second actor, the rebels as agents (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2013).

1. 3. 1) Delegation to the Fragmented Rebels and the Concept of Forced Merger

The principals must be able to threaten and/or impose sanctions for agency costs credibly. The control mechanisms may reduce or eliminate principal-agent problems, but these measures come at the price of reduced efficiency (Hoekstra 2021). The capacity of the principal to impose costs upon an agent is often limited and costly, as it entails sacrificing some of the benefits of delegation. The principal requires a presence with the militia, which undermines plausible deniability, and limits the rebel autonomy, which can undermine its efficiency. Options to punish a rebel militia can be limited unless the principal is willing to get more involved in itself. The principal often has few alternative agents to delegate to (Davies 2018).

Fragmented rebel militias, which are inherently militarily weak and disorganized, are unlikely to pose a significant challenge to the incumbent. For that reason, principals should want to select agents that can demonstrate a certain level of competence in fighting the government. Otherwise, they risk expending resources for little benefit. Fragmented militias are less desirable agents since it is unclear that the organization will carry out the principal's wishes (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 714-715). The principal's preferences for unity can decrease the overall number of rebel militias. Principals might also enhance the institutional strength of the ties between rebel militias. They may push militias to create institutional structures fostering greater unity (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012, 269-270, 274).

Since rivalries within and across rebel militias are commonplace, principals generally find it more challenging to ensure rebel cohesion than to foster splits. Principal's patronage is likely to counteract factors that increase the chance of fragmentation—such as weak social ties—only if the level of external resources allocated to the leader is very high, including troop support. Tamm argues that principals are keen to ensure rebel cohesion when their preferences align with the rebel leader's. More generally, principals need to balance their desire to control rebel militias with the need to find a rebel leader capable of delivering on his promises. In many cases, principals are involved in the initial creation—or at least proper emergence—of rebel militias. Principals can thus often screen potential leaders early on and help their preferred candidate establish himself as the militia's leader (Salehyan 2010, 505; Tamm 2016a).

To offset the negative consequences of rebel fragmentation, the principal can ensure greater cohesion of the fragmented rebel militias through the forced merger. The forced merger is a pathway of rebel structural change when rebels are fragmented, and the principal decides to use increased central control mechanisms to solve the fragmentation problem. That arrangement can allow one preferred militia in a fragmented movement to become a vanguard militia by facilitating the creation and deepening of social ties and consequent central institutions through external patronage. The success of this mechanism hinges on a deeply involved principal that wants greater cohesion and is willing to invest serious time, effort, and resources (Staniland 2014, 53-54).

In Hennig Tamm's opinion, those observations are undertheorized and secondary, if not contradictory, to the main focus of Staniland's book on the explanatory power of social bases (Tamm 2016a). The principal may change the whole structure of the rebellion by the delegation. Logically, this structural change will have a tangible impact on the preexisting social structures, including the rebel movement. Here I turn back to rationalist institutionalism to argue that the principal is supposed to be a rational actor, willing and/or capable of establishing the most effective and efficient way to realize its interests within the constraints it encounters (Reus-Smith 2003, 220).

1. 3. 2) "Black-boxed" Delegation Chains in the Principal-Agent Theory: Who Delegates?

One of the most undertheorized aspects of the rationalist principal-agent theory of delegation is the principal itself. The theory works with the collective actors - collectivities as aggregations of individuals - and the principal should be defined as such (Thelen 1999, 377). However, the principal is "black-boxed" in the heavily agent-centric extant literature. We know *why* principal delegates, its context-dependent motives and preferences, but we don't know *who* exactly delegates and how does it affect and shape the rebellion.

For instance, principal's competing state agencies may focus on the weakening of competing agency's agent on the ground, which may facilitate the rebel fragmentation, infighting and incapacitating of the whole rebel movement. The principal's institutional subsystems, managing the delegation chains might be decentralized and incoherent. They might be driven by internal tensions, have divided interests, compete with each other, or in some extreme cases, spin out of control of the state.

My argument is that the problem of coherence is not the exclusive domain of the agents (rebel militias) in the principal-agent relationship. It relates to principals as well. Literature on delegated rebellion does not discuss these issues, so we are left guessing in who exactly delegates? I argue that the delegation chains are not merely long or short, as discussed above (Popovic 2015a, 2017). The length of the delegation chains, discussed by Popovic, is only one dimension, which may affect the outcome of the delegated rebellion. The second dimension is the (de)centralization of the delegation chains.

The delegation chains' centralization or decentralization depends on how many institutional subsystems of the principal are engaged in the delegation management and what are the relations between them. The principal subsystems can be foreign ministry, defense ministry, ruling political party, president's office, secret services, and their respective departments or officials and aides within those institutions. All of them can cooperate or compete during the delegation. The individuals in these institutional subsystems responsible for delegation management can have different personal interests and preferences.

Taking Russia as the example of the delegating principal, we can see that given the complexity of governing Russia, the Kremlin must delegate some decision-making power and control over policy implementation to lower levels of government and bureaucracies, with all the inevitable slippage down the lines of communication. I agree with Timothy Frye that the problem grows when the Kremlin seeks to maintain plausible deniability. The Kremlin multiplied the delegation chains to the rebels because Putin oversees a range of security agencies with mixed motives, overlapping agendas, and competing for access to state funds, influence with the Kremlin, and opportunities to shake down private businesses (Frye 2021). Western scholars tend to broadly apply the term Kremlin to all Russia's decision makers – contributing to the impression of a "black box" that is impossible to decipher. Knowing little about the internal adjustments of power and how the balancing/competing games are regulated, we can still identify several subsystems at play (Laruelle 2021, 86).

Not only rebel militias, but some principals may also be factionalized. For instance, secret services and armed forces may act separately or independently and delegate without the explicit consent or knowledge of the weak government or president. State leadership not always has sufficient authority to impose its preferences on delegation management. For that reason, I propose to measure delegation chains on two levels – length (short/long) and centralization (centralized/decentralized). The extreme values on both levels, i.e., long and decentralized delegation chains, mean that the principal has imperfect control over the rebels, especially if the rebel movement is highly fragmented.

The length and decentralization of the delegation chains reveal another problem - the longer the delegation chains, the higher costs of supplying resources and monitoring; the more decentralized chains, the less chance that even the higher costs of supplying resources and monitoring will lead to more effective organization of the rebel movement. At the same time, the shorter the delegation chains, the less deniable delegation (Popovic 2015b, 920). As already discussed above, there is a fundamental tension between control and deniability. The principal has to exert more effort and resources to achieve increased control, resulting in higher visibility (Bowen 2019). The costs of supplying resources and monitoring tend to increase as the chains become long and decentralized, especially in the environment of pervasive corruption when a large part of the funding is embezzled by principal's officials, intermediaries, and rebel commanders.

High value in one of the two categories, low cost and deniability, does not automatically mean high value in the another. Costs do not positively correlate with deniability. It means that it is not a relationship in which both categories move in tandem – that is, in the same direction. As Andrew Bowen notes, there is a trade-off when it comes to efficiency and immediacy in outcomes. With a decrease in cost and an increase in deniability comes the loss of control and precision (Bowen 2019). On the similar note, Mark Galeotti adds that there is almost inverse relationship between deniability and effectiveness. (Galeotti 2019c, 82).

1. 3. 3) Theory-Building and Puzzles

The difference between the historical and rational choice institutionalist traditions in theory-building is how they approach hypothesis formation. Historical institutionalists tend to begin with empirical puzzles that emerge from observed events or comparisons. Rational choice theorists often proceed somewhat differently, deriving their puzzles from situations in which observed behavior appears to deviate from what the general theory predicts (Thelen 1999, 374). I follow the rational choice institutionalist tradition of counterintuitive puzzles in this work.

The principal-agent theory of delegated rebellion says that the main reason behind the delegation is the consideration of it as a cost-saving and deniable device for weakening the target government at significantly reduced costs, which is an attractive alternative to inter-state war. On the other hand, principal-agent theorists admit that delegation is fraught with problems, and there are numerous examples where the principal faces adverse consequences of its gamble on delegation (Salehyan 2010; Hoekstra 2021). The central puzzle of this work is why the rebellion's delegation to the fragmented and autonomous rebels tends to be neither low-cost nor deniable and thus, implicitly, an improper device for the delegation?

My work aims to identify the causality and conditions under which the delegated rebellion turns into a costly and visible campaign in the case of the delegated rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. I claim that delegation of the rebellion through the long and decentralized delegation chains to the fragmented autonomous rebels is, in general, costly and visible instead of being low-cost and deniable, as the theory says. In this regard, the forced merger of the fragmented autonomous rebel militias by the principal forestalls plausible deniability and low-cost delegation.

As a rational actor, the principal should be willing and capable of enforcing the coherence of rebel militias with the same or similar political preferences. I argue that in the forced merger, the principal's preference for coherent and centralized rebel militias is self-evident. The principal preferring weak agents would not resort to the forced merger to enhance the rebel cohesion. The forced merger can work as a mutually beneficial mechanism when chosen rebel leaders become a vanguard militia, which, in exchange for obedience and loyalty to the principal, does not have to share the power and resources with competing rebel commanders and their militias. Tamm (2016a) identifies the principal as the leading actor who shapes the fragmentation or cohesion of the rebel militias. I claim that it is the combination of both factors, the social embeddedness of the rebel militias (i.e., their social ties) and the principal's length and centralization of the delegation chains that result in the fragmentation (Staniland 2012, 2014; Fjelde & Nilsson 2018; Tamm 2016a).

In this work, I introduce the concept of self-defeating patronage in the delegated rebellion. The concept is based on the delegation's rationale, which is low cost and deniability, but in the case of fragmented rebels, it lures the principal into the trap, because once it is involved in the delegation to fragmented rebels, it has two choices – either to spend much more resources than probably expected to increase the organizational and fighting capacity of the rebels, or give up on them and waste all resources spent on the rebels.

The principal must keep the barriers-to-entry low in order to overcome the collective action problem that the incipient rebels experience due to their weak social ties, but it is extremely hard to keep fragmented rebels under control. Besides, keeping the barriers low without strict control by the principal - which would raise the costs and visibility - fuels perpetual fragmentation, which tends to result in the rebel proxies' failure. Keeping the barriers-to-entry low produces new and new unchecked rebel militias. It leads to higher costs and visibility if the rebellion should succeed. Low costs and deniability of the delegation turn into high costs and visible liability.

The extant literature identifies rebels' fragmentation as a problem (Staniland 2014; Tamm 2016a; Fjelde and Nilsson 2018). It recognizes that the delegation of the rebellion is also fraught with problems (Salehyan 2010; Bowen 2019; Bapat 2012). Still, it does not discuss under which conditions pose the patronage to fragmented rebel movement a problem for the principal. Closest to my argument is Popovic's claim that decentralized and factionalized rebel organizations are more likely to defect against their sponsors than centralized organizations. However, Popovic makes research focused on factionalized rebel movements, not fragmented ones (Popovic 2015a).

Factionalized rebel movement is similar to the fragmented movement in several features, but it is not the same thing. While factionalized rebel movement has weak central leadership, fragmented rebel movement has none. Unlike factionalized movement, the fragmented rebel movement does not necessarily lack internal control; some separate rebel militias are strictly controlled by authoritative commanders, such as Igor Bezler controlled his militia in Horlivka. What has the decentralized and fragmented rebel movements in common is the lack of accountability to the principal, which curtails the principal's ability to deter rebel misbehavior by credibly threatening to punish proxies' leadership (Popovic 2015a).

However, long and decentralized delegation chains arguably did not lead to the defection of the rebels in Donbas against the principal. Many rebel militias did not recognize the attempts to create a rebel government that would rule over the whole rebel-held territories, but they stayed loyal to Russia despite their resentment over the abandonment of the Novorossiya project. Even those rebel commanders killed during the forced merger, namely Bednov, Dremov, Mozgovoi and others, have not been caught slandering Putin or Russia, except for complaints over insufficient help or corruption of principal's proxies in Donetsk and Luhansk, who regularly embezzled humanitarian aid. Many of those commanders who survived later left or returned to Russia without any troubles with the authorities on the Russian territory.

I claim that the forced merger of fragmented autonomous rebel groups proves the point of the self-defeating patronage – the forced merger is an emergency measure intended to reverse imminent rebels' failure. Delegation to fragmented rebels will probably be cheaper than full-scale inter-state war but much more costly and visible than delegation to the cohesive rebel movement with committed rebel fighters. I argue that the decision to delegate the rebellion to the fragmented rebel movement may stem from imperfect information on the rebels, principal's miscalculations, and unrealistic expectations. For instance, Mark Galeotti notes in his book on Putin that in March 2014, everyone he spoke with in Moscow, including government insiders, military types, and think-tankers, was sure that it would be a short and limited intervention:

> "I was in Moscow in March 2014, when this undeclared war began, and what struck me then was that everyone I spoke to – government insiders, military types, think-tankers – was sure that this would be a short and limited intervention. Within six months, I was told, Ukraine would have got the message, have realized that it would be destabilized if it tries to break away from Moscow, and come back into the fold. The Russian troops, spooks and saboteurs in the Donbas would be home, and the West would have forgotten all about it. This was not too ridiculous an assumption, as it is what exactly happened after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, but the point is that there seems to have been a consensus that it would be another easy win. It did not work out that way, but Putin had presumably believed what everyone told him. This was Putin the badly advised, not Putin the bold" (Galeotti 2019b).

My argument is that the low cost and deniability are somewhat unattainable goals in the delegation to the fragmented rebels. At this point, the delegation loses its main advantage. The principal should seek the cohesion of the rebel militias and strengthen their social ties but keeping the barriers-to-entry low by imperfect control over the fragmented rebels only breeds further fragmentation and prevents the principal from controlling the rebel proxies.

My work aims to identify the scope conditions under which delegation of the rebellion turns into self-defeating patronage. Drawing on my theoretical concept, I propose tentative scope conditions under which we should observe the self-defeating patronage in more cases than Donbas in order to prove its external validity in perspective: 1.) Weak social ties of the rebel groups; 2.) Low barriers-to-entry for incipient rebels; 3.) Imperfect control (high autonomy) by the principal over the rebel proxies.

I look for extreme values on both analytically equal categories of fragmentation and autonomy. It means that a) the high number of rebel militias (interrebel fragmentation) + b) weak institutionalization + c) dispersed power distribution = high fragmentation of the rebel movement; and a) decentralization (more than one institutional subsystem engaged in delegation) + b) long delegation chains (delegation is outsourced to intermediaries, such as para-state actors) = high autonomy for the rebel movement. The principal has two options what to do. It can either give up on the delegation or try to raise the cohesion of the rebel groups and the effectiveness of its delegation chains at the expense of low cost and deniability.

High costs and visibility mean that the principal should expect to spend overhead political and economic costs compared to delegation to the centralized rebellions with highly motivated and committed fighters strongly embedded in and across local societies. Overhead costs are linked to the emergency measures taken to enhance the coherence of the rebel movement, including the principal's direct military inroads taken to forestall rebels' military failure. The principal's steps toward a forced merger are supposed to avert the total collapse and breakdown of the rebellion once the rebels are on the brink of a military defeat by the incumbent's counterinsurgent forces. The rebellions demonstrating the extreme values of fragmentation and autonomy are supposed to be incapable of withstanding counterinsurgency measures in the long-term period. The contribution of this work to the theoretical discussion on indirect warfare is twofold:

- a) Introduction of the theoretical concept of self-defeating patronage, which demonstrates the inherent contradictions in the principal-agent theory of rebellion's delegation. The delegation to fragmented rebels with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry runs against the logic of the delegation as a low-cost and deniable foreign policy device. As a result, the principal has to centralize rebel movement and take over more control over the rebels in order to be more coherent and able to stand against the incumbent. Such effort is linked to high visibility and political and economic overhead costs the principal intended to avoid initially at the onset of the rebellion. These costs are related to what Salehyan identifies as the main reasons why the principals choose delegation instead of interstate war, such as foreign sanctions, international condemnation, the intervention of the target state's allies and opposition by domestic audiences averse to casualties (Salehyan 2010).

- b) Introduction of the theoretical concept of decentralized delegation chains, which shape the process and outcomes of the rebellion. Literature says that longer delegation chains increase the distance between a principal and rebels, which leads to defection of the rebels against the principal (Popovic 2015a). I argue that focus should be paid not only to the length of the delegation chains but also to their centralization. Decentralized delegation chains of competing state agencies may disrupt the efficiency of the rebellion and enhance the fragmentation. It might be used by rebel proxies to improve their positions vis-à-vis the principal and facilitate infighting for the principal's resources via the multiplicated delegation chains. Except for the length and centralization of the delegation chains, their quality, competence, and professionalism may also seriously affect the rebellion and its outcomes. Without any exaggeration, the research on *how* principals delegate and *who* exactly delegates may open a door for a whole new research field in the studies of conflicts and insurgencies.

1. 4) Literature on the Delegated Rebellion in Donbas

For almost eight years since the breakout of the rebellion in Donbas until the large-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, opinions of the scholars had been divided into external or internal drivers of the rebellion and the primary causes of this conflict.

1. 4. 1) Causes of the Delegated Rebellion in Eastern Ukraine

The empirical literature explaining the root causes of the Donbas rebellion is divided into several strands. Some explanations are based on the cultural identity and history of the region (Kulyk 2019, Sotiriou 2016; Giuliano 2015; Kuromiya 2019; Loshkarev and Sushentsov 2016; Matveeva 2016; 2018). These identity-based explanations refer to some form or combination of fears for physical or cultural survival and/or fear of losing advantageous social and political position (Kudelia 2016; Giuliano 2015, Kulyk 2019, Sotiriou 2016; Matveeva 2016). These scholars argue that people in the Donbas mobilized to defend their regional identity, linguistic rights and in response to the relative deprivation they felt after the government change in Kyiv. They also discuss the various facets of this identity, such as localism conditioned by the poor integration of the Donbas into the rest of Ukraine, Soviet nostalgia and the fear of "fascism," that might have contributed to the anti-government feeling and, subsequently, to the onset of war (Platonova 2021, 11).

However, they have been criticized by Andriy Portnov (2015) as intellectually reductionist and essentialist. More practical political support networks overridden the importance of language and ethnic differences in Eastern Ukraine (Dzutsati 2021). Donbas war is not an ethnic conflict as Russian speakers have been fighting on both sides (Kuzio 2020, 107). The principal was supposed to use the political support networks as a tool for the recruitment of agents in the incumbent territory. Valery Dzutsati identifies the networks of previous support for President Yanukovych as those responsible for providing a vehicle for driving Russian influence in the Donbas, which brings us to the discussions on the role of the local elites in the rebellion (Dzutsati 2021).

Claims that the rebellion in the Donbas was economically determined suggest that the local population was inclined towards secessionism, either because of the region's economic exposure to Russia or its relative economic significance and perceptions of discriminatory wealth redistribution within Ukraine. Scholars working with economic determinism as the primary cause see the critical factor in the economic dependence on the Russian market (Zhukov 2016). However, such arguments are dismissed by Vlad Mykhnenko, who argues that the Donbas was neither outstandingly prosperous nor excessively economically depressed—relative to the rest of Ukraine—to warrant an armed uprising of its own volition. His evidence points to the paramount role of exogenous political agency and endogenous military geography in explaining the outbreak of the armed conflict (Mykhnenko 2020).

None of these concepts convincingly explain why rebellion broke out in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces and did not break out in similarly pro-Russian and/or industrial provinces such as Odesa or Kharkiv. The validity of such explanations diminishes when Donbas is considered from a comparative perspective because other regions, such as Kharkiv, Odesa, and Dnipro, have a relatively similar ethnic and linguistic composition to that of Donbas. This lack of explanation was later remedied by other authors (Portnov 2015; Stebelsky 2018; Buckholz 2017; Laryš and Souleimanov 2022; Platonova 2021; Nitsova 2021). They juxtapose local elites in various cities and provinces to the Donbas elites. Portnov and Buckholz point out to local elites in Dnipro, Stebelsky and Platonova to Kharkiv, Nitsova to both, Kharkiv and Dnipro (Portnov 2015; Buckholz 2017; Stebelsky 2018; Platonova 2021; Nitsova 2021).

Portnov uses the Dnipropetrovsk oblast as the counter-case of an eastern Ukrainian region, calling it a bastion of Ukrainian civic nationalism due to the activities of local leaders around oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky. Stebelsky uses the same line of argument in comparing Donetsk and Kharkiv, explaining the outbreak of war by invoking the dominant Soviet Donbas narrative, cultivated by the subnational elites from the Party of the Regions, which tended to adopt a more pro-Russian outlook (Stebelsky 2018). Buckholz juxtaposes subnational elites in Dnipro and Kharkiv with those in the Donbas. Criticizing popular sentiment and economic factors as insufficient to explain the success or failure of secessionist efforts. Buckholz suggests that local elites' preferences and actions may have been a key determinant in the distinct political outcomes across Eastern Ukraine, along with other likely factors, such as Russia's external support (Buckholz 2017).

All these authors agree that preferences, strategies, and actions of the local elites are a key determinant in the distinct political outcomes across Ukraine, along with external support. This literature emphasizes the role of the local elites in the onset of the delegated rebellion in Ukraine's southeast. It points to the delegated rebellion as a miscalculated escalation instigated by non-secessionist subnational elites, which was hijacked by the external state actor – Russia. On the other hand, I claim that the principal also miscalculated. The situation in Donbas in 2014 implies that the principal expected that the local political institutions and local elites would pronounce the illegitimacy of the incumbent government and the will for the federalization of Ukraine and autonomy for Donbas. Since it did not happen, the principal had to change its strategy and find new agents willing to confront Kyiv.

1. 4. 2) Domestic or External Actors? Civil War or Foreign Invasion?

Since the onset of the delegated rebellion in Donbas, there had been a lack of consensus among scholars on whether it is a civil war, foreign invasion, or perhaps a combination of both, especially when the "civil war" label does not necessarily exclude the "invasion" label. TO some scholars, the Donbas war is both a (Ukrainian) civil war and a (Russian) invasion. In that case, one needs to consider which of these two dimensions is the primary and whether the character of the conflict has changed over time (Åtland 2020). That would also help us to understand better the nature of the decentralized delegation chains and self-defeating patronage.

The extant literature combines exogenous (Russia) and endogenous (mostly local elites) factors to explain the outbreak of rebellion, stressing the primary role of either the external actor (Wynnyckyj 2019; Mitrokhin 2015), or domestic causes (Kudelia 2014, 2016). However, those alternative views of the conflict are not mutually exclusive. The covert deployment of Russian forces does not exclude that there also was some local initiative for the rebellion. Rebel militias are mixed with direct Russian military inroads (Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 802; Katchanovski 2016). The explanations of the Donbas conflict have gone through several stages, from simpler (or monocausal) to more complex or multi-causal (Platonova 2021, 8).

The official Russian position is that the Donbas conflict has been an internal conflict between the central authorities in Kyiv and the self-proclaimed "people's republics" of DNR and LNR, which rightfully did not recognize Ukraine's post-Maidan leadership. This leadership allegedly came to power as the result of a "coup." Ukrainian authorities, for their part, have on numerous occasions rejected the Russian attempts to frame the Donbas conflict as an intrastate conflict and civil war, claiming that Russia's political and military role in it is both central and undeniable (Åtland 2020). The Russian officials present the conflict in the Donbas as a civil war sparked by the Ukrainian government's attempt to suppress the Russian language and the popular uprising of the Donbas' residents (Katchanovski 2016, 4; Platonova, 2021, 8).

While not explicitly denying the presence of Russian forces on Ukrainian territory at different stages of the conflict, Jesse Driscoll holds what may be described as a minority view among Western observers, namely that Western academics and policymakers should call the conflict a "civil war" (Åtland, 2020; Driscoll 2019). Tymofil Brik took Jesse Driscoll to task for ignoring the local context, neglecting census results and Ukrainian opinion polls and research, which is a typical problem found in academic orientalism, and being influenced by his experience working in Central Asia and the Caucasus, "which is not often applicable to Russian-Ukrainian relations, neither current nor historical" (Åtland, 2020).

Ivan Katchanovski, another scholar sticking to the civil war label, cites the Uppsala Conflict Data Program statement on the conflict, which characterizes it as intrastate, having started primarily because of domestic factors. Katchanovski thus characterizes the conflict as "a civil war with both direct and indirect military intervention of a foreign state", that is, Russia, as do Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll and Lucas Way (Katchanovski 2016; Kudelia 2014a; Kudelia 2014b; Kudelia 2014c; Matsiyevsky 2021; Umland 2014).

Some scholars emphasize the local roots of the crisis in the Donbas (Matveeva 2018; Kudelia 2017; Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019; Himka 2015). Serhiy Kudelia argued that the conflict had primarily domestic sources, while other scholars Andreas Umland and Yuriy Matsiyevsky depict it as Russia-led. Tor Bukkvoll attempts to have it both ways, describing the conflict as an 'insurgency' until August 2014 "even though Russian political agents and special forces most probably played an important role in its instigation" (Kuzio 2020; Bukkvoll 2019, 299).

One of the major views on the Donbas conflict strongly supported and promoted by the Ukrainian government and media is that the conflict has been manufactured in Moscow. In some scholarly accounts espousing this view, the agency is largely denied to the locals in Donbas. Instead, many analysts focus on the role of Russians as individuals and Russia as a state (this distinction is important) in causing the conflict. They depict the conflict as a Russian invasion, from the start led by Russian military intelligence agents and ideological "volunteers" (Mitrokhin 2015; Sutyagin 2015; Wilson 2014, 2016; Platonova 2021, 8).

To Taras Kuzio, arguments in favor of a "civil war" fueled by competing regional and national identities are only made possible by ignoring Russia's long-standing chauvinistic attitudes towards Ukrainians, the many aspects of Russia's "full spectrum conflict," and the intervention in Ukraine from February 2014 (Kudelia and Zyl, 2019, 807); Kuzio 2020).

Andrew Wilson depicts the conflict as lacking popular backing in the region and being organized and fomented by Russia almost single-handedly. The absence of prior ethnic strife in the region makes these researchers look beyond the local factors that played out in the Donbas rebellion and argue that it was primarily Russian involvement that aggravated the rebellion and turned it into a full-fledged war. Wilson argues that the protests and demonstrations in the Donbas were "smoldering away" already in March and April 2014, and, if it wasn't for the Russians involved, they would have eventually tapered off, and a peaceful settlement would have been made (Wilson, 2016, 633; Platonova 2021, 27).

Nikolai Mitrokhin divides the conflict into three phases, with the first two being propelled by the "Russians." In Mitrokhin's account, "Russians" are pro-Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine. They are represented by various individuals with either Russian roots or connections to Russia through military service or family. They also include nationalists from Russia. Mitrokhin argues that it is this "military wing" that quickly supersedes the "political wing" of the pro-Russian protest in the Donetsk region and initiates the conflict (Mitrokhin 2014; Platonova 2021, 27).

1. 4. 3) Conflict in Eastern Ukraine as Rebellion Delegated by the Principal

Most experts agree on Russia's decisive role in the rebellion's breakout because incipient rebels had insufficient resources and were mostly not determined enough to engage in war (Kuzio 2020, 108, 120; Wilson 2014, 2016; Mitrokhin 2015; Wynnyckyj, 2019; Bowen 2019; Davies 2016; Kuzio 2017; Robinson 2016; Wilson, 2014, 2016). Kristian Åtland adds that without Russia's financial, organizational, and military support, it is highly doubtful that the Donbas militants would have been able to sustain the rebellion over time and/or to seize, expand, and retain control over significant parts of Ukraine's easternmost territory (Åtland 2020).

Rather than framing the conflict as a civil war or Russian invasion, he classifies it as an "internationalized" conflict, given Russia's well-documented involvement. UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, jointly administered by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program at the University and the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, codes the conflict as a "Type 4" conflict. According to the UCDP/PRIO definition internationalized internal armed conflict occurs between the government of a state and one or more internal opposition group(s) with intervention from other states (secondary parties) on one or both sides (UCDP/PRIO 2017, 9).

Gomza suggests categorizing the Donbas conflict as a “transnationalized insurgency.” Donbas rebels and their Russian backers intended to destabilize larger parts of Ukraine or launch a nationwide civil war, but they clearly failed to achieve this objective. Gomza argues that Donbas was from the very beginning heavily penetrated by Russian agents and operatives who were either supporting or directly controlling the rebels. The permeable Russian-Ukrainian border became a frequently used crossing point for Russian arms supplies, paramilitaries, and regular Russian troops. Thus, the interstate dimension of the conflict in Donbas is undoubtedly one of its defining features (Gomza 2019; Åtland 2020).

Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth discuss how an external sponsor can use different combinations of the various instruments at its disposal to induce rebellion. Russia’s intervention activated cleavages and increased polarization, making it harder for the Ukrainian state to suppress the rebellion (Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth 2020). Violence escalated as polarization increased, inflamed by Russia’s information warfare and politicians’ rhetoric and outright disinformation. Without Russia’s intervention, anti-Maidan protestors in the Donbas would not have transformed into armed insurgents (Wilson 2015; Platonova 2021). Hiroaki Kuromiya, the leading historian on Donbas, believes that “violence was encouraged and supported by Moscow because, on their own, the local separatists were simply not determined enough to engage in war” (Kuromiya (2019, 252, 257).

Authors working with principal-agent delegation theory define Donbas as the typical case of delegation (Rauta 2016; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2021). Rauta writes about sovereign defection, deliberate pursuit of a break-away from an existing state, externally promoted by Russia. He identifies the Donbas case as inward sovereign defection and refers to the external sponsorship of the secessionist rebels in Ukraine with the purpose of creating a political buffer zone in the shape of a frozen conflict (Rauta 2016). Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl mention Eastern Ukraine as the instance where highly capable states refrained from using such “hands-on” control instruments. Russia—a great power far from being militarily incapable—provided the rebels in Eastern Ukraine with armaments without applying hierarchical controls (Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2021).

2.) Data and Methods

My work, grounded in the epistemology of scientific realism, is designed as an explanatory case study using process tracing as the research method. It attempts to explain events by providing an account of causes in a temporal sequence (Kurki and Wight 2013, 27). Such grounding is allowed by developments in the philosophy of science that have provided a firmer foundation for case study methods. In particular, the scientific realist school of thought has emphasized that causal mechanisms are central to causal explanation. That has resonated with case study researchers' use of process tracing to uncover evidence of causal mechanisms at work or to explain outcomes (George and Bennett 2005).

2. 1) Case Study

Case study methodology has been dominated since the 1970s by methodological advice rooted in the same epistemology that underlies large-N studies, which draw causal inferences with the help of statistics (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 9). Nevertheless, the situation changed in the 1990s when Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba (1994) tried to reemphasize that small-N research should apply the same logic of descriptive and causal inference as large-N research (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 15). The case study approach understands the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events (George and Bennett 2005).

Blatter and Hoverland define case study research as a non-experimental research approach that differs from large-N studies in the following four characteristics: a small number of cases; a large number of empirical observations per case; a huge diversity of empirical observations for each case; and an intensive reflection on the relationship between concrete empirical observations and abstract theoretical concepts (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 19-20). Robert Yin notes that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin 2010, 13). John Gerring notes that a case study is best defined as an in-depth study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units (Gerring 2004, 342).

Joachim Blatter and Markus Hoverland do not make a fundamental distinction between the study of a single case and the study of a few cases because the core characteristics are the same for all small-N studies. Probably the most important feature of case studies is the fact that limiting the research to one or a few cases allows the researcher to invest time and intellectual energy in reflecting on the relationship between empirical observations and the abstract concepts that form the core elements of hypotheses, theories, and mechanism-based explanations. Many strengths and advantages of case study research result from this fact (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 19-20).

Qualitative researchers usually start their research by selecting cases where the outcome of interest occurs (these cases are often called "positive" cases). This practice is not surprising because the research goal is the explanation of particular outcomes. To explain certain outcomes, it is natural to choose cases that exhibit those outcomes (Goertz and Mahoney 2006, 239). That was also the reason why I chose the delegated rebellion in Donbas as the "positive" case. The case study is designed to explain how general phenomena occurred in one country setting. It is rather suggestive than falsifiable, which is more typical for quantitative explanatory studies (Gerring 2004, 345).

2. 2) Scientific Realism

My work is epistemologically grounded in scientific realism as it better suits the process tracing method in a case study than the positivist tradition, even though realists and positivists are both foundationalists (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 14; Marsh and Furlong 2002, 19). Sharing foundationalist tradition with empiricism and positivism means that its adherents assume that there is an 'objective' social reality beyond the minds of the researchers that plays a central role in the process of scientific knowledge generation (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 12-13). There is a real-world 'out there' external to agents. The world exists independently of our knowledge (Marsh and Furlong 2002, 19, 30). Realists take these ontological questions, not the epistemological issues, as their starting point (Kurki 2008, 161).

Like positivists, realists contend that social phenomena/structures have causal powers, so we can make causal statements. However, realists, unlike positivists, do not privilege direct observation. The realist believes that deep structural relationships between social phenomena cannot be directly observed but are crucial for any explanation of behavior (Marsh and Furlong 2002, 19, 30). To them, it is necessary to dig deeper into the social world by having a closer look at the processes, temporal sequences, underlying mechanisms, and conditionalizing contexts that constitute social entities and have causal effects in the social world (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 12-13). Scientific realists ascribe ontological status to unobservable entities like generative structures (Wendt 1987, 351).

Scientific realists try to understand the perceptions and intentions of social actors and the contexts of social interaction, generating useful, practical knowledge for social actors. They are doubtful of the value of law-like patterns of co-variation among variables that positivists strive for in making predictions. Instead, there is a strong affinity with 'configurational thinking', which leads to less ambitious goals concerning generalization across populations. Scientific realists strive to explain specific cases or for contingent generalizations instead of universal laws. Causal inference depends equally on observations, logical conclusions, and interpretations (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 12-13).

Central to the realist accounts is the reinstatement of the notion of natural necessity between causes and effects. For the realists, causes are real ontological entities that ontologically necessitate their effects: causal necessity is not 'logical' but 'natural'. Causes are seen as 'naturally necessitating' because causes are conceived to consist of, and carry, 'causal powers' to bring about effects. These causal powers arise from the internal constitution, or the ontological structure, of objects (Kurki 2008, 166). Scientific realist definition places causal mechanism on the ontological level. Theories and explanations are hypothesized models of how underlying mechanisms work (George and Bennett 2005).

The key method of scientific realism is causal-process tracing with a large number of diverse observations. The observations need not be aggregated into standardized scores because the causal inference is not based on the cross-case comparison. Instead, a large set of diverse observations is necessary to produce 'comprehensive storylines', 'smoking guns', and 'confessions', which form the empirical basis for drawing causal inferences (Blatter and Hoverland 2012, 19-20). Causal explanation in scientific realism is built around contiguity and sequencing of events, which opens a methodological space for process tracing. There is no need to observe causality; there is a need to make inferences about it (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 10-11).

2. 3) Process Tracing

The term "process tracing" originated in the field of cognitive psychology in the United States in the late 1960s - early 1970s. As used in psychology, process tracing refers to techniques for examining the intermediate steps in cognitive mental processes to understand better the heuristics through which humans make decisions. In 1979, the Stanford University political scientist Alexander George appropriated the term to describe the use of evidence from within case studies to make inferences about historical explanations (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 5-7).

The book by Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (2013) provides a detailed articulation of the theoretical groundings of process tracing and step-by-step guidance for its application.

Process tracing is a qualitative method that uses probability tests to assess the strength of evidence for specified causal relationships within a case study design and without a control group. It offers the potential to evaluate impact by establishing confidence in how and why an effect occurred. Process tracing is part of a wider effort in the social sciences to systematize qualitative methods by adopting a generative perspective of causality. The strengths of qualitative methods are that they can assist in explaining how a given input led to an observed effect (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 1-2).

Qualitative researchers using process tracing are in some ways analogous to criminal detectives: they solve puzzles and explain particular outcomes by drawing on detailed fact-gathering, experience working with similar cases, and knowledge of general causal principles (Goertz and Mahoney 2006, 241). Process tracing proceeds through a combination of induction and deduction. Process tracing proceeds primarily through inductive study for phenomena on which there is little prior knowledge and for cases that are not well explained by extant theories. It often involves analyzing events backwards through time from the outcome of interest to potential antecedent causes, much as a homicide detective might start by trying to piece together the last few hours or days in the life of a victim (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 18).

In the context of case studies, process tracing appears to be the most promising avenue of having confidence in how and what we know. Using process tracing in case studies is based on the premise that understanding must precede explaining, yet, at the same time, any explanation requires theoretical premises and a methodological apparatus capable of uncovering the causal mechanisms that its ontological foundations presume (Wolff 2021). Process tracing is sometimes viewed as incompatible with rational choice theories. However, Bennett and Checkel concur with the prominent rational choice theorists who argue that their hypotheses should correspond with the actual processes through which individuals make decisions and that they should therefore be amenable to process tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 5-7).

2. 3. 1) Process Tracing as a Tool to Study Causal Mechanisms in Case Study Research

Beach and Pedersen explain process tracing as a tool to study causal mechanisms in case study research. They define a causal mechanism as a complex system which produces an outcome by the interaction of a number of parts. Studying causal mechanisms with process-tracing methods enables the researcher to make strong within-case inferences about the causal process whereby outcomes are produced, enabling us to update the degree of confidence we hold in the validity of a theorized causal mechanism (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 1-2).

The important part of the definition, explaining why I prefer scientific realism to positivism, is the unobservability of the causal mechanisms. George and Bennett explain causal mechanisms as ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities. In so doing, the causal agent changes the affected entity's characteristics, capacities, or propensities in ways that persist until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it (George and Bennett 2015).

Process tracing involves articulating the steps between a hypothesized cause and an outcome (Punton and Welle 2015). That involves unpacking the causal arrows linking cause and outcome into a series of interlocking and interacting parts that transmit causal forces from X to Y. We can make strong inferences that a causal relationship is present in a case by using mechanistic evidence only by unpacking the causal arrow and studying it empirically by tracing how the mechanism works in a particular case (Beach and Pedersen 2016).

The causal mechanisms are viewed as a system of interacting parts that transfers causal forces from causes to outcomes (Beach and Pedersen 2016). They are ontologically different from intervening variables. Whereas variables measure attributes of specific cases, causal mechanisms uncover the underlying social processes that connect inputs and outcomes. As such, causal mechanisms are distinct from both inputs and outputs; they are portable and so may operate in different contexts (Falleti and Lynch 2009).

2. 3. 2) The Individual Steps in Theory-Building Process Tracing

Theory-building process tracing seeks to build a generalizable theoretical explanation from empirical evidence, inferring that a more general causal mechanism exists from the facts of a particular case. Theory-building process tracing involves building a theory about a causal mechanism between X and Y that can be generalized to a population of a given phenomenon, starting from a situation where we are in the dark regarding the mechanism. The social world can be split into manageable parts that can be studied empirically. The ambition is to build generalizable theories, irrespective of whether we have the narrower ambition of working with mid-range theories that are bound within specific contexts (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 3, 10-12).

Scholars use the theory-building process-tracing in the research situation when they know that a correlation exists between X and Y, but they are in the dark regarding potential mechanisms linking the two. It is X-Y-centric theory-building process tracing seeking to build a mid-range theory describing a causal mechanism that is generalizable outside of the individual case to a bounded context that scholars can test empirically in subsequent research (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 16).

2. 3. 2. 1) Step 1: Collecting Empirical Data

Step 1 involves collecting empirical material to detect potential observable manifestations of an underlying causal mechanism between X and Y that fulfills the guidelines for a properly conceptualized causal mechanism. This process involves an intensive and wide-ranging search of the empirical record (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 17, 62). The data for my dissertation has been collected from both primary and secondary sources, rebel and Ukrainian ones.

Rebel sources

The primary rebel sources are the memoirs of the rebel commanders, leaders of the pro-Russian organizations, Russian volunteers, and officials of the emerging “rebel administrations”, such as Pavel Gubarev, leader of the People’s Militia of Donbass; Aleksandr Zhuchkovskiy, Russian nationalist and recruiter for Girkin’s forces in Sloviansk; Andrei Pinchuk, first “minister of state security” in Donetsk People’s Republic and other pro-Russian activists, journalists and militants, who were witnesses of the delegation process. I also used several pro-rebel Livejournal accounts, one of them belonging to Girkin’s supporter Boris Rozhin (aka “Colonel Cassad”) from Crimea, who engaged in informational support of the rebel movement. These sources include insider accounts that, despite their obvious biases, offer essential insights.

The problem with potential interviewing of the rebel militias’ fighters stems from their assumed reluctance to share their views and willingness to provide the information that may put them in danger. Daria Platonova from King’s College London confirms that such respondents usually do not provide “killer insight” (Platonova 2021, 76). I did not conduct interviews with rebel commanders and rank-and-file rebel fighters several reasons:

1. Many of the commanders are dead or in jail, imprisoned by the rebel administration.

2. Considering the security situation in Russia and in the rebel-held territories, I decided not to travel to these areas for personal safety reasons, and I don't think that these people would like to share sensitive information about Russia's involvement in the rebellion or other information that would somehow put rebels into the negative light either in-person or online.
3. This potential target group is extremely biased, and their data's value would expectedly be very questionable.

Ukrainian sources

The essential data sources are semi-structured interviews in Russian and Ukrainian languages with the local experts from Eastern Ukraine, who experienced the breakout of the rebellion in 2014. I conducted several dozen personal and online interviews between August 2018 and July 2021. All interviews have been anonymized so as not to compromise the identities of the interviewees. The respondent sample included mostly local representatives of civil society who witnessed the early stages of the rebellion in 2014: political analysts, bloggers, academics, journalists, local politicians, and others. Interviews were conducted either in Ukrainian or in Russian. I speak both languages fluently on the equal level, so it was the interviewees' choice which language to speak during an interview.

The interviewees were recommended by my personal contacts—gatekeepers—during my long-standing research in Ukraine. I travelled to Kyiv several times to conduct the interviews in 2018-2020. All personal interviews were done in Kyiv only in the interviewer's presence. Some interviews with chosen respondents were conducted repeatedly. The questions I asked related to the observable manifestations of the pre-war pro-Russian political organizations, their embeddedness in the local society, and the resulting fragmentation of the incipient rebel militias.

However, some of these local experts were not direct witnesses of the rebel fragmentation. In this case, it is hard to tell whether I should take such data as the primary sources. Other respondents were direct observers of the early stages of the rebellion and/or were held hostages and prisoners by the rebels. In general, I interviewed more than 70 people from this milieu, but only data from 29 interviewers were used for the empirical section of this dissertation. The interviews have been taken in the following proportion: around 40 per cent face-to-face interviews in Kyiv, around 60 per cent online calls due to the Covid pandemic (mostly via Facebook Messenger), making notes and rewriting the interviews to my notebook.

All the interviews lasted from half an hour to several hours.

This group of my respondents is biased as they all hold pro-Ukrainian political views, which was one of the reasons why there were forced to flee the rebel-controlled territories in 2014 (and some of them later in 2022). Some fled already at the early stages of the rebellion in spring 2014 because they were locally known figures, and the pro-Russian militants had lists of the 'public enemies' who might be beaten or killed even before the large-scale fighting broke out in the summer of 2014. On the other hand, these local pro-Ukrainian experts had at least access to many different participant accounts, but some observations might be relying on hearsay.

Other sources

Other information comes from the media, investigative journalists and associations, especially Bellingcat. These should certainly be taken with a pinch of salt, and therefore, I will not rely on them as 100 per cent evidence but rather as an indicator of certain tendencies - these investigators are necessary for identifying and analyzing delegation chains, which are not public and intended to be kept in secret. A popular source of such data is the leaks from emails of the people responsible for the principal's delegation chains – Sergey Glazyev and Vladislav Surkov (so-called Glazyev Tapes and Surkov Leaks).

Some experts suspect that the published records of the Glazyev Tapes were tampered with, or/and that they do not reveal the full story of the events they are supposed to illustrate. According to Andreas Umland, it is unlikely that these recordings are mere fakes. The published conversations are interactive and made by interlocutors whose voices can be easily ascribed to individuals on the basis of their audible statements recorded in video material published elsewhere. The Kremlin would have already published proof of any manipulation had it taken place. Nor has there been any other public questioning of the genuineness of these audio documents (Umland 2016b).

When it comes to Surkov Leaks, Umland noted that they had reinvigorated the discussion of Moscow's involvement in the war in Ukraine and the emergence of "people's republics" in the east of the country. The leaks confirm the Kremlin's involvement in the armed conflict in the Donbas (Umland 2016b). In the fall of 2016, email accounts allegedly belonging to Surkov were made public by Ukrainian hackers. The leaked communications have been triangulated with other open-source information and verified by multiple independent experts (Hosaka 2019, 751).

Finally, newspapers and other journalistic sources can provide accurate observations of what I intend to measure, although the accuracy of newspaper sources often can be challenging to assess. Most of the pro-Ukrainian medial sources are known for their consistently high-quality journalism. The main media sources I used and cited in my dissertation are: OstroV owned by Serhiy Harmash, a political activist and journalist from Donetsk, Donbas.Realii at Radio Liberty, Donetskaya pravda and Novosti Donbassa (both owned by journalists originally from Donetsk), The Insider (owned by Ukrainian entrepreneur Oleksiy Tamrazov), Fakty.ua (owned by journalist and editor-in-chief Oleksandr Shvets), Hromadske telebachennya (owned by the journalist collective in the head with Maksym Butkevych captured by Russian soldiers in the summer 2022), V chas pik, Ukraiinska pravda (owned by editor-in-chief Olena Prytula), Censor.net (owned by journalist and military expert Yuriy Butusov), LB.ua (owned by the NGO Instytut Horshenina), and Depo owned by company Kartel, reportedly owned by agricultural oligarch Oleh Bakhmatyuk (Korol, Vinnichuk, and Kosenko 2015). Some more controversial sources, such as Myrotvorets, linked to the deputy interior minister Anton Herashchenko, are triangulated by other sources. These Ukrainian media sources are also supplemented by Russian opposition media sources, especially when analyzing the delegation chains, such as Gazeta.ru, Novaya gazeta, Vazhnye istorii, and Meduza.

Biases and triangulation

The most effective way to cope with biases on both sides of the conflict is triangulation, when a researcher cross-checks the causal inferences derived from process tracing by drawing upon distinct data streams, such as interviews, media reports, documents, say (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 28). There are numerous factors causing respondents' bias. The people may be interested in portraying themselves in the best possible light or exaggerating their role in the events. The political bias of the respondents may distort their view of the situation (scapegoating). Another problem is fading memory – lapses of memory over time may result in less reliable observations. Let's not forget that the rebellion in Donbas started more than eight years ago. As a consequence of the imperfections of human memory, interviews will never be a perfectly reliable measuring instrument (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 135).

Also, triangulation is not a panacea. Its successful use requires that the error term in each stream of evidence, on average, points in such a way that it cancels those in others. However, if all the streams are subject to the same selection bias, errors can accumulate, making researchers unaware of this problem ever more confident in a false explanation. Seemingly diverse sources of evidence could all originate from one or a few individuals with instrumental reasons to convince observers of a particular explanation (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 28).

To mitigate potential respondents' biases, I collected data from different sources of the same type (interviewing various participants) and observations across different sources, typically from "soft" primary sources like public speeches and statements or memoirs of participants from both sides. Being suspicious is a must in evaluating observations, so the information provided by one respondent should have been confronted and checked with information from other respondents and another type of sources when checking the credibility of the data and with secondary sources from both sides. I have not privileged any individual primary or secondary source by weighing the evidence they provided in my research.

2. 3. 2. 2) Step 2: Developing a Hypothesized Causal Mechanism

The process of the delegation to the fragmented rebel militias is unwrapped and divided into smaller steps to look for observable manifestations in each step of the causal mechanism (Van Evera 1997, 141). Beach and Pedersen recommend that each part of the mechanism specify which entities (for example, individuals, organizations, groups – nouns) are expected to conduct which activities (for example, protesting, researching, advocating – verbs). Each part of the mechanism can therefore be framed as a hypothesis and can be tested (Centre for Development Impact 2015).

Each part of the theorized causal mechanism can be disaggregated and conceptualized as composed of entities engaging in activities. Entities are the factors engaging in activities, whereas the activities are what actually transmit causal forces from X to Y. Each part of a causal mechanism has no independent existence in relation to producing Y. Instead, they are integral parts of a system that transmits causal forces to Y. Theorizing a mechanism can be thought of as developing the causal story linking X with Y in more or less abstract terms. A good theory of a mechanism does not have logical holes (Beach and Pedersen 2016).

The ontological position in process tracing involves a mechanistic understanding of causality. The defining feature of a mechanistic ontology of causation is that we are interested in the theoretical process whereby X produces Y and, in particular, in the transmission of what can be termed causal forces from X to Y. Process-tracing is connected to the deterministic causal relationship referring to discussions of necessary and sufficient causes in individual cases or combinations of these types of conditions. Scholars have to examine whether X is either a necessary and/or sufficient cause of Y in an individual case (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 25-27).

Necessary conditions have to be present for an outcome to occur and where the absence of X results in the absence of the outcome. Sufficiency describes a situation where a condition is able to produce an outcome. If X, then always outcome Y. In the theory-centric variant, mechanisms are understood as mid-range theories of mechanisms that transmit causal forces from X to Y and are expected to be present in a population of cases (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 30-34, 44).

As a safeguard against storytelling, process tracing should be based on causal mechanisms that are derived ex ante from theories and follow a basic analytical template. Such causal mechanisms tell us what to look for in a causal process rather than inducing us to make up a "just so" story of our own. They usually stipulate who the relevant actors are; how their beliefs and preferences are formed; how they choose their actions; and how the individual actions of multiple actors are aggregated to produce the collective outcome (Schimmelfennig 2015, 105-106).

The hypothesized causal chain of my dissertation and conceptualization of each part of the causal mechanism:

***Cause** - Transformative event that opens **the window of opportunity for the principal's patronage**: Toppling Yanukovych's regime in February 2014 (Chapter 3 of this work).* The unseating of Yanukovych is the critical juncture and a starting point for process tracing. Critical junctures are exogenous decisions or events that interrupt long periods of stability and set institutions on one path of development rather than another (Rixen and Viola 2016, 14; Checkel and Bennett 2015, 27).

Part 1: Initiation of the delegation to the loosely controlled and fragmented incipient rebel proxies with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry (Chapter 4 of this work)

Entities and activities: The principal acts as a guarantor of collective action for nascent rebel militias to initiate political violence against the incumbent, but in avoidance of high costs and visibility, it allows the high autonomy and low barriers-to-entry to its rebel proxies (Baylouny and Mullins 2018).

Predicted evidence (empirical indicators):

- Pre-war social embeddedness of the incipient rebel militias (election results, number of pre-

war organization’s members, public appearances, and rallies).
- Identifying people with Russian citizenship (non-locals from Russia) at the head of the rebellion, responsible for sparking off violent events.
- Identification of the delegation chains organized by the Russian state and para-state actors and the specific role of the local elites in these delegation chains.
- Principal’s keeping the barriers-to-entry low for the rebel non-state actors (deterrence of the incumbent to restrain from repression against incipient pro-Russian militants, the collusion of the local law enforcement and security forces).

Part 2: Perpetual fragmentation incapacitates the rebel movement against the government forces (Chapter 5 of this work)

Entities and activities: Increasing fragmentation of the rebel militias impedes the principal from using the rebel proxies as the effective forces against the incumbent.

Predicted evidence (empirical indicators):
- Evolution of the rebel movement in both provinces; their structure, hierarchy, splinters, infighting, internal disputes, and relations between commanders.
- Manifestations of the rebel fragmentation– number of the rebel militias, distribution of power between them, institutionalization across rebel militias.
- Identifying the mechanisms of delegation chains and their impact on the fragmentation of the rebel movement.

Part 3: The forced merger of the autonomous fragmented rebel militias as a solution for the problems caused by fragmentation and imperfect control by the principal (Chapter 6 of this work)

Entities and activities: Forced merger and other supplementary measures with high overhead costs enhance the rebels’ fighting capacities and facilitate the principal’s control over the rebel proxies in order to avoid failure.

Predicted evidence (empirical indicators):
- Imminent signs of the rebels’ military defeat and the principal’s actions to avoid the military defeat (local defeats, desertions, territorial gains, encirclements by the government forces).

- Rising costs and visibility of the principal to keep rebellion undefeated (direct military attacks).
- Practical measures of consolidation (assassinations, expulsions, purges of uncontrolled rebel commanders, merger of the rank-and-file with the forces of the principal's proxy protégé, co-optation).
- Evidence of the principal's role in the consolidation (activities of the principal's special forces, private military companies, providing resources to the proxy protégé).

Outcome: High-cost and visible overcoming of rebel proxies' fragmentation that become entirely dependent on the principal (Chapter 7 of this work)

Entities and activities: The principal curtailed the autonomy of the rebel militias and established *strict control over centralized rebel proxies* because fragmented rebels imposed high political and material costs on the principal and risks to the principal's political goals. The principal had to "clean up the mess" caused by the rebels' fragmentation due to their weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry. Instead of a cost-saving, deniable and quick campaign, the principal faced adverse consequences and has been stuck with enormously high, visible, and long-standing costs of holding onto external territory through rebel proxies. On the other hand, the principal succeeded in taking over complete control of the rebellion. Initially, the reluctant principal understood that without full-scale control through delegation, the rebel proxies might perish on the battlefields. The establishment of the total dependency of the rebel proxies on the principal coincides with the moment when designated rebel rulers get rid of inside competitors, but their centralized authority is subordinated to the principal's political, military, and economic offices.

2. 3. 2. 3) Step 3: Making empirical evidence under Bayesian logic

Evidence is made by evaluating the observable manifestations from the collected data through content evaluation, assessment of accuracy, and probability of evidence. That involves working out what each part of the mechanism will look like in practice. My position is pragmatic regarding the observance of causal mechanisms, as Beach and Pedersen propose. The ambition is to get as close as possible to measuring the underlying causal mechanism, but this ideal may not be achievable for theoretical and empirical reasons (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 44).

Bayesian logic is closely related to process tracing in ways illuminating its strengths and limits. It is the most developed logic in the context of process tracing. They both use evidence to affirm some explanations and cast doubt upon others, put importance on the probative value of evidence relative to competing explanations, and on diverse or independent evidentiary tests rather than on the number of pieces of evidence. Both also allow for the possibility that a few pieces or even one piece of evidence with high probative value can help observers, who approach a case with different theoretical priors, to converge in their views on the proper explanation of the case (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 16).

Bayesianism and process tracing warn against becoming 100 per cent confident in any theory or explanation due to the limits on observational evidence and the possibility that undiscovered theories may prove superior to existing ones. Central to Bayesianism and process tracing is the idea that some pieces of evidence provide higher inferential power than others. Van Evera has developed useful shorthand terms for the probative value of alternative evidentiary tests in process tracing. In his view, the probative value of evidence depends on the degree to which a hypothesis uniquely predicts that evidence and the degree to which it is certain in doing so (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 16).

Evidence unavailable at the time of the research, such as classified information, lowers the upper limit of the probability one can attach to the likely truth of an explanation. Evidence that is contrary to the process tracing predictions of an explanation lowers the likelihood that the explanation is true. It may therefore need to be modified if it is to become convincing once again. Inferences from process tracing also depend in part on judgments of when “absence of evidence” constitutes “evidence of absence”. When social actors have incentives and capabilities for hiding evidence, however, the absence of evidence might not greatly lower our expectation that an entity or relationship exists (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 19).

Given the difficulty of measuring complex social phenomena, we cannot fully measure what is happening in reality. As Beach and Pedersen say, even with the best-measuring instruments, we can gain only a selected sample of observations of a given phenomenon. Therefore, we are forced to infer from a small set of empirical observations that a theory was the cause of the phenomenon. We make an inferential leap from what we can observe empirically to conclude that an underlying causal explanation exists. We need to make within-inferences, meaning that we use empirical evidence collected from a particular case to infer that all of the parts of a hypothesized causal mechanism were present in that case. It cannot make cross-case inferences (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 68-69).

The evaluation process in process tracing is depicted symbolically as $o + k = e$, where o is an observation, k is case-specific knowledge, and e is the resulting evidence produced by the evaluation process. After evaluation, empirical material can be termed evidence, which can be used to make inferences that update our confidence in the presence of a hypothesized causal mechanism. We make inferences about whether causal mechanisms are present in a case. Raw empirical observations are assessed for their content, accuracy, and probability, enabling us to see them as evidence to update our degree of confidence in the presence of the hypothesized causal mechanism (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 73-81, 120). The evaluator should consider the reliability of each source and its potential limitations and biases and take appropriate steps to maximize the reliability and validity of the evidence used (Centre for Development Impact 2015). Evaluation is done in the four stages: collection, content evaluation, assessment of accuracy, and probability of evidence (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 123-125).

Evidence is comprised of:

- Account evidence: the content of empirical material, such as interviews, observational evidence, and oral accounts.
- Trace evidence**:** evidence whose mere existence provides proof that a part of a hypothesized mechanism exists.
- Pattern evidence – statistical patterns. Classic statistical probabilities can be relevant when evaluating this evidence.
- Sequence evidence – the chronology of temporal and spatial events (Centre for Development Impact 2015).

2. 3. 2. 4) Step 4: Testing the empirical evidence

Four 'tests' have been developed to assist this process: 'straw-in-the-wind', 'hoop', 'smoking gun' and 'doubly decisive' tests – all depending on Van Evera's principles of low or high uniqueness and certainty. In other words, whether the tests are necessary and/or sufficient for inferring the evidence (Centre for Development Impact 2015; Van Evera 1997). Unique predictions mean empirical predictions that don't overlap with any other theory. Certain predictions indicate that the prediction is unequivocal and must be observed, or the theory fails the empirical test (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 101).

The nature and assessment of evidence have parallels to a law court: evidence consists of empirical observations combined with knowledge of contextual factors. The investigator works similarly to a detective, looking for evidence to increase confidence that an outcome was caused in a particular way (Punton and Welle 2015). One difference to the workings of a detective is that more than one causal chain may contribute to the effect under investigation. In assessing the probability that the hypothesized causal chain led to an isolated effect, the investigator compares alternative causal sequences through:

- Reviewing the evidence under the assumption that the hypothesized causal sequence holds - cause A led to outcome B in the theorized way.
- Reviewing the evidence under the assumption that the hypothesized causal sequence does not hold: an alternative causal sequence explains the outcome.

Tests with high uniqueness help to strengthen the confirmatory evidence for a particular hypothesis by showing that a given piece of evidence was sufficient to confirm it. Tests with high certainty help to rule out alternative explanations by demonstrating that a piece of evidence is necessary for the hypothesis to hold (Punton and Welle 2015). It is an imperative in process tracing to cast the net widely for alternative theories, including theoretical explanations in the academic literature, the more context-specific arguments that historians or experts have offered, the implicit theories of journalists or others following the case, and the understandings participants have about what they are doing and why they are doing it (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 18).

Explanations are more convincing to the extent that the evidence is inconsistent with alternative explanations. Scholars must ask whether any major theoretical categories of social explanation have been omitted. These include explanations based on actors' material power, institutional constraints and opportunities, and social norms or legitimacy. As process tracing often involves exploring what individuals knew when and how they behaved, there is a risk of overlooking normative or material structural contexts. Fairness to alternative explanations requires that we fully consider evidence that fails to fit the explanations that interest us most, as well as evidence that fits explanations that initially interest or convince us the least (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 23-24). The last chapter of the dissertation will provide the testing of evidence, the uniqueness and certainty of the theoretical concept of self-defeating patronage I have introduced in this work.

2. 4.) External Validity

External validity is never going to be the case study's strong suit. Case study research is hard to generalize from because it includes, by definition, only a small number of cases of a more general phenomenon (Gerring 2017, 245). Some authors even dismiss the need for external validity whatsoever. Frank Schimmelfennig notes that whereas process tracing maximizes the internal validity of causal inferences, it does not generate any external validity per se

(Schimmelfennig 2015, 103-104). Process tracing is considered to be a trade-off between internal and external validity, because causal mechanisms are operationalized in specific cases, process tracing is a within-case method of analysis, and generalization can be problematic. The use of process tracing to test and refine hypotheses about causal mechanisms can clarify the scope conditions under which a hypothesis is generalizable (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 13-14).

A researcher cannot have a very clear idea of whether, how, and to which populations an explanation of a case might generalize until they have a clear theory about the workings of the mechanisms involved in the case. To some degree, this theory can evolve inductively from a close study of the case itself. In short, we may uncover hypothesized mechanisms through process tracing that may be either very generalizable or unique to one or a few cases, but it is almost impossible to know prior to researching a case the degree to which any inductively derived explanations will be one or the other (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 13-14).

Scholars register plenty of fragmented rebellions, although not all of them are delegated by the principal. Michal Findley and Peter Rudloff coded the number of rebellions in the Uppsala Conflict Database. Based on a conservative coding of the wars, fifty out of 114 (roughly 44 percent) observed cases experienced fragmentation. In a number of rebellions, fragmentation occurred more than once. One-third of the fragmentation occurred during the first quarter of the conflict (Findley and Rudloff 2012, 881).

Mike Woldemariam confirms that rebel fragmentation is all too common phenomenon. His dataset, which includes the full sample of African rebel organizations between the years 1946 and 2006, is based on data provided by Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and identifies 171 rebel organizations. More than one-third of Africa's rebel organizations have fragmented at least once, a full 20 percent fragmented multiple times, suggesting that for some organizations the affliction of fragmentation is endemic (Woldemariam 2018, 19-20).

Salehyan confirms that 285 rebel groups listed in the NSA data set prepared on the basis of the UCDP a plurality (134) had an explicit or widely accepted link with a foreign patron. This figure becomes an absolute majority if the 30 cases of alleged support indicate real external ties. Thus, the delegation of conflict to rebel militias is a quite common phenomenon, and many rebel militias are not purely autonomous actors but rely on foreign governments for their viability. External support for rebels in the conflicts that are seemingly domestic in nature but are, in fact, the products of foreign rivalries is more common than direct state-to-state fighting (Salehyan 2010).

That being said, I expect that my theoretical concept of self-defeating patronage can be tested in dozens of cases throughout time and space. Arguably, the concept of decentralized delegation chains has ever wider external validity because is not exclusively tied to the fragmented autonomous rebel movements.

3.) Critical Juncture and Cause of the Rebellion

The events of 22 February 2014, the day when protesters in the streets toppled Yanukovych's regime, represented the victory of the revolution against the kleptocratic and increasingly authoritarian system of Ukrainian government. Late at night on 21-22 February, Yanukovych travelled to Kharkiv, where he was to attend the Congress of People's Deputies of all Levels of Government from the Southern and Eastern Regions, Sevastopol, and Crimea the following day. The last time such a meeting had been held was in 2004 in Severodonetsk in the context of the Orange Revolution. However, Yanukovych decided not to speak at the congress, departed for Donetsk, and fled to Crimea and eventually to Russia (Wynnyckyj 2019, 133-139).

At that time, the border was amassed with Russian troops, artillery, and armor, ordered to full alert by Putin. Several columns of tanks stood ready to cross into Sumy and Chernihiv provinces (*oblasts*) from the north. Given the disarray of the Ukrainian army, had the order to invade been given, they would have been in Kyiv very soon probably. But Yanukovych officially failed to request military support from Moscow during the Kharkiv Congress. As Mykhaylo Wynnytskyi noted, it is unlikely to ever be known with certainty whether Putin's vision of territorial breakup of Ukraine was hitched after Yanukovych's flight from Kyiv, or before, but why has Ukraine played such a significant role for Russia in general, and Putin's regime in particular? (Wynnyckyj 2019, 141).

3. 1) Why is Ukraine so important for Russia and Putin's Regime?

Ukraine has been and probably will remain a key element in the Russian elites' thinking about their identity and destiny. This country has always occupied a special place in Russia's consciousness. Russian visions of empire, great-power status, and nationhood all hinged on a view of Ukraine as a distinct but integral part of Russia. Russian establishment has regarded the possibility of Ukraine leaving the Russian sphere of influence as an attack on itself (Plokhy 2017, 348).

It refuses to treat Ukraine as a separate nation with the right to independent statehood. Ukraine's assertion of independence not only delivers a crushing blow to Russia's great-power ego but also leaves Russia without Kyivan Rus', the cradle of East Slavic Orthodoxy. To process this change, Russia must rewrite its own national historical narratives. Ukraine's departure from the Russian fold also poses a challenge to the Russian projects for integrating neighboring countries under Moscow's leadership (Shevtsova 2020).

An independent, ‘Europeanized’ Ukraine poses a strategic threat not so much to Russian national security as to Russian premodern, imperial identity. Ukraine's historical myths of seeking independence over a long period of time, its claim to sole historical title to the medieval principality of Kyivan Rus and other elements of historical symbolism conflicts with Russian nationalist historical and territorial claims. Ukraine remains a crucial part of the Russian imperialistic mythology and imagination and will remain a ‘sublime object of desire’ for too many Russians unable to reconcile with its sovereignty, independent development and integration outside the Russian dominant influence (Riabchuk 2016).

Unhealthy fixation with neighboring country demonstrates a deep post-imperial trauma in Russia. Russian political scientist Sergei Medvedev noted that “Ukrainians were too close to us, too much like us, for Russia to allow them simply to slip away quietly” (Medvedev 2020, 218-219). For a quarter of a century, Ukrainian independence was looked on as some sort of mistake, a bit of a joke – the very word *nezalezhnist’*, the Ukrainian word for “independence”, was usually said in Russia with an ironic accent.

Mykola Riabchuk adds that since Ukrainian and Russian languages are proximate and mutually comprehensible (to a degree), the purpose behind the use of specific Ukrainian words like *mova* (language) or *nezalezhnist’* (independence) implies that the concepts they signify are not quite real but should be perceived with an ironic distance, as they fail to match the fully-grown “language” (“*yazyk*”, in Russian) or fully-fledged “independence” (“*nezavisimost’*”). All things Ukrainian in the imperial supremacist discourse had to be crude, amusing and explicitly artificial, as in a humorous operetta (Riabchuk 2016).

To Riabchuk, it is part of the system of stereotyping and negative othering of Ukrainians which served the imperial goal of belittlement, depreciation, and further subjugation, through discursive rather than coercive means. The major function of such stereotypes was to induce and reinforce inferiority complexes within the subaltern groups, so that they would internalize the dominant deprecating view of themselves. The stereotypes helped to legitimize the imperial status quo, to assert the “normality” of the de-facto racist hierarchies, and to sanction discursively any possible deviation from that fabricated “norm.” It was a product of imperial knowledge enshrined in textbooks and academia, in high and popular culture, and in folklore which represented a common and, therefore, undeniable wisdom, a “banal colonialism” (Riabchuk 2016). Medvedev goes on:

> “Russians cannot accept Ukrainian independence. And we are not talking here about imperialists or nationalists, but about the vast bulk of the educated classes, who look on

> Ukraine as some sort of banana republic, while trying to conceal a deep ressentiment against this stupid "little brother" who brazenly tore up their blood ties" (Medvedev 2020, 218-219).

The chauvinist arrogance and hostile stance toward Ukrainian sovereignty are built on myths of the advantages of the Soviet civilization and the superiority of the fictional 'Russian world'. Since the Belovezha Accords in 1991, which signaled the end of the USSR, Russia had a contemptuous attitude to Ukrainian independence. Russia does not consider Ukraine as a state but as an ethnography, merely a Cossack in his baggy trousers (called *"sharovary"*), standing in the doorway of one of the 'Taras Bulba' Ukrainian restaurants (Medvedev 2020, 37).

For more than twenty years, Moscow has repeatedly acted with paternalism and condescension toward Ukraine (Shevtsova 2020). Since Putin came to power in 2000, the Russian government has invested a tremendous amount of political, financial, and organizational resources into drawing Ukraine back into Russia's geopolitical orbit (Melnyk 2019). Viewed as a critical component of its strategic security, it is unsurprising that the Kremlin has taken a keen interest in the fate of Ukraine. In particular, this has meant impeding Ukraine's realigning towards the EU and NATO (Bowen 2019). Ukraine has been the potential crown jewel in any Russia's integrationist project in the post-Soviet space. Besides, in 2004, as in 1991, Ukraine remained the most populous post-Soviet country after Russia (Plokhy 2017, 323-324).

For the Russian elites, Ukraine is simply a sort of lesser Russia. In Sergei Medvedev's opinion, the Russian imperial chauvinists regard Ukraine as the 'pork fat republic', named after a typical Ukrainian product (and Belarus is the 'potato republic'), which does not have the right to political sovereignty (Medvedev 2020, 37). The Russians ascribe to themselves the role of the "older brother", which underlined their political dominance, cultural superiority and imperial suprematism (Riabchuk 2016). Ukrainians in the Soviet and Russian worldview have never been independent and sovereign actors but only the pawns in the conspiracies by the Swedes (1709), Austrians in World War I, Nazi Germany in World War II, Western and Israeli intelligence agencies during the Cold War and the US and the EU since the 2000s (Kuzio 2016). According to Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council *("Sovet bezopasnosti"*), the United States has spent billions of dollars through various channels to ensure "a complete separation of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics from Russia, a total reformatting of the post-Soviet space to suit American interests […] a whole generation in Ukraine was brought up to hate Russia and believe in the mythology of 'European values'. This generation doesn't grasp that these values, even if they are given a positive spin, are not, in fact, meant for Ukrainians (Egorov 2014).

Putin repeatedly stated that Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people’, reviving Tsarist chauvinism that denies Ukrainians are a nation and claiming their ‘artificial’ state is a Western puppet. Ukraine as an ‘artificial’ state is a staple of Russian establishment. Russian nationalism has never been reconciled to Ukraine's sovereignty over its eastern and southern regions. This was raised by Russian political technologists in the 2004 elections and by Putin in his April 2008 speech to the NATO summit in Bucharest (Kuzio 2018). In April 2008, a source told Russia’s Kommersant newspaper how Putin described Ukraine to George Bush at a NATO meeting in Bucharest: “You don't understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us” (Marson 2009). Later in April 2014 Putin first spoke publicly about the historical origins of such an entity as Novorossiya: “Let me remind you that this is Novorossiya. And this Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev, Odessa - were not part of Ukraine in tsarist times. These are all territories that were transferred to Ukraine by the Soviet government. Why they did it, God knows” (BBC News Ukraiina 2014).

3. 1. 1) The “Orange Revolution” and the first Russia’s Miscalculation on Ukraine

The Orange Revolution was a series of mass protests against the fraudulent victory of Viktor Yanukovych in the presidential election in 2004. Protests led to the second run-off of the presidential election in which Yanukovych’s contender, pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko, won. The Kremlin was both furious and frightened. Putin and the people around him interpreted the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as a breach of an informal agreement between the West and Putin’s Russia, as a treacherous act undermining the legitimacy of Putin’s kleptocracy (Shekhovtsov 2017, 75).

According to Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar, Putin could not understand why outgoing president Kuchma did not disperse the Maidan protesters since Yanukovych was not yet president. Putin did not try to hide his irritation and accused the United States of interfering in Ukraine’s internal affairs. Russian media coverage was pointing out that the West had organized an anti-Russian coup in Ukraine (Zygar 2016). After the Orange Revolution, the new Russian narrative became that Ukraine still wanted to be ‘with Russia’ but that an evil alliance of Western imperialists and minority Ukrainian nationalists were trying to prevent this. Color revolutions in Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries have been regarded as the new Western way of waging war on Russia (Bukkvoll 2016).

Before the final vote at the end of December 2004, the regime in Ukraine played the secessionist card. On November 28, Severodonetsk in Luhansk oblast held a "congress of deputies of all levels"—a gathering of opponents of the Orange Revolution from fifteen Ukrainian oblasts. They suggested holding a referendum on creating a southeastern federative state with its capital in Kharkiv. Yanukovych still hoped to become president of Ukraine and wanted to use congress as a trump card in the political game. However, the participants talked and then went their separate ways. It seemed they completely forgot the idea of autonomy for the next ten years (Zygar 2016).

The results of the third round on December 26 (51.99 per cent for Yushchenko, 44.20 per cent for Yanukovych) came as a shock to Moscow. It was the Kremlin's first serious miscalculation in a series of subsequent miscalculations in 2014 and 2022. Until the very last minute, the Kremlin's team of political scientists, consultants, and Duma MPs had been reporting that the situation was under control, that Ukrainians would "reject the orange plague," and that "the pro-Western candidate had no chance." The defeat was particularly painful because the Kremlin did not understand its causes and concluded that it occurred because the enemy—the West—had tried even harder. Kremlin concluded that the Orange Revolution resulted from an anti-Russian plot, and the next target of the overseas patrons of the color revolutions would be Russia itself— something that had to be avoided at all costs. The post-Orange neurosis spread to internal politics in Russia and seriously affected the domestic political situation in Russia (Zygar 2016).

Having suffered an embarrassing reversal in Ukraine during the Orange Revolution, the Russian political class did not abandon its belief that Russia has a right to participate in setting the rules of international relations (Shevtsova 2007, 174). Scholars consent that for Putin, the Orange Revolution represented a double challenge – to Russian foreign policy interests and to the regime's survival. Yushchenko's desire to move toward the West threatened Russia's political and economic influence over its most important neighbor. But equally threatening was the specter of the Ukrainian people protesting against the corrupt, repressive government and bringing it down (Stent 2019, 192).

Serhiy Plokhy, the Ukrainian historian at Harvard University, concluded that Putin perceived the outcome of the Orange Revolution as a major defeat. Putin blamed the West and its pro-democracy campaigns in the post-Soviet space for what happened in Ukraine. He felt threatened not only by coming to power of a pro-Western candidate in the larger post-Soviet republic but also by the example that the democratic movement in Ukraine had now set for opponents of his increasingly authoritarian regime in Russia (Plokhy 2017, 324).

In Anton Shekhovtsov's opinion, Putin and his entourage, with their Cold War mentality and bitterness over the demise of the Soviet Union, perceived the "loss" of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution as a continuation of the breakdown of the Soviet empire as they never came to terms with the independence of Ukraine. Russian ruling elites have truly believed that Russians and Ukrainians were one wrongfully divided nation. Apart from its emotional and imperialist connotation, this argument implied that Russians were – as the Ukrainian example had demonstrated – also capable of staging successful mass protests against the corrupt regime (Shekhovtsov 2017b, 76).

In Lilia Shevtsova's opinion, losing Ukraine would be more than just a personal failure for Putin. It would represent the most painful blow to the Russian system since the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving the Kremlin without a buffer state to shield Russians from Western influence. A successful transformation of Ukraine would present Russians with a dangerous model for emulation. Thus, Moscow cannot afford to allow Ukraine to be a prosperous, independent state (Shevtsova 2020, 141). In Russia's eyes, Ukraine has shattered the balance by leaning away from Russia. In Moscow's mind, Ukraine should be neutral, not present a threat to Russia, and it must permit Moscow to exercise some sort of patronage (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Since the Orange Revolution, Ukraine has become not just a vital issue in Russian political discourse but an all-consuming topic. Moscow has grown so obsessed with Ukraine that it has made the "Ukrainian question" integral to Russian identity, even as Ukraine tries desperately to escape Moscow's suffocating embrace. Destabilizing Ukraine is Moscow's means not only of shoring up its geopolitical influence but also of eliminating the very idea of the Maidan as an alternative to Russia's system of personalized kleptocratic autocratic power. In the Kremlin's view, the Maidan is an absolute evil that must be eradicated (Shevtsova 2020, 138).

3. 1. 2) Russian Strategy towards Ukraine: Road to Euromaidan

Russian involvement in the internal politics of Ukraine has been a constant since the fall of the Soviet Union. Elements of this strategy included open support of Viktor Yanukovych during the 2004 presidential elections; trade wars and the consistent use of energy as an instrument of pressure, including several "gas wars" in 2006 and 2009; cultural diplomacy, lobbying for special status for the Russian language, and support of pro-Russian organizations in Ukraine with a view to creating a consolidated political community that would identify with Russia and serve as an instrument of the latter's foreign policy; promotion of historical-political visions geared toward Russian nation-building in Ukraine and international discrediting of the country (Melnyk 2019).

The unpredictability of electoral politics in Ukraine presented a significant challenge to Russian foreign policy. However, once Yanukovych won the presidential election in 2010, Putin wanted Ukraine to join the Eurasian Union, a Russia-led political and economic bloc whose creation he put forward as one of his principal goals in late 2011 when he was preparing to become president of Russia for the third time (Plokhy 2017, 335-336). Yanukovych's regime allowed increased Russia's influence over the Ukrainian state institutions, including systemic infiltration of the organs of the Ukrainian state by Russian agents (Melnyk 2019).

Yanukovych also rejected NATO membership as a Ukrainian strategic goal in favor of a 'non-bloc' status and agreed to extend the lease for the Sevastopol naval base to Russia for 25 years, plus an automatic prolongation of five years. All this allowed Moscow to continue to regard Ukraine as a geopolitical buffer between Russia and NATO and even to nurture hopes that Ukraine might lean towards the Russia-led CSTO, Collective Security Treaty Organization (Allison 2014, 1271).

Before returning to the presidential office in 2012, Putin proclaimed the reintegration of post-Soviet space as one of his primary tasks (Plokhy 2017, 348). However, Yanukovych was not eager to join Russia's integration projects in the post-Soviet region, at least without serious material incentives. In 2013, Yanukovych had to make a choice – either he would sign the association agreement with the EU, which would mean strong incentives to pro-Western political orientation, or he will refuse, and Ukraine will be trapped in Russia's orbit of influence. The proposed association agreement with the EU in 2013 threatened to derail Putin's plans for the creation of a viable Eurasian Union, which would be incomplete without Ukraine (Plokhy 2017, 338).

In the autumn of 2013, Putin's hopes grew that Ukraine's potential participation in Customs Union in place of an EU Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement could be the key to unlocking his plans for a substantive Russia-led Eurasian regional order. As the Ukrainian domestic political crisis mounted in late 2013, Putin stepped up efforts to stake out normative division, requiring states to choose between EU-centered and Russia-centered integration. Putin characterized Russia as a front-rank player in a global clash of values, championing Eurasia ostensibly on a platform of social conservatism, tradition, religion and a focus on state authority to generate social stability. On the other side of this divide are found the liberal, universalist values and ideas of the EU and western states, which Putin derided as a cover for self-serving and strategic objectives (Allison 2014).

With Yanukovych's popularity fading ahead of the next planned presidential election in 2015, he had revived the possibility of strengthening relations with Europe, something strongly supported by the country's opposition. He pushed through political reforms that Europeans had demanded as a condition of signing the association agreement. For Putin, however, the expansion of "Europe" to include Ukraine amounted to an encroachment on Russia that would, in his mind, inevitably be followed by the further encroachment of NATO. Putin's efforts to knit Ukraine closer to Russia had made little progress, blocked by the internal divisions in Ukraine's state and society (Lee Myers 2016, 394-395).

The EU set a deadline for Ukraine to adopt the trade agreement before its summit in Lithuania in November 2013. In the months leading up to it, Putin exerted enormous effort to persuade Yanukovych to resist. In August 2013, Russia virtually halted all commercial traffic across its border with Ukraine. It was a very public way of making the point that Ukraine's economic future would be much easier if it joined Russia's union, not Europe's. Putin explained to Yanukovych that an agreement with the European Union would cost Ukraine dearly. The losses it was already feeling because of the customs enforcement would pale in comparison to the billions of dollars in economic pain that the country would suffer from the new barriers to the Russian market and higher prices for natural gas (Lee Myers 2016, 396-398).

Yanukovych's equivocation over his policy on the EU Association Agreement was his ultimate mistake. His initial interest in advancing European integration ran counter to his other blatantly predatory policies, offering the Ukrainian nation hope. In the fall of 2013, he allowed the Europe issue to crowd out everything else from Ukrainian political discourse (Åslund 2015, 101). On November 21, a week before the summit in Lithuania, Yanukovych's government announced that his country would back out of the agreement. It provoked outrage among those Ukrainians who envisioned closer ties with Europe as an inevitable evolution from their country's Soviet past (Lee Myers 2016, 397-398).

The first protesters rallied in Kyiv's main square, Independence Square (*Maidan nezalezhnosti*). Soon, the crowds had swelled, and tents were erected, as during the Orange Revolution in 2004 (Lee Myers 2016, 397-398). After the protests started, with his binary view of Ukraine's integration options, Putin supported Yanukovych by lending him generous financial assistance. Circumstantial evidence suggests that in an effort to secure Russia's interests in Ukraine, the Russian leader pressured Yanukovych to subdue the protests. More recently, uncorroborated reports have surfaced, revealing that Putin threatened Yanukovych with the dismembering of Ukraine should the latter pursue the Association Agreement (EAA) with the EU (Melnyk 2019; Allison 2014).

As an incentive to save Yanukovych and insert himself on the center stage of the Ukrainian drama, Putin offered Yanukovych a credit of $15 billion, which was sufficient external financing until the presidential elections scheduled for March 2015. Putin also cut the price of Russia's gas exports to Ukraine for the first quarter of 2014 by one-third and eased some but not all trade sanctions against Ukrainian exports to Russia. The two countries concluded a few agreements on production cooperation. Both sides maintained great secrecy around the negotiations and the details of most of the agreements, leaving the Ukrainian opposition to fear that their president had given up some sovereignty to Russia (Åslund 2015, 104).

It was a temporary victory for both Putin and Yanukovych, which resolved none of Ukraine's economic or political problems. Putin tied troubled Ukraine financially to the Kremlin while luring it away from the EU. This deal seemed to be a personal victory for Yanukovych. The EU had tried to persuade him to opt for the rule of law and democracy, while the Russians did not ask him to pursue any pesky reforms. The Ukrainian nation was the main loser. A significant majority wanted Yanukovych to sign the EAA, expecting to gain access to the EU's markets, job opportunities, and presumably visa-free travel. They hoped that rule of law and democracy would be reinforced in Ukraine, but their president let them down (Åslund 2015, 105).

3. 1. 3) Russia and the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine

In the early hours of November 30, the situation on the Maidan took a sharp turn for the worse. Riot police, called Berkut, cleared out several hundred protesters legally holding the fort on Maidan. Thirty-five were injured and thirty-one detained. The official reason for the cleaning of the square was to raise a Christmas tree. Three developments occurred simultaneously after that: the opposition called for massive peaceful demonstrations, defections started in Yanukovych's inner circle, and the authorities brought in a large number of hired thugs, so-called *titushki* - young men in sportswear - to attack both the riot police and peaceful demonstrators in staged provocations (Åslund 2015, 103).

Rhetoric by the Ukrainian and Russian authorities against Euromaidan protesters depicted them in a Soviet ideological manner as “extremists,” “fascists,” and radical nationalists in the pay of the West. With Russian television viewed by a majority of Ukrainians in the Donbas and the Crimea, such heavily laden rhetoric found adherents among populations who believed the Euromaidan was a “fascist” putsch financed by the West. Ukrainophobia on Russian television inflamed inter-regional and inter-state tensions where “fascists” were anybody who spoke the Ukrainian language, wore and held Ukrainian national symbols, and supported Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Playing up the “fascist” threat in Ukraine was an opportune way to mobilize Russian and Eastern Ukrainian political support and antagonism against the Euromaidan with the Ukrainian nationalist Right Sector (*Pravyi Sektor*) as the main scapegoat (Kuzio 2015a, 162).

After a secret trip by Yanukovych to confer with Putin, notorious “Dictatorship Laws” were rammed through parliament without a real vote on 16 January 2014, criminalizing everything the protestors had been doing (Wilson 2014, 349). Brutal violence erupted in Kyiv between battle-hardened protesters and repressive police forces, who started to shoot the people. The death toll soon climbed over a hundred, the worst violence in the city since the Second World War up to that moment. The reports that filtered back to Putin in the Kremlin – and thus onto Russia’s television networks – portrayed the clashes as an armed insurrection, prodded by American and European diplomats who had not only encouraged the protesters but even passed out food and cookies (Lee Myers 2016, 404).

On February 18, 2014, the authorities tried to break the impasse by escalating violence. Police shot 18 people dead in the center of Kyiv. Two days later, snipers presumably belonging to the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior killed dozens of people. The opposition named the victims the Heavenly Hundred (*Nebesna sotnya*), who were recognized as martyrs. Yanukovych had gone too far. After three months of public protests, turmoil, and violence, the opposition finally achieved a major breakthrough on February 21. That day Yanukovych made concessions in negotiations with the three opposition party leaders mediated by the three EU ministers but the next day Yanukovych fled Kyiv, and a week later he resurfaced in Russia as did several of his top loyalists (Åslund 2015, 107-108).

Putin never understood the core grievances that kept the majority of the protesters in the streets during those freezing winter months, the yearning to break the corrupted grip of a rapacious leader, the radicalization that had inevitably arisen when even their most basic demands went unheeded. Putin had thought he could buy off Yanukovych and thus the people, as he had succeeded in doing in Russia for fourteen years, with economic largess, dispensed at critical moments (Lee Myers 2016, 415).

The narrative about Western geopolitical interests in Ukraine has been used in framing USA and other Western government as active participants (Pynnöniemi 2016, 87). Putin and other senior figures in the Russian security elite convinced themselves that this critical political transformation in the strategically core state of Russia's CIS neighborhood must have been fomented by western leaders. The purpose, they suspected, was to empower a hostile government on Russia's western borders through "anti-constitutional coup" in order to block Russian integration plans and even open the way for a renewed effort by western states and NATO to achieve a security alignment with Ukraine. This would permanently constrain Russian potential as a European regional power and, beyond this, could be used to challenge the legitimacy of the Russian political system (Allison 2014).

By describing the change of government as a "putsch" or "coup" the aim was to deny the agency of the protestors and drain legitimacy from Euromaidan and new government (Freedman 2019, 83). The protests on Maidan and unseating Yanukovych from power for the second time in the last ten years changed the Kremlin's plans. Victory of the second Maidan, or Euromaidan, was another serious blow to Russian chauvinist pride. It also clearly demonstrated that Ukrainians did not want to be simply "the little brother" patronized by Russia (Medvedev 2020, 37).

The revolution in Ukraine also posed some uncomfortable questions that existed before but have increasingly grown since 2014. If Ukrainians and Russians are 'fraternal peoples' why do a majority of Ukrainians not feel part of the Russian World and are therefore not interested in joining the Russian-led Eurasian Union? Are all these disinterested Ukrainians really "fascists" because they do not want to be part of the Russian World? Yet, Ukrainians who seek independence from Russia are automatically 'pro-fascist' and 'Russophobes' (Kuzio 2016). Ukrainian researcher Alexandr Osipian argued that the framing of Euromaidan activists as anti-Russian and Russophobic has been made on purpose to render any attempt to carry out similar protests in Russia unthinkable and to automatically classify anybody speaking in support of Euromaidan as a traitor. Thus, in the Russian domestic context, a citizen who is critical toward the official line or expresses sympathy for countries in conflict with Russia is deemed a "Russophobe" (Pynnöniemi 2016, 78).

3. 2) Myths of Ukrainian "Fascism" and "Fascist Junta": Justification of the Rebellion

Taras Kuzio notes that in Putin's Russia, the term 'fascist' is manipulated by political technology and massive state control of television that spews anti-Western xenophobic propaganda. Russian campaigns against Ukrainian separatism and nationalism stretch as far back as the 1709 Battle of Poltava, where Ukrainian Cossack forces led by Hetman Ivan Mazepa forged an alliance with Sweden and were defeated by the Russian Empire. For the last three centuries, the themes of "betrayal" and Western governments behind a Ukrainian conspiracy to weaken Russia have been at the center of Ukraine-Russian relations (Kuzio 2016). The narrative of Russians and Ukrainians being one nation mixes imperial mythology with a sense of betrayal (resentment) felt towards Ukrainians for failing to follow Russia's lead (Pynnöniemi 2016, 93).

In the official Russian discourse, Ukrainians have been positively defined only if they have supported the Tsarist, Soviet and Russian hierarchy of nationalities, with Russians as the "elder brother" and those who disagree with the hierarchy have been defined as "agents of Austria," "bourgeois nationalists" and "fascists." The term 'fascism' in this use has nothing in common with political science definitions of the term. 'Fascism' was a misused and abused term in the Soviet Union and continues to be in contemporary Russia. It has incorporated all shades of political opinions, including people who oppose the Russian designation of Ukrainians as a branch of the Russian nation with Russians being the 'elder brothers', and back Ukraine's integration into Europe (Kuzio 2016). In Sergei Medvedev's opinion, the myth about Ukrainian fascism grew out of the

> "Russian state's teenage complexes, the elite's childish disappointment with the West and the social infantilism of the population. For the second time in ten years, Ukraine dared to ignore its big brother and was trying to tear itself away from the paternalistic paradigm on the way to European development. The answer was consolidated Russian resentment, in which the Kremlin's frustrated ambitions merged with the Russians' jealousy. Ukraine was declared a traitor, and its treachery was even more offensive because the Ukrainians were supposed to be Russians' blood brothers, the closest of all in the Slav family" (Medvedev 2020, 226).

The use by Russian propaganda of the image of fascism as a synonym for absolute and final evil is the ultimate dehumanization of the enemy. In the Russian state discourse, fascism represents the universal value of "the Other"; a whole new Russian identity is built on the victory over fascism. To Medvedev, the Russian response to Ukraine's revolution has been compensation for the elite's inferiority complex concerning the West and the people's loss concerning the conditions of their own life. The state cannot change Russia's role on the international stage with the help of soft power or quality economic growth, and the vast majority of the population is unable to break out from the bounds of state paternalism. The symbolic compensation for that misery was the creation of a dreamt-up enemy in the image of Ukraine and dreamt-up victories, such as the annexation of Crimea (Medvedev 2020, 226-227).

Given that the Kremlin controlled all major Russian news outlets, it served a unitary and consistent diet of news. A "fascist junta" had taken over in Kyiv, illegally ousting a democratically elected president. Putin was convinced that the US and its allies were responsible for Yanukovych's ouster (Stent 2019, 197). Russian state media continuously repeated and developed the idea of Ukraine as a "puppet state" in their reports. For Nikolai Patrushev, one of the most prominent hardliners of Putin's regime, it was clear that the motive behind the Ukraine crisis was not a desire on the part of Ukrainians for the country to be more democratic. Instead, it was about the US desire to create a new generation of Ukrainians who despised Russia and would ensure that Ukraine was removed from Russia's sphere of influence (Yablokov 2018).

Russian propaganda used the popular code word – *banderovtsy*, or Banderites – derived from Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera, who fought the Polish authorities in the inter-war period, and forces loyal to him fought the Soviet Army during and after the Second World War. The Russian media began to use the word *banderovtsy* with reference to Ukrainians in general and pro-Ukrainian activists in particular. Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported on 3 April 2014, that 82 per cent of respondents to a public opinion poll in Russia regard *banderovtsy* as a real danger to the Russian-speaking population, and 76 per cent of respondents saw them as "protégés of Western politicians". The majority of respondents (91%) defined *banderovtsy* as a semi-fascist movement terrorizing Russians, Jews and other nationalities (Pynnöniemi 2016, 73-74). The use of "Banderites" has been stretched far beyond its original reference to the militant followers of Stepan Bandera, to a degree where it loses any sense and logic. Now, it is not just a metonym for Ukrainian nationalists, or west Ukrainians, or Ukrainian speakers in general, but for all those inhabitants of Ukraine who do not wish to welcome the Russian army with tricolor flags and flowers (Riabchuk 2016).

In the propagandist narratives, the pro-Ukrainian forces are fascists and Nazi collaborators and thus create an existential threat to Russians living in Ukraine and to Russian civilization in general (Pynnöniemi 2016, 73-74). Henceforth, Russia, according to Putin, had to act to protect Russians beyond its borders against all threats, real or imagined, and Russia was justified in using force and annexing territory if Russians were deemed to be threatened. But it was not only ethnic Russians who needed Russia's protection: it was also Russian speakers in the "near abroad" (Plokhy 2017, 340-342).

With Yanukovych forced out of the office and a new Ukrainian government professing its commitment to integrating Ukraine into European structures, Putin and his advisors decided to partition the country (Plokhy 2017, 337). The first step of Russia's efforts to partition Ukraine was the annexation of Crimea. Armed men took over the local Crimean assembly and forced a change of government on 27 February 2014, one week after Yanukovych fled (Wilson 2014, 350-351).

The rapid seizure of Crimea surprised most observers – along with the new government in Kyiv (Bowen 2019). Kremlin used the argument of the Russian language and identity defense against Ukrainian nationalism during the annexation in February-March 2014. Russian propagandists supplemented references to the Russian imperial past with rhetoric that went back to the so-called Great Patriotic War – the founding historical myth of Putin's regime in Russia. Supporters of the Ukrainian government were portrayed as nationalists, agents of the decadent West, and fascists (Plokhy 2017, 340-342). The accusation by the Russian leadership that the new Ukrainian authorities were allies of the USA served as another justification for Russia's annexation of Crimea (Yablokov 2018).

In Eastern Ukraine, Russia started to demand Ukraine's "federalization," which would be tantamount to its dissolution and breaking the state integrity. Russia's key objective for Ukraine as a whole was to shape its new political order in such a way that governmental decision-making would be paralyzed. In Eastern Ukraine, Putin appears to have hoped for a much more generalized pro-Russian insurrection (Freedman 2019, 85, 91). Russia sought to create mechanisms that would allow it to negate any further Ukrainian drift toward the West and ensure that it retained veto power over any future negotiations (Bowen 2019).

The idea was to create autonomous regions inside Ukraine, which could be manipulated by Russia to influence Ukrainian domestic politics, and avoid using more overt, external forms of pressure. Buoyed by the weakened political situation and non-existent resistance encountered during its seizure of the Crimea, the Kremlin viewed Ukraine's eastern regions as an opportunity ripe to allow Russia to institutionalize its influence permanently. Russia sought to foster a secessionist movement that – while reliant upon Russian support – remained inside Ukraine to hamper further rapprochement with the West (Bowen 2019).

4.) Initiation of the Delegation to the Fragmented Rebel Proxies with Weak Social Ties and Low Barriers-to-entry

I argue that weak social embeddedness in the local population was the major obstacle to overcoming rebel collective action problems in the Donbas. There was no prior history of a large-scale pro-Russian secessionist movement which could have provided activist networks for rebel mobilization. This absence of a domestic tradition of anti-state violence and radical secessionist organizations was the source of other problems, such as whom to delegate the rebellion when there were no movements, parties, and organizations ready to take this role. Arguably, the main reason for that problem was the unwillingness of the local elites to be a vanguard of violent secessionism and the weakness and social marginality of the pro-secessionist organizations active in Donbas.

4. 1) Weak Social Ties of the pro-Russian Secessionists in Donbas since 1991

During the disintegration of the Soviet Union, mass national-democratic anti-communist movements in the national republics of the USSR were growing under the common name of “People's Fronts.” As a counterweight to these national-democratic movements, pro-Soviet hardline conservative “international movements” emerged in the Baltic Soviet republics at that time (Matsuzato 2022, 46). Their goal was to preserve the Soviet empire and endorse the great-power Russian chauvinism. The most reactionary forces within the Soviet communist party and KGB supported these so-called international movements from the very beginning (Skorkin 2016). They accused their political opponents, advocating the independence of the national republics, of “fascism” and virulent nationalism (Sizov 2015). Regional identity became an ideological platform for such a network of “internationalist movement” activists in Donetsk who drew on historical myths to justify claims for autonomous status for Donbas and even its separation from Ukraine. The Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih Republic (*Donetsko-Krivorozhskaya Respublika*, or DKR), which existed shortly in 1918 as a separate entity, became a reference point for a generation of pro-Russian secessionist activists in Donbas following the dissolution of the USSR (Kudelia and Zyl 2019).

4. 1. 1) Kornilov Brothers - Founding Fathers of the Donbas Secessionism

Brothers Dmitry and Vladimir Kornilov founded the so-called Inter-Movement of the Donbas (*Inter-dvizhenie Donbassa, IDD*) in 1990 to fight "against separatism, nationalism, chauvinism, and xenophobia, sprouted in Ukraine" (Dudnikova 2015). From the very beginning, *Inter-dvizhenie* agitated against Ukrainian independence, democracy, and free-market economy. Since the disintegration of the USSR was considered the consequence of the hostile Western policy, the movement acquired anti-western features, and it positioned itself as a sort of "anti-Ukraine" (Chalenko 2015; Skorkin 2016). The Inter-Movement was a precedent of Donbas secessionism in 2014 (Matsuzato 2022, 4).

The ideology of the Kornilov brothers draws on the re-invented communist Donetsk-Krivyy Rih Republic, a short-lived fictive state founded during the civil war in February-March 1918 by Bolshevik Artem (real name Fedor Sergeyev). DKR has been portrayed as a model state, while the Ukrainian nation, its culture, and language are deemed, in line with the traditional Russian imperial nationalist worldview, as an artificial invention inspired by the "foreign powers" to rupture the unity of the Russian people (Donbass Realii 2019).

Many other secessionist groups, especially Donetsk Republic (*Donetskaya respublika*), founded in 2005 after the Orange Revolution, adopted this ideological framework and references to DKR. This quasi-state was used as a political legacy to base the region's claim on its separate path. Kornilov supplied the "myth of the past," and when the rebellion took off in 2014, he expressed that the myth was becoming a means to the right end (Matveeva 2018, 80).

Kornilov brothers assisted in creating the Slavic Party (*Slavyanskaya partiya*), a Donetsk-based marginal Russian nationalist party founded in 1994 by the local teacher Aleksandr Bazilyuk (Sizov 2015). It was the most radical pro-Russian political party in the region. Donetsk authorities used Bazilyuk and his party for political provocations, while electoral results never exceeded one per cent, even in Donetsk. Bazilyuk balloted in the presidential election, in which he obtained 0,14 per cent in 1999 and 0,03 per cent in 2004. The ideological background of the Slavic Party and Kornilov's Inter-movement were similar, but Kornilov and his entourage tried to appear more intellectual (Interview 1, 2018).

4. 1. 2) Orange Revolution as a Prelude to the Delegated Rebellion: Secessionist Groups in Donbas in 2004-2014

The Orange Revolution in Kyiv sent a shock wave to the local elites in Donbas when their patron, Viktor Yanukovych, lost in the presidential elections to pro-western Viktor Yushchenko. The local elites in Donbas reacted by attempts to isolate the region from the rest of the country in order to preserve their grip on power. They sparked off the campaign for Ukraine's federalization to restrain Kyiv from intervening in their political and economic affairs, considering Donbas its feudal fiefdom.

Party of Regions officials cultivated Soviet cultural stereotypes and specific Donbas regional patriotism. Round tables and forums were regularly held in Luhansk and Donetsk, devoted to protecting the Russian language and federalization of Ukraine, opposing "rewriting history" – often with the participation of Russian guests (Skorkin 2018). Donbas witnessed rapid activation of openly anti-Ukrainian pro-Russian activities with the support of local elites (Nykonorov 2015b). The intensification of the domestic political conflict and polarization of the society led to the active promotion of anti-Ukrainian sentiment. The Party of Regions (PR) and small pro-Russian organizations in the region began to organize steps to discredit the Ukrainian pro-western foreign policy and accused Kyiv of heroization of the so-called "Nazi criminals," such as the veterans of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukraiinska povstanska armiya,* UPA).

The experience of the Orange Revolution demonstrated to the local elites in Donbas the necessity to create the mechanisms for their interests' protection from the political center employing street radicals as a bargaining chip. The Orange Revolution served as the trigger mechanism for instrumentalizing the secessionist groups and individuals by the local elites. Radical organizations were founded with the financial assistance of PR officials in this escalated atmosphere of tension, fear, and grievances (Interview 1, 2018). However, even after the Orange Revolution, future DNR leaders did not endeavor to organize a united secessionist Russian party but established multiple small, virtual, and sometimes absurd organizations (Matsuzato 2022, 46). Most of those organizations functioned only on paper and limited their activities to disseminating leaflets (Interview 2).

Vladimir Makovich, the future first chairman of the DNR Supreme Council in April-May 2014, formed Young Patriots Movement (*Dvizhenie molodykh patriotov*). Scandalous Aleksandr Khryakov, future DNR minister of information, led the initiative For Ukraine without Yushchenko *(Za Ukrainu bez Yushchenko),* intended as an umbrella for anti-Ukrainian political activities (Interview 2). The PR structures supported unemployed Khryakov through Akhmetov's right-hand Borys Kolesnikov, who financed his website, office and secretary (Antikor 2015). Khryakov also represented the Committee of Donbass Voters (*Komitet* *izbiratelei Donbassa*) led by Aleksandr Tsurkan, one of the Donetsk Republic leaders. Roman Lyagin, future chairman of the DNR Central Electoral Committee for the referendum on May 11, 2014, founded his marginal organization Us *(My*) after 2004 (Golovnev 2014).

4. 1. 2. 1) Donetsk Republic (Donetskaya respublika)

Under the ideological influence of Dmitriy and Vladimir Kornilov, the Donetsk Republic (*Donetskaya respublika,* DR) was founded in December 2005, eclectically mixing radical Russian imperial nationalist and pro-Soviet beliefs. Leaders of DR were Andrei Purgin, Aleksandr Tsurkan, and Oleg Frolov, who declared the fight against the Orange Revolution as their primary goal. These people led marginal and virtual mini-organizations before the DR foundation, such as the Movement of Vigilantes (*Rukh pylnych*) by Aleksandr Tsurkan or the Union of Born by Revolution (*Souyz rozhdennykh revolyutsiei*) by Andrei Purgin (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 121). The Donetsk Republic (DR) numbered only around 20-30 members, usually from poor semi-criminal elements.[2]

Purgin was probably the only leader with organizational and rhetorical skills. He imitated the Maidan kinetics of sit-ins with tents in Lenin (Central) Square in Donetsk, requesting that Ukraine be federalized, and Russian made the second state language (Matsuzato 2022, 46). According to the former DR member, Purgin has been an idealist, dreaming about creating the DKR-like Russian enclave in Donbas. Compared to other members, Purgin looked successful as he had moderate income from his shop with building materials. Tsurkan was an older man working in Donetsk hospital, talking about the need to form an army of homeless people as they have nothing to lose. Even Purgin supposedly made fun of Tsurkan, who called himself "the angel of darkness" (Interview 2). Tsurkan died in 2009, and DR disseminated the conspiracy theories that Ukrainian security services (*Sluzhba bezpeky Ukraiiny*, SBU) poisoned him with mercury. Frolov, the third leading member, was jailed before the DR foundation for failing to pay alimony and traded with pirate CDs on the local market (Kazanskiy 2010).

Pro-Soviet socialists, outspoken neo-fascists, and imperial Eurasianists gathered in the Donetsk Republic. From the outset, it was an openly secessionist player, enthusiastic about Donbas independence, although they presented themselves as federalists aiming to divide Ukraine into federative republics (Kazanskiy 2010). The official objective was to achieve a special status for Ukraine’s eastern oblasts and create an entity analogous to the DKR. Purgin promoted the idea of the Donbas as an island of a separate identity with special political and cultural connections to Russia (Matveeva 2018, 80). DR was not so much pro-Russian as it was anti-Ukrainian (Interview 2). Anti-Ukrainian ideology was based on myths about regional exclusivity and self-sufficiency, derogation of Ukrainian statehood and language in line with Russian chauvinist rhetoric and calling supposedly forceful Ukrainization “cultural genocide of the Russian people” (Kuzio 2019). Purgin refused to recognise Ukraine as a viable state and wanted the Donbas to become part of Russia (Platonova 2021, 207).

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[2] Respondent number two was active in the DR in the first years of the DR activities until he switched sides, joined the ranks of Ukrainian nationalists, and later had fought in Ukrainian volunteer battalion against Russian-backed rebel militias and Russian large-scale military invasion.

According to its former member, Russia did not finance DR, although it established close ties to pro-Kremlin Russian nationalists from Eurasian Youth Union (*Evraziskii soyuz molodezhi,* ESM). ESM was founded as a pro-regime vigilante organization to prevent the Orange Revolution-like processes in the Russian streets. It was funded by Putin’s Presidential Administration and managed by Vladislav Surkov; the deputy chief of the Presidential Administration in 1999-2011. DR leaders frequently travelled to Russia, where they have attended training camps and seminars since 2006. ESM provided the most important connecting link between Russia and the DR (Fakty.ua 2014).

The counter-revolutionary ESM claimed to be heirs of the *oprichniki*; Ivan the Terrible’s secret police (Horvath 2021, 90). It also claims to repserent “the squadrons of the Eurasian revolution”, says it wants to “create a new army”, and speaks of a “great purge”. To bring these war metaphors to life, the ESM has organized several training camps for the so-called anti-Orange movement. Held every year since 2005, the biggest ones of whioch drew a few hundred young people. During ESM summer camps, young participants studied Eurasianist doctrine, Russian history and Orthodoxy, and urban warfare training, especially preparations for street demonstrations (Laruelle 2019b).

DR unsuccessfully attempted to organize its paramilitary wing (Kazanskiy 2010; Skorkin 2016; Donetskaia Pravda 2014a). DR former member said the only “training” he was aware of consisted of several people that arrived at slag heap, slept in tents, shot from airsoft guns, drank alcohol, took pictures, and went back home. The photos later emerged on the internet. This trip out of the city with flags, beer, and barbeque could hardly be called paramilitary training (Interview 2). Local SBU knew about DR activities, but the organization was banned only after 2007 following a wave of civic pressure.

However, the ban was somewhat symbolic. DR lost its registration, but the authorities did not preclude DR in their public activities (Interview 1, 2019). Even after its ban, the Donetsk Republic movement was able to hold regular celebratory meetings in central Donetsk, which means that the movement was condoned by the Donetsk city council (Platonova 2021, 207). The Party of Regions covertly funded DR in small amounts enabling them to meet their ends (Interview 2; Kazanskiy 2010). The mid-range local authorities maintained constant contact with DR, especially Aleksander Bobkov, the only high-ranked Party of Regions official who overtly joined the rebellion in 2014 (Antikor 2015). He was the sponsor of the Bulwark (*Oplot*), a rebel militia commanded by Aleksandr Zakharchenko, who later became the head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR).

The conflicts in DR leadership followed after the official ban, and members dispersed to local online forums entering into virtual battles with each other, trying to figure out who was a "SBU provocateur" among them. Frolov had disagreements with Tsurkan resulting in mutual accusations of collaboration with the leader of the Ukrainian nationalist *Svoboda* party Oleh Tyahnybok (Kazanskiy 2010). PR officials reportedly abandoned DR after Yanukovych's victory in the 2010 presidential elections. There was no need to imitate the illusion of secessionism in the Donbas anymore, and Purgin had to finance some activities from his pocket (Interview 2).

Donetsk Republic's public meetings were unpopular and attracted mostly journalists because of the colorful appearance of the participants with old Soviet caps, Stalin portraits, and USSR flags (Bessonova 2015). The Donetsk Republic held regular 9 February meetings to celebrate the anniversary of the DKR and to "proclaim the state sovereignty of the Donetsk Federative Republic" almost every year since its incipience. The protestors, usually numbering no more than 20 people, were always allowed to march through the streets, from the Artem monument next to the city council building to Lenin Square (Platonova 2021, 207).

Since 2010, the Donetsk Republic had organized conferences in Donetsk in cooperation with Dugin's people from ESM and Sergei Baryshnikov, the university teacher at Donetsk National University and Russian chauvinist (Kuzio 2020). Baryshnikov enlarged the number of participants in the pro-Russian meetings by giving his university students credits for their attendance (Interview 1, 2019). Baryshnikov believed Ukraine should not exist because it is an "artificial state." He admits, "I have always been against Ukraine, politically and ideologically," showing the ideological continuity between the pro-Soviet Inter-movement and the pro-Russian Donetsk Republic (Kuzio 2020).

In 2011-2012, pro-Kremlin imperial nationalists aspired to unite marginal secessionist groups in Donbas into one movement in order to lobby more effectively for the idea of Ukraine's integration with the Russian-led Custom's Union (*Tamozhennyi soyuz*). In February 2012, the organizers of the roundtable in Luhansk announced the creation of the Russian-

Ukrainian civic initiative called the Donbas for Eurasian Union (*Donbass za Evraziyskiy soyuz*), headed in Donetsk by Andrei Purgin. Such efforts were supported by Viktor Medvedchuk's structures of Ukrainian Choice (*Ukraiinskyi vybir*), Russian nationalists from ESM and International Russia, project led by nationalist editor-in-chief of the Regnum media agency Modest Kolerov. However, Donbas for Eurasian Union had absolutely no political influence on the local and national levels. The political leaders, media, and society mostly ignored it (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 148-150).

While being relatively quiescent in the years that followed its ban, Donetsk Republic began organizing regular pickets, meetings and campaigns once Yanukovych was in power. From 2011, they held a regular campaign to honor the Russian Flag in Donetsk. On 4 May 2012, they organized a campaign for unity with Russia. Throughout 2012–2013, a number of pickets was held, at one of which a member of United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*) was present. In 2013, they picketed the SBU building in Donetsk and the United States consulate in Kyiv. They had activists in Horlivka and Makiivka and campaigned there (Platonova 2021, 208).

Since 2012, DR issued "passports" of the Donetsk Republic at the ESM Moscow headquarters, declared as the seat "of the Donetsk Republic Embassy in the Russian Federation". The former neo-Nazi skinhead from Makiivka, Aleksandr Matyushin ("Varyag"), led the organization's youth wing. Matyushin lived in Moscow for a while, where he was active in the local neo-Nazi scene, and then joined National Bolsheviks (*Natsional-bolshevistskaya partiya,* NBP). He left NBP in disagreement with Limonov's temporary rapprochement with the liberals and joined the DR back in Donbas (Kazanskiy 2015a; Klich molodosti 2015). Matyushin believes that the war between Ukrainians and Russians has occurred because the Ukrainians rejected the idea of a Great Russian Empire. He liked to speak about alleged non-Slavic roots of the Ukrainians, calling them "Turks", and praising Russians as pure-blooded blond Slavs (Klich molodosti 2015).

4. 1. 2. 2) PSPU-connected Network of the Russian Nationalists in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts

Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (*Prohresyvna sotsialistychna partiya Ukraiiny*, PSPU) was founded in the mid-1990s by Natalia Vitrenko with the alleged support of the Presidential Administration of the former president Leonid Kuchma to siphon off votes from the Communist Party (Wilson 2014, 199). Since the 1990s, PSPU was one the most radical anti-western parties in the political arena, promoting an eclectic mixture of Stalinism, political Orthodoxy, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and Russian imperial nationalism. The party had been relatively successful on the national level in the late 1990s when it entered the parliament in 1998 for the first and the last time with 4,04 per cent of votes and 14 seats. In 2002-2007, the party obtained around 2-3 per cent of votes. Later it went into oblivion and did not ballot in the last pre-war general elections in 2012.[3]

Vitrenko has maintained close ties to the Russian neo-Eurasianists led by imperial nationalist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, who called her a leader of the pan-Ukrainian resistance [to the US]. She promoted the idea of creating a political union of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus; rejected any form of Ukraine's rapprochement with the West and labeled all advocates of Ukraine's independence as Ukrainian ultranationalists or Nazis. She freely substituted “NATO” with “Nazism” (and vice versa) in her political speeches, attempting to create a strong association between Nazism and the West in general, and – appealing to the Soviet mythology of the “Great Patriotic War” – portrayed a struggle between the “fascist” West and “anti-fascist” Russia (Shekhovtsov 2017a, 187).

Proletarian Donbas was one of the PSPU's strongholds, where it was, as any other political party, dependent on the PR power monopoly with little maneuvering space for political activities unless the local elites authorized it. Despite relative popularity in Donetsk and Luhansk, the PSPU's activities rapidly declined after 2007[4]. Party got 4.24 per cent in Donetsk oblast in parliamentary elections in 1998, then 4.58 per cent in 2002, 6.80 per cent in 2006 and 2.91 per cent in 2007. In local elections in 2010, the party obtained only 1.44 per cent and did not participate in parliamentary elections in 2012, officially because of a lack of funds. PSPU’s structures disintegrated, and street agitation stopped (Kazanskiy 2013). Active members left and dispersed to other political projects of a similar kind (Kazanskiy 2010).

PSPU served as a specific “forge” of future pro-Russian secessionist leaders, including Pavel Gubarev. Gubarev began as a leader of the small skinhead gang and the local chapter of the neo-fascist Russian National Unity (*Russkoe natsionaľnoe edinstvo*, RNE), conducting racist propaganda. RNE paid for Gubarev's trips to Russia and his university study, but the organization eventually split into several parts, and Gubarev ceased his organized political activities until becoming PSPU city district deputy in Donetsk shortly in 2006 (Interview 1, 2018). Then he worked as an advertising agent and a Grandfather Frost entertainer, the Soviet equivalent of a Santa-for-hire (Wesolowsky 2019). Gubarev emerged again as one of the first grass-roots secessionist leaders in March 2014 and the founder of the People's Militia of Donbas (*Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa*).

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[3] *Tsentraľna vyborcha kommissiya*, https://www.cvk.gov.ua/.

[4] *Tsentraľna vyborcha kommissiya*, https://www.cvk.gov.ua/.

Vadym Bondarenko controlled Donetsk PSPU. Later he became director of the tax revenue office in Donetsk with ties to “The Family” centered around Yanukovych’s son Oleksandr. Bondarenko sought to get PSPU elected to the Donetsk city council probably to draw attention to himself as a local political actor by heading the election staff of PSPU mayor candidate Serhiy Beshulya. In the end, unknown Beshulya was not even allowed to run in the election. People close to Beshulya’s team, such as Myroslav Rudenko, were also active in 2014 but did not play any significant role in the rebellion (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 197-199). Rudenko actively participated in anti-Yushchenko protests during Orange Revolution and published articles in pro-Russian newspapers calling Ukrainians the "Slavic Turks" (Rudenko 2012).

Russia covertly sponsored PSPU through organized crime structures active in Ukraine (Wilson 2014, 331). Party officials created the network of affiliated groups and individuals, assisting in forming pro-Russian secessionist movements in 2014. PSPU party structures in the Donetsk oblast were personally interconnected with Donbass Rus’ (*Donbasskaya Rus’*) and minor political party Russian Bloc (*Russkiy blok*), which obtained less than one per cent of votes in the 2010 local election in Donetsk.

Donbass Rus’ was founded in 2007 by former PSPU councilwoman Natalia Bilotserkovskaya, owner of an auditor company from Shakhtarsk. The organization soon clashed with the Donetsk Republic over the funding from local elites (Skorkin 2016). This small project had only a few members, Sergei Buntovskiy and Myroslav Rudenko. Buntovskiy worked as a teacher at the Donetsk National University and was elected PSPU councilman in Donetsk. He presents himself as a writer and author of a Ukrainophobic book co-authored with the Russian neo-fascist publisher Maksim Kalashnikov, called “Independent Ukraine: The collapse of the project.” Buntovskiy had ties to Russian nationalists and neo-fascists close to RNE, National-Bolsheviks, and Dugin's ESM. He also unsuccessfully aspired to form a pro-Russian hooligan group Metadon from second league Metallurg Donetsk football club (Interview 3).

Russian Bloc (RB), a small all-national party, never exceeded one percent of votes in the elections. Vladimir Filatov, the teacher of the Russian language at the Donetsk National University, headed the Donetsk branch in 2002-2010. His political activities consisted of assigning his students as party members to present his local branch as serious political structure. However, it was rather an inactive decoration. Filatov was ousted from the party in summer

2010 in a hostile takeover by Bilotserkovskaya and Buntovskiy from Donbass Rus'. RB never had not more than ten active members in Donetsk, and the Party of Regions' officials had to help them get signatures to register for the elections (Interview 2; Kazanskiy 2010). A large amount of money was spent on leaflet distribution, handled mostly by unemployed people who usually threw their printed materials away to the trash bins (Kazanskiy 2010). Russian Bloc was one of the main organizers of the so-called Russian March (*Russkii marsh*) every November 4 with attendance of several dozen people. In 2011, the leader of the ESM branch in Rostov-on-Don branch Vladimir Prokopenko went in the head of the Russian Marsh in Donetsk (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 132-133).

In Luhansk, the PSPU maintained close ties to several marginal Orthodox monarchists and Cossack groups (Hromadske Telebachennia 2015). Radical Orthodox and neo-fascist one-man "movements" in Luhansk oblast were nothing but empty shells with no proper funding that counted only ten to twenty members in total. Some of them were presented as the "branches" of larger Russian nationalist organizations, such as the Union of the Russian People *(Soyuz russkogo naroda, SRN*), People's Assembly (*Narodnyi sobor, NS*), and Russian Imperial Movement (*Russkoe imperskoe dvizhenie, RID*). Those one-man organizations organized anti-gay parades and Russian marches with imperial Russian flags (Hromadske Telebachennia 2015; MsSakadinsky 2013). These few individuals on the fringe of the local political landscape with radical, bizarre, and conspiracy-prone ideological backgrounds did not have any influence on political life in Luhansk oblast whatsoever.

Several pro-Russian individuals worked as political provocateurs on the local elites' payroll. The use of odious figures, such as eccentric Anton Klinchaev, who worked for local elites and Viktor Medvedchuk, or controversial local businessman Vladimir Krivobokov was the instrument of Yefremov's local clientelist network intended as leverage on Kyiv. Klinchaev, oblast deputy since 2010, founded the political organization Youth Guard *(Molodaia gvardia*) for organizing political scandals like brawls during the presentation of the document about UPA commander Roman Shukhevych (Ivchenko 2012). Kryvobokov filmed a short video in 2012, where the civil war in Ukraine is shown, allegedly sparking off in 2015 due to Ukraine's refusal to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union. In the same year, Kryvobokov founded a small organization called Indifferent People Unite (*Nebezrazlichnye lyudi obiediniaites, NLO*), created for the promotion of the ideas of Eurasian and Customs Unions in cooperation with the initiative Donbass for the Eurasian Union (Nykonorov 2015b).

Except for such political marginals and political provocateurs, the Cossacks, affiliated with the Don Cossack Host (*Vsevelikoe voisko donskoe*) in southern Russia, have been formed in Luhansk oblast. It was linked with the change of Putin's regime attitude towards Cossacks. The Russian government replaced the tarnished reputation of Don Cossacks as German collaborationists in the Second World War and created a new myth of the Don Cossacks' revival as the cornerstone of the "new imperial rule". The Russian authorities generously sponsored new Cossack structures ideologically rooted in Russian imperial nationalism. This "Cossack renaissance" was under the strict control of the Russian security forces (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 139-140).

Small, marginal, and fragmented Cossack groups started to appear in Luhansk oblast in 2008-2009. They were involved in infighting, political provocations and criminal activities. Cossacks in Luhansk oblast were, according to Luhansk journalist Maryna Vorotyntseva, under the control of the Russian state authorities and the local Luhansk patronage network centered around Oleksandr Yefremov (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 141). In Donetsk oblast, Cossack groups with bombastic names gathered a small number of people from the semi-criminal milieu, who typically engaged in beer drinking and petty crime but remained politically passive until 2014 (Interview 10).

For instance, in Kostyantynivka, local Cossack activist Sergei Britchenko led Bakhmut Cossack Regiment of the Emperor Nicholas II (*Bakhmutskiy kazachiy polk imeni Gosudarya Imperatora Nikolaya II*). Local source said that:

> "Britchenko has criminal records because he attempted to racket some entrepreneurs in Donetsk, who apparently enjoyed stronger protection ["*krysha*"]. When he came out of prison, he became religious and organized small group of Don Cossacks, but their patrols regularly ended up by drinking alcohol in the restaurant Sadko. It was not clear where the money came from because none of them had a job, but they sat in the pub daily. They didn't organize any political activities during elections. Rumors circulated that they were providing paid protection to someone, maybe a small-scale racket, but most likely, they received some little money from Russia. Then they actively supported "Russian Spring," but they were only a few, up to ten people" (Interview 10).

First thing the local Cossacks in Kostyantynivka did when Yanukovych fled was organizing the guards in front of Lenin statues to protect them from "Banderites". Then they joined various rebel militias (Interview 10; Kostyantynivka biznesova 2014). With the onset of the rebellion, Cossacks in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts actively joined rebel ranks. Pavel Orlov, one of the pre-war "chieftains" of Don Cossacks in Luhansk oblast commanded the Don rebel militia with roughly 30 fighters. Another "chieftain", Leonid Ruban, assisted in supplies of humanitarian aid from Russia and died in Luhansk in 2016 (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 144-145).

Other source of pro-Russian secessionism and recruitment for incipient rebel militias were local veteran organizations, mostly from Afghanistan war, that were tied to Communist Party (KPU)[5] or local municipalities. Such organizations were often engaged in small-scale financial schemes, money laundering and other illegal activities. Some leaders of the veteran organizations later became rebel commanders, such as Aleksandr Gaidei in Sverdlovsk, pre-war chairman of the Union of Afghanistan Veterans (*Soyuz veteranov Afganistana*), Yuriy Protsenko ("Dushman"), *Vostok* deputy commander, and pre-war chairman of Afghanistan Veteran Community (*Obshchestvo veteranov Afganistana*) in Kostyantynivka, Igor Bezler and Valeriy Bolotov, both active in paratrooper veteran organizations (Interview 19, 20, 21; Nykonorov 2015a, 2015b).

4. 1. 3) Pro-Russian Secessionists in Donbas and their Readiness to Engage in the Rebellion

Ukrainian society has never really sympathized with the (pro-)Russian radical nationalist political movements despite the grim socio-economic conditions in the country (Umland 2020). The people had no incentive to support or vote for the radically anti-Ukrainian political parties. In the Donbas, region with a supposedly strong pro-Russian orientation, the small pro-Russian parties, such as the Russian Bloc, enjoyed very low popularity. They did not win any seats in the regional government in 2010, despite having nominated their candidates in the local elections (Platonova 2021, 206).

Russian-speaking people were not the subjects of persecution or discrimination in Ukraine. There have never been ethnic, linguistic, or religious conflicts in Donbas. Whatever problems may have plagued the Donbas, its inhabitants had not considered seriously taking up arms to resolve political disputes (Kuromiya 2019, 245-246). Russian nationalist and ultra-conservative imperialism, portrayed as an antithesis of Western political models, was not as popular in Ukraine as in Russia, where it became mainstream.

Many people in Ukraine were inclined to Russia because of the putative economic stability, higher wages, or pensions and preferred Russia for material, not ideational, or identity reasons (Stebelsky 2018; Kuzio 2015a). Soviet/Russian imperialism and political Orthodoxy did not attract masses of supporters prior to the war. Russian nationalist stereotypes and myths about Ukraine and Ukrainian had little support in reality (Kuzio 2019). That was arguably one of the sources of a series of endless Russian establishment's miscalculations about Ukraine.

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[5] KPU party officials in Starobilsk (Aleksandr Miliutenko), Donetsk (Vadym Zaibert), Kostyantynivka (Kostyantyn Beskorovainyi) and Rovenky (Volodymyr Hlushchenko) were also chairmen of Afghanistan war veteran organizations, participating in the rebellion.

In 2014, the anti-Ukrainian mobilization relied on a set of disparate ideational frames rejecting the legitimacy of the new pro-western Ukrainian government, characterizing power transfer in Kyiv as a "neo-Nazi coup," amplifying threats of Ukrainian nationalist violence against locals and calling for integration with Russia. These ideological frames were hardly sufficient to produce an instant mobilizing effect and encourage widespread recruitment into the pro-Russian militant movements (Kudelia 2019, 285). The fragmented pro-Russian organizations could not provide vital ideational resources for the anti-Ukrainian mobilization.

The pro-Russian secessionist leaders were obscure figures of little-to-no political significance in the country or the region. They would be properly characterized as local and regional political outsiders, adherents of extreme movements that exist on the political landscape's margins. The biographies of the pro-Russian secessionist leaders in the Donbas reveal that people from different social backgrounds formed the leadership of the pro-Russian movements, including local criminals, small entrepreneurs, and ideological extremists colored by Russian nationalism (Kofman et al. 2017).

In all cases, they had not even the slightest influence on the local society. They were outsiders, unable to appeal to the masses. The lack of charismatic leaders was one of the biggest issues in the pro-Russian milieu. Their status as outsiders made them unattractive to the local paternalist population. Such leaders could be interesting only for local elites as paid provocateurs useful for the local political struggles (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 127).

The inexperienced and unknown secessionist leaders did not fit into higher politics as the representatives of the local societies or as potential leaders of the disenfranchised, oppressed, exploited, and discriminated communities because no such things existed in Ukraine. As a result, not a single pro-Russian organization in Donetsk was ready for large-scale political violence, and neither had paramilitary wings. With the culmination of the Euromaidan, small groups around Andrei Purgin from the Donetsk Republic tried to mobilize pro-Russia supporters in January and February 2014.

When the Donbas rebellion started, not a single widely known local dignitary seemed to have visibly taken part in it, not to mention led it. Although the Donbas had, like any other society, regionally prominent politicians, journalists, doctors, entrepreneurs and writers, apparently none or very few of the Luhansk and Donetsk notabilities chose to become, if not a leader, then at least an open participant of 2014 so-called “Russian spring”. The only prominent Ukrainian politician ever officially involved with the rebellion was Oleg Tsaryov, a notorious member of Ukraine’s pre-Euromaidan parliament. However, Tsaryov is not from the Donbas but from the neighboring Dnipro oblast —perhaps, one of the country’s most staunchly pro-Ukrainian Russophone regions (Umland 2016b).

Nevertheless, local pro-Russian marginals started calling for violence. Perhaps the most well-recorded case of the open call for violence is the speech by Khryakov, then the head of a small pro-Yanukovych movement Committee of the Donbas Voters and later one of the ministers in the nascent DNR, during the meeting on 8 February 2014. Khryakov openly appealed to the Soviet army officers to come to the rescue of the anti-Maidan forces in Ukraine and to demonstrate that “they have not forgotten the lot numbers on their guns.” The Donetsk Republic movement also appealed to violence against the Euromaidan protestors. It used its online platform on the Russian social media Vkontakte not only to recruit people but also to issue or endorse a profusion of belligerent statements (Platonova 2021, 96). On 7 February, the following message was posted on Donetsk Republic pages on Vkontakte:

> “Tomorrow the “Orange” Russophobe neo-Banderites will have a meeting next to the building of the Appeals Court ... All those who want to come to beat them up, please write a message to me. We are going to be there at 11am. Let’s beat the fascists! Let’s clear the Banderite scum from the Donbas!” (Platonova 2021, 96).

When Yanukovych fled to Russia in late February 2014, radical pro-Russian organizations had no more than 100 active members in both Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, among the population of nearly seven million, ready to engage in anti-state violence. Without respected leaders, pro-Russian secessionists desperately needed a boost from the external actor. Gubarev admitted that in early March 2014, his fighting groups from People's Militia of Donbass comprised no more than twenty members (Gubarev 2015, 108). He voiced aloud in public for the first time the idea of violating Ukraine’s sovereignty at mass meetings in early March 2014 (Interview 2; Vaganov 2018).

Gubarev stormed the Donetsk Regional Council several times to force regional deputies to announce a referendum on federalization in March 2014 (Vaganov 2018). Later, he proclaimed himself the “People's Governor of Donetsk” (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2017). Party of Regions officials lost their connection with the people in the streets, and radicals like Gubarev took over the initiative (Interview 3, 2019). Donetsk and Luhansk pro-Russian leaders have been arrested in March 2014, Gubarev in Donetsk and Kharitonov in Luhansk. The people around Gubarev, with ties to Russian neo-fascist structures, took over the lead of the People's Militia in Donbass after his arrest - Miroslav Rudenko, Sergei Tsyplakov, and Robert Donya (Donetskaia pravda, 2014b)[6].

Regional PSPU secretary Alexandr Kharitonov, and former councilman in Luhansk, founded Lugansk Guard (LG) as the key anti-Maidan force in January 2014. LG was composed of PSPU officials, such as Liubov Korsakova, ex-secretary of the PSPU regional committee, and Anastasiya Pyaterikova, redactor of the party's newspaper The Sunrise (*Voskhod*) and former pole-dancer in a Krasnodon night club (Nykonorov 2016b). Yefremov's clientelist network had covertly supported LG. Kharitonov was proclaimed as "people's governor" and proposed to hold a referendum on federalization. After Kharitonov's arrest in March, other LG leaders immediately escaped to Russia or were put under house arrest.

The Russian positions in Donetsk and Luhansk were not as strong as they had been in Crimea. There was no evidence that substantial sections of the local population actively backed pro-Russian militants occupying buildings. Pro-unity demonstrations draw significant crowds but meager compared with those that had filled the streets of Kyiv. The overall impression was that the population wanted more autonomy but had no interest in joining Russia or seceding Ukraine (Freedman 2019, 98).

An opinion pollster reported that 18,1 per cent of Donetsk and 24.2 per cent of Luhansk support the recent armed seizures of administrative buildings. Roughly 25% in the Donbas oblast said they would support secessionist rallies in favor of joining Russia (Freedman 2019, 98). Support for separatism was not the dominant political opinion among residents of Donbas. Only a minority of the population – less than a third of people surveyed in Donetsk and Luhansk – backed separation from Ukraine in 2014, while slightly more than 50 per cent opposed it. By early summer, popular support for the DNR and LNR reached approximately one-third of the population (Giuliano 2018).

According to Moshes and Rácz, the last reliable, properly procured data regarding the political loyalties of the local population is from April 2014, when the Kyiv Institute of Sociology conducted a comprehensive survey in Eastern Ukraine on attitudes towards secessionism. In the Donetsk oblast, only 27.5 per cent of respondents favored the idea that the region should secede from Ukraine and join Russia, while 52.2 per cent were firmly against. In

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[6] Later in 2014 Gubarev survived an assassination attempt, and his Novorossiya Party was banned from the November 2014 elections in the Donbas on a technicality (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2017). Rudenko and Tsyplakov became DNR deputies for a while.

Luhansk, the secession supporters constituted 30.3 per cent, while 51.9 per cent were against it. In their opinion, the available public opinion data shows that secessionism in Eastern Ukraine had no support base for constructing a new political identity for the secessionist leaders with backing from Russia (Moshes and Rácz 2014).

4. 2) Keeping the Barriers-to-entry Low

The role of the local elites in Donbas was not as straightforward as in other conflicts where the secessionist elites led the rebellion against the incumbent government. Elites in Donbas were not interested in seceding from Ukraine or stirring up a war. They sought to preserve their influence at the regional level by using widespread unrest as a tool to extract concessions from Kyiv, a dangerous game which they ended up losing. They did not take action to hamper the escalation of violence and secessionism in the critical initial stages of the rebellion (Nitsova, 2021). Their strategy backfired because the disintegration of the party in power opened a political vacuum into which previously marginal groups moved (Kuzio, 2017; Wilson 2014).

4. 2. 1) Local Elites and Law Enforcement

The Party of Regions (PR), the political machine connected to Donetsk and other local elites, did not function as a base of pre-existing support network for the rebellion because the PR-related local elites in other regions sided with the state at a critical moment (Nitsova 2021; Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 805). PR leaders often labeled their opponents as "fascists" and a threat to Russophone culture, reinforcing PR's position as a focal point for political coordination of the Donbas residents. Nevertheless, the party's rhetoric avoided making explicitly secessionist demands (Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 805-806).

PR appealed to voters with pro-Russian sympathies, claiming good relations with Russia as its priority in foreign policy. It was a typical Eastern Ukrainian ideologically amorphous populist party, uninterested in handing the Donbas, their fiefdom, over to Russia (Kuzio 2015c, 105-106). The party did not stand for an ideology or any particular policies but was used as a tool for gaining access to state power for self-enrichment (Nitsova, 2021). It combined left-wing paternalism, Soviet nostalgia, and big business as one of the most populist parties in Ukraine (Kuzio 2015b, 177-178).

Defining who was and was not part of the local elites in 2014 is complicated by the fact that Donetsk elites captured power at the national level in 2010 and held it until February 2014. The mighty patrons from the Donbas consisted of the "Family" led by Yanukovych's son Oleksandr, a clientelist network around the wealthiest oligarch in Ukraine, Rynat Akhmetov, and several smaller local groups as their satellites (Kuzio 2015b, 176). The members of the local elites in Donbas were usually clients of either ex-president Yanukovych or the oligarch Akhmetov. The latter built a powerful clientelist network as a major employer in the Donbas. The region had been their semi-feudal fiefdom since the late 1990s (Kovaleva, 2007: 69-73). When Yanukovych fled to Russia, the most influential power-holding positions went to people associated with Akhmetov.

The patronage network of former Komsomol officials around Oleksandr Yefremov formed local elites in Luhansk. This local strongman had been building his clientelist system in Luhansk since the late 1990s. His people controlled the local PR structures, regional and city councils, mayoral offices, and some economic assets. Thus, the most relevant elite actors were Akhmetov's and Yefremov's networks active in Donetsk and Luhansk because most of The Family associates fled Ukraine with Yanukovych. Akhmetov was the dominant actor with enormous economic assets, compared to Yefremov, who held political power in Luhansk oblast through local political institutions, mostly mayoral offices, without commanding sizable economic resources.

The demise of Yanukovych's regime in February 2014 endangered the positions of the elites in the Donbas once again since the Orange Revolution as they were personally connected with the toppled government (Interview 14; Wilson 2014). Local elites and oligarchs had plenty to lose in the aftermath of the Euromaidan movement since their patronage party, the Party of Regions, was politically decimated and had much to gain from informal backing protests as part of a bargaining game with those newly arrived in power (Kofman et al. 2017).

Local elites and law enforcement refrained from any public decisive political action in March-April 2014. Their passivity contributed to the political vacuum and general chaos. Local deputies from the regional council turned to Kyiv in March 2014, demanded the right to form municipal police and local law enforcement, and announced the formation of local self-defense forces. The regional council recommended forming such forces to city and district councils in the Luhansk oblast (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 188).

Local elites in Donbas did not favor a secessionist rebellion as they initially sought to use popular discontent to attain concessions from the Kyiv government and use street radicals as a bargaining chip for negotiations. However, the principal "hijacked" the rebellion and effectively sidelined the local elites. The elites turned out not to be ready for large-scale political violence, which was never a part of their strategy (Laryš and Souleimanov 2022). Most likely, Akhmetov and Yefremov underestimated the Russian factor and the risk of a fully armed conflict breaking out. On 20 May 2014, Akhmetov initiated a civic action, "For a peaceful Donbas," in which both factories and cars blared their horns in rejection of the force used by the self-proclaimed DNR. In the end, Akhmetov's action stood out as a belated act of desperation rather than an attempt to save the region from its descent into the war (Portnov 2016). The attitude of the local elites and regular defections of law enforcement officers lowered the risks and costs of participation in the rebellion.

The relations between the Donbas' local elites and Russia and *vice versa* were rather complicated. The local elites used pro-Russian/Soviet rhetoric in order to legitimize their grip on power reproducing a loyal stance to Russia, mobilizing people by the fear that disrupting economic relations with Russia would lead to economic decline and marginalization because their products are not competitive on the European markets and only Russia can save the local industry (see Zhukov 2016). Although many local oligarchs' holdings were reliant on the Russian market, it was rather part of their game with Kyiv than open defense of the Russian geopolitical interests in their "fiefdom". Some of the most pro-Russian members of the local elites and their patronage networks maintained close ties to Russia, such as Levchenko or Bohachev, but it would be an exaggeration to say that they acted as stooges and fifth column of the Kremlin in Donbas.

The most powerful oligarchs, such as Rynat Akhmetov, were pragmatic defenders of their economic assets in Eastern Ukraine with no substantial business in Russia, while Russian business did not set foot resolutely in Donbas. Local Donetsk-based oligarchy jealously protected local economic assets from the inroads of both Kyiv and Moscow. To a limited extent, Donetsk and Russian capital competed in Luhansk province because local elites under Yefremov did not manage to build their own economic base. Russian enterprises bought an oil refinery in Lysychansk (not working since the moment Rosneft bought it in 2012), Luhanskteplovoz (bought by Transmashholding, private manufacturer closely tied to Russian Railways), Luhanskvoda (bought by Rosvodokanal, company owned by financial holding Alpha Group) and assets owned by ISD (*Industrialnyi Soyuz Donbassa*), whose 50 % + 2 stocks were bought by Russian investors from Evraz Group and state-owned Vneshekonombank, now VEB.RF (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 137). The biggest economic assets held by ISD were Alchevsk Metallurgical Complex and Alchevsk Coke-chemical Plant.

Police inactivity was essential in helping rebels control the streets and keeping the barriers-to-entry low for new rebel militias during April and May 2014 (Interview 1, 2018; Judah 2016; Matveeva 2018, 8). Police were demotivated and sabotaged every order from Kyiv or their police superiors (Interview 29). Some police officials actively participated in seizures of government buildings, and many were distrustful of the new government (Dzerkalo tyzhnya 2014). Local police either sympathized with the anti-Kyiv side because they shared their sentiments or sought to keep their distance to support the eventual winner (Matveeva 2018, 8).

According to various sources, police and SBU defections to the rebels were enormously high, from 50 to 70 per cent (Interview 3, 6, 7). By August 2015, Ukraine's chief military prosecutor would report that some 5,000 police and 3,000 servicemen had defected to the secessionist cause (Kofman et al. 2017). Police in Donbas kept strong pro-Russian sentiments. Since the dissolution of the USSR, relations with their Russian counterparts had never faltered. Many local police officers saw differences between their material situation and their Russian colleagues' standard of living, which was enhanced by popular Russian TV serials about heroic policemen (Interview 6).

When the crisis began in Donbas, many Russian policemen called to warn local officers that it has no sense to be involved in a "fratricide war" because of some "fascists from Maidan." For most police officers, Yanukovych was a common criminal who lacked authority, but Putin was "their guy", a "Chekist," who knew how to deal with "rioters" and reward officers (Interview 1, 2018).

On April 6, 2014, pro-Russian mobs led by Afghanistan War veterans in Donetsk and Luhansk seized state administrative buildings, but their enthusiasm began to crumble not knowing what to do next. No one was ready for actual fighting (Gubarev 2015, 161; Zhuchkovskiy 2018). The militants, a chaotic network of several dozen uncoordinated people in a city of a million, had no leadership. The external actor had to step in more decisively. Pro-Russians seized the rest of the government buildings in April 2014, and nascent rebel groups began to emerge in these buildings, using them as headquarters.

4. 2. 2) Principal's Deterrence

To deter the incumbent from any harsh response, Russian authorities announced military exercises on the Ukrainian border in late February and, again, late April to increase concerns of a Russian military invasion (Interview 28). At the end of February 2014, then State Duma

Speaker Sergei Naryshkin threatened that Russia would intervene to “defend” Russians and Russian speakers in a telephone call with Ukrainian Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov during an emergency meeting of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council (*Rada natsional'noi bezpeky ta oborony Ukraiiny*, RNBOU) (Kuzio 2020, 120).

On March 1, the Russian parliament approved Putin’s request for Russian forces to be used in Ukraine “until the normalization of the political situation in the country to protect the interests of Russian citizens and compatriots” (Freedman 2019, 91; Kuzio 2020, 120). The Council of Federation’s Speaker, Valentina Matviyenko, promptly convened a session that approved Putin’s request with remarkable alacrity. After a vitriolic “debate” in which speaker after speaker railed against the evil of Ukraine and the United States, 90 of 166 members voted unanimously to give Putin free rein to invade its neighbor – after he already had. It was only after that, on March 2, that Putin summoned Yanukovych and forced him to draft and sign a letter, dated the day before, asking Russia to intervene (Lee Myers 2016, 408).

The Russian troops leveraged the rebels’ weak power in the Donbas. The potential use of conventional forces was as important as their actual use. Ukraine was restrained from using too much force against the nascent rebels for fear of triggering an actual invasion (Wilson 2014, 129). The threat of a massive Russian conventional military attack functioned as a deterrent and seriously limited Kyiv’s freedom of action. (Rácz 2015). Russia maintained a substantial military capability on its side of the border in a position to invade, underlined by warnings about a possible direct Russian military intervention. Some forty thousand Russian forces were kept in a position, occasionally engaging in exercises to demonstrate that they were ready to cross the border. Putin’s rhetoric gave every impression that a large swathe of Ukraine would be a natural fit for Russia and that it would be perfectly reasonable for this to be demanded by the people of the region (Freedman 2019, 92).

Since March 2014, Russian military units had provocatively crossed the borders, awaiting the response of Ukrainian border guards. The active stage of a counterinsurgency in April 2014, known as Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), was immediately paused due to the fears of a Russian invasion (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 86). In addition, efforts were made to undermine an already weak Ukrainian economy through export embargoes and gas supply threats. The annexation of Crimea, Russia’s deterrence against the fragile Ukrainian state and the propaganda campaign fueled emotions and hopes with popular slogans, such as “Russians don’t abandon their own” (“*russkie svoikh ne brosayut*”).

Russian politicians encouraged people to seize government buildings, forcing local deputies to declare the illegitimacy of the Kyiv government publicly and ask Putin for help.

However, the principal unintendedly undermined the will of incipient rebel proxies to fight not despite cultural similarities but because of them. The comfortable feeling of having a stronger brother behind them, who would always show up to beat anyone, lowered the motivation to fight. This was even admitted by rebels in their publications (Zhuchkovskiy 2018*,* 164, 208-210). Pro-Russians expected a quick and decisive victory thanks to the direct military intervention of the principal, which ignited false expectations of a Donbas "liberation."

Russia' s external patronage increased public expectations of a successful outcome. This affected the calculus of many rebels by creating an impression that the scenario of Crimean annexation could be repeated in Donbas, raising the likelihood of a quick and successful resolution to the conflict. Rebels expected a swift and decisive victory once Russia intervened (Kudelia 2019, 291-292; Pinchuk 2018). DNR's Prime Minister Aleksandr Borodai and rebel commander Igor Girkin were living symbols that Russia was behind all these processes. According to some sources, even Girkin and Borodai believed that DNR was designed only as a smokescreen for the military invasion (Pinchuk 2018, 96). The illusion of easy victory convinced many rebels that they should care more for their self-enrichment during this exclusive opportunity (Kikhtenko 2016a).

4. 2. 3) Indecisiveness of the Incumbent Government

State authorities in Kyiv had no strategy for dealing with the turmoil in Donbas. The new government was paralyzed by inactivity and indecisiveness. The Ukrainian army was disintegrated, demoralized, and unskilled to wage war after years of neglect and underfunding (Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016). Ukrainian units demonstrated a lack of combat readiness, with a number of platoons surrendering their weapons and vehicles to rebels (Aliyev 2021). At that time, the Ukrainian army existed largely on paper, with perhaps only 6,000 combat-capable troops available. The Ukrainian military was utterly unprepared for the launch of combat operations (Kofman et al. 2017).

The army critically lacked resources to contain the spreading of violence. Along with poor military readiness, the Ukrainian military lacked basic equipment. According to the Ministry of Defense, only four per cent of the Ukrainian army had life-saving items, like helmets and bulletproof jackets, in April 2014. At the beginning of combat, the majority of soldiers and volunteers were deployed without uniforms or ammunition. Food provision was poor and insufficient. Most expenses incurred on the front were covered by relatives, friends, and acquaintances of those in the military (Stepaniuk 2022, 91-93).

A source close to Taruta's oblast administration in 2014 said that "the condition of our army and border guards was terrible - we were collecting money to fuel a helicopter that was the only one responsible for the control of the whole 400-kilometer section of the border" (Interview 29). Ukrainian state security forces detained some people in March-April 2014, who were supposed to be secessionist leaders, such as Gubarev or Kharitonov, but it was not enough to halt the coming rebellion. Besides, SBU later released them.

As late as April 2014, Kyiv placed its bets on negotiations with oligarch Akhmetov. Many perceived the region as his economic fiefdom, with Akhmetov as potentially the most potent powerbroker (Kofman et al. 2017). New Kyiv authorities reportedly proposed him to become the regional head (*holova oblasnoi administratsii*), but Akhmetov declined, and Kyiv chose his protégé, businessman Serhiy Taruta. Akhmetov probably underestimated the scope of the principal's influence in the Donbas, thinking that Russia was bluffing, and overestimated his own influence and power, believing that he could stop the rebellion at any moment (Moroz and Zhegulev 2016; Interview 9).

Sources working with Serhiy Taruta in 2014 indicated that Kyiv was unwilling to deal with these problems and took the attitude, "we gave you the powers to solve these problems, so do something and do not bother us" (Interview 29). The authorities in Kyiv outsourced the settlement of the local unrest to Taruta and Akhmetov. Akhmetov's people were appointed to the police, security forces and state institutions. The oligarch was chosen due to the unwavering belief of the incumbent government that he was the right man who would keep everything under control (Interview 9, 2018).

Due to the lack of the incumbent's interest in the events in Donbas, the oblast administration nominated by Kyiv did not resolve to radical actions against mounting secessionist rallies and increasing power vacuum. The administration, headed by Taruta, tried to keep dialogue, but there was no one to talk to in Donetsk. One of the direct participants said:

> We were called to a meeting with government officials about the presidential elections in late May. Yatsenyuk [then acting prime minister] had stopped answering the phone from Taruta sometime in April. Avakov [then interior minister] was the only one who helped with the arms supplies. We carried them in the car, in Taruta's private plane, because it wasn't always legal, and we helped arm the Azov battalion. Taruta was looking for a compromise, and he thought he could come to an agreement with the secessionists, but

> there was no one to negotiate with. We wasted a lot of time. After secessionists had seized the regional administration building, there were talks about recapturing the building with a "private army" which was ready but had to be ordered to do so. In the meantime, Kirovohrad Spetsnaz was brought to Donetsk airport with private funds. They appealed to Turchynov [then acting president], but he refused to give an order, saying he would solve the problem himself. Then a meeting took place between Yarema [then deputy prime minister] and Akhmetov. The risks were not great then, it is not clear what they discussed, but Yarema left without order to storm seized regional state administration building. That was the turning point" (Interview 29).

The oblast council, working until early March 2014, and head of the oblast administration, sometimes inaccurately called governor, were the only legitimate political authorities in Donetsk oblast. Taruta appointed a new police chief Kostyantyn Pozhydayev, who claimed that police forces sabotage their tasks, and he has no authority over them. Kyiv adopted a wait-and-see approach. The incumbent's strategy was apparently to wait for the presidential election, which was due on May 25, and see what happened, because no one wanted to take full responsibility for the events that could come (Interview 9, 2018).

Kyiv read the situation simply—all we need to do is to strike a deal with Akhmetov. Meanwhile, Donbas patrons chose to play a risky game, thinking they could outsmart both Kyiv and Moscow, play one off against the other and stay in power (Interviews 4, 5, 9). Akhmetov called for Ukraine's unity, but on the other hand, he, according to local sources, quietly supported the pro-Russian secessionists under the official excuse of wanting to avoid a bloodbath (Interviews 5, 9; Boiko 2014). He hoped militants would provide controllable leverage, allowing him to maintain a powerful position in the new post-Maidan Ukraine (Potocki, 2018).

4. 3) Initiation of the Principal's Decentralized Delegation Chains

The Kremlin's strategy in late February and early March 2014 exploited three closely intertwined themes: 1) the alleged illegitimacy of the interim government in Kyiv; 2) the supposedly "fascist" character of the Euromaidan Revolution; 3) the cultural and physical threat to the Russian/Russophone population (Melnyk 2019). In the initial post-Euromaidan stage, Moscow was aiming at a decentralization of the Ukrainian state such that the eastern and southern oblasts would exercise self-government, become more firmly integrated with the

Russian economy and ideally be able to conduct their own foreign relations with Russia (Allison 2014, 1275). The principal sought to maximize centrifugal tendencies in Ukraine, consolidate the power of local political elites, and play on the contradictions between regional identities - in the case of the Donbas with adherence to the Soviet past and rejection of integration with the EU and NATO (Interview 8).

Russian state media hailed the anti-Maidan protests, but the counter-Kyiv demonstrations in Eastern Ukraine were not well supported, and the early enthusiasm fizzled out. If they had taken off, then this might have led to a much more substantial intervention from early on, with which Ukraine would have struggled to cope (Freedman 2019*,* 93-94). Since early March 2014, hundreds of Russian "tourists" came to Donbas and other cities to instigate street violence against pro-Ukrainian activists (Interview 3, 2019). The principal radicalized the crowds by sending aggressive people from Russia to fire the first shot. They played the role of detonator since local petty criminals did not have any experience with escalating political violence (Interview 4).

Meanwhile, local pro-Russians waited for Russia to do as it had done in Crimea (Gubarev 2015, 94). However, even after the seizure of state administration buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk on April 6, no one was ready for actual fighting. People sat in the seized buildings waiting for Russian military support (Gubarev 2015, 161; Zhuchkovskiy 2018). The pro-Russian militants, a chaotic network of several hundred uncoordinated people in a city of a million, had no leadership. The demands of the disorganized pro-Russian movement vacillated between autonomy within a federalized Ukraine and secession in order to join Russia (Kofman et al. 2017).

The situation radically changed on April 12, when ardent Russian nationalist and (former?) intelligence officer Igor Girkin with group of about fifty armed militants arrived in Sloviansk, assisted by local secessionists from the People's Militia of Donbass (Galeotti 2019a, 16-17). Gubarev later claimed that the main difference between locals and Girkin's men was that the latter "smelled of war" since "they understood there will be a war, while we still believed it'd be like in Crimea (…) that Russia will come, and Ukrainian Army won't fight us" (Gubarev 2015, 167). The task of this group was, as Girkin proudly declared, to pull the trigger of war (Lenta.ru 2014):

> "It was me who pulled the trigger of the war. If our unit had not crossed the border, Donbass would have ended up like Odessa. There would have been dozens killed, burned alive, and arrested. And it would have been the end of it. But the flywheel of war was set

> in motion by our division. We reshuffled the cards […] We went to Slavyansk because we needed an average-size city, where fifty-two people would be a force to be reckoned with. And I was told that Slavyansk had the most potent local [pro-Russian] assets. It looked like the best option" (Zygar 2016).

Girkin's deniable operations, which were in line with the strategy of the delegated rebellion, prevented the restoration of order by Ukrainian authorities as occurred in Odesa and Kharkiv, where crackdowns ended protests, and the local elites chose to side with the national government. Girkin also shifted the cause from federalization to outright secession from Ukraine, which was always his personal intention (Kofman et al. 2017). It was congruent with Russia's intentions because following the failure of its federalization proposal, Russia's strategic objectives seemed to shift towards weakening Ukraine in another way, namely by creating a non-recognized entity in Eastern Ukraine (Rácz and Moshes 2014).

Sloviansk became the stronghold of an anti-Ukrainian rebellion, sparking a roving occupation of the surrounding towns. State administrative buildings became the focal point for organizing locals willing to join the emerging but fragmented rebel movement (Kudelia 2019, 286-289). Girkin, with the call sign Strelkov, soon became a public figure, giving press conferences and recording video messages. In them, he called on the Russian authorities to come to his aid and send troops into Donbas. He reportedly coordinated his actions with Moscow, above all with Putin's advisor Sergei Glazyev, but no help from the Russian troops arrived (Zygar 2016). On Girkin's account, they were not being directed by Moscow but assumed that if their movement developed enough momentum, "Russia would lend a hand" (Freedman 2019, 95).

Girkin had nurtured early hopes of creating a unified, professionalized rebel army for his conception of "Novorossiya," but this foundered on Moscow's half-hearted commitment to the idea of an independent Novorossiya. After all, the Kremlin's goal had never been to occupy Donbas itself, but simply to use it as a lever against Kyiv; consequently, at the beginning of the delegation, it was interested neither in outright annexation nor in supporting the creation of an independent state. Instead, in Mark Galeotti's opinion, its goal has been reincorporating a Moscow-dominated Donbas into Ukraine on its own terms, giving it the power to veto any moves by Kyiv that it dislikes (Galeotti 2019a, 20).

The timing was also crucial. Russia judged it could take advantage of an opportunity when the Ukrainian state's military and internal security forces were fragmented, demoralized and uncertain where their loyalties lay, having served under the collapsed Yanukovych regime

(Allison 2014). On 13 April, Acting President Turchynov announced the commencement of an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) to take back control of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Wynnyckyj 2019, 154).

Since mid-April, Russia ensured the flow of Russian volunteers to complete the rows of local rebels, who were often unwilling to directly participate in fights. Kacper Rekawek writes about sixteen thousand Russian volunteers and mercenaries (Rekawek 2021). Russian volunteers made up to 40 per cent of all fighters sent by Gubarev to Sloviansk by the end of June 2014 (Zhuchkovskiy 2018). This flow from Russia allowed the bulk of domestic rebels to avoid armed confrontations with Ukrainian forces.

The delegation had no central decision-making body in Russia. The Kremlin gathered information and encouraged the secessionist sentiment but did not give specific instructions. The general feeling inside the Kremlin was that Ukraine had ceased to exist as a state. The central government was no more, and the eastern regions would follow Crimea into Russia's embrace. The locals would be in favor, and there would be no military resistance (Zygar 2016).

Moscow may have expected that an unrealistic level of popular resistance to the post-Maidan Kyiv government would follow later in spring 2014 in eastern and southern Ukraine. That could reflect wishful thinking by Putin and those he consulted once they had been drawn towards an agenda of Soviet or even imperial revisionism, previously confined to a fringe of Russian nationalist politics (Allison 2014, 1288).

Another problem was that the principal did not know whom to delegate – it was hard for the principal to be well versed in the chaos of the Donbas rebellion. The fragmented rebel movement had no hierarchy, and its social background was not "delegation-friendly" either. The social background of the rebels, with most being local men, poorly educated and often unruly, with a background in private security, (un)skilled labor, small business; and low-level administrators, points to the absence of a professional middle class or elites which could have led the insurgency (Matveeva 2016, 36.).

Paul Robinson argues that Russia has been reacting rather than masterminding the events in this stage (Robinson 2016, 507). Similarly, Serhiy Kudelia contends that Russia did not act in a vacuum but rather exploited the local conflict. The recent evidence on the role of Russia in the conflict confirms to Daria Platonova that Russian state actors, such as Putin's aide Vladislav Surkov, stepped into the rebellion later and were not welcome by some rebel commanders. To her, there is also the time factor, the sequence of the events, leading one to discredit Russia's responsibility for stirring the rebellion from the beginning (Platonova 2021, 28). However, it does not exclude that Russia used the window of opportunity for the rebellion's delegation and facilitated its transformation from unarmed protests to a full-scale rebellion.

4. 3. 1) Presidential Administration and Surkov's Delegation Network

Presidential Administration (PA) has emerged as Putin's principal agency for political control. The PA helps the president formulate presidential policy, communicates it to the executive agencies, and monitors performance and compliance. It is a powerful and complex agency whose influence extends far beyond that envisaged in the laws framing it for the very reason that it dominates access to Putin and likewise is the main conduit for his decisions. The PA is, in Mark Galeotti's opinion, the single most central institution in modern Russia, curating president's information flows and communicating his wishes (Galeotti 2019c, 64-65).

The Presidential Administration has been running the delegation's political aspect, most of the time (until 2020) through former Putin's aide Vladislav Surkov (Galeotti 2019a, 37). Surkov was a deputy head of the Presidential Administration from 1999 to 2011 and deputy prime minister until May 2013, known as the "supreme PR man" and the ideologue of "sovereign democracy", responsible for policies to counter "colored revolutions". In September 2013, he came back to the Kremlin as Putin's aide to supervise the Presidential Directorate for Social and Economic Cooperation with the CIS Member Countries, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Hosaka 2019, 752).

At the beginning of 2014, Putin's advisor Sergey Glazyev, reportedly had the most extensive network of connections in Ukraine, including the main openly pro-Russian politician, Viktor Medvedchuk. Glazyev was the chief economic adviser to Putin from 2012. He made no secret of his sympathy for the radical anti-Western positions adopted by the nationalist Izborskiy Club, a gathering of an eclectic group of Russian neo-traditionalists, neo-Soviet restorationists, Stalinists, and empire builders (Sakwa 2017, 2015). Glazyev shared nationalist and conservative/isolationist views, including popular conspiracy theories, and heavily criticized the West as Russia's rival (Yablokov 2018).

It was Glazyev's voice, which resented the fact that "residents of the southeast do not come out to protest against the Kyiv government even for Russian money," that was heard in the recordings of the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office, which were published as part of the criminal investigation (Zolotukhin 2020). Glazyev was the most fervent supporter of Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine in 2014. A year earlier, he had nearly been appointed the head of the central bank, but Alexei Kudrin had resisted. Putin had concurred. Glazyev was sidelined and left with little to do in Russia, so he—a native of Zaporizhzhya—focused all his energy on the fight for Eastern Ukraine (Zygar 2016).

In 2016 the Ukraine prosecutor general's office published audio tapes of telephone conversations involving Sergey Glazyev, recorded over a number of days, starting on February 27, seeking to orchestrate civil unrest in Eastern Ukraine. The so-called Glazyev tapes illustrate Moscow's covert support for the still unarmed anti-government protests in Ukraine several weeks before the actual war started (Kuzio 2020, 123). Glazyev supplied Putin with reports that pro-Russian sentiment in eastern Ukraine was strong and that residents of Donetsk were continuing to rally for secession from Kyiv, but Putin reportedly did not want to take any decisive action. Putin allegedly told Glazyev that the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine should be the ones to make the first move, whereupon Moscow would support them (Zygar 2016).

According to the Glazyev tapes, on February 27, Glazyev discussed the immediate organization of mass protests with the director of the Institute for CIS Countries (*Institut stran SNG*), Konstantin Zatulin (Hosaka 2019, 755). However, Kremlin's plans to stoke mass protests against the Kyiv government throughout Ukraine had suffered severe setbacks, while support for secessionism in Donetsk and Luhansk had turned out to be not as strong as expected (Wynnyckyj 2019, 155). Moscow tried to shape events on the ground and was often unaware of the pro-Russian militants' actions. However, the evidence is insufficient to determine the scale or effectiveness of the principal's involvement in this early stage (Nitsova 2021). Although the early attempts of destabilization were supervised by Glazyev, these operations could be seen as integral parts of Surkov's scenario because Glazyev had been hierarchically put under the control of Surkov in the Kremlin's Ukraine policy as early as September 2013 (Hosaka 2019, 751).

Reportedly, Putin had asked Surkov not to build a new unrecognized state but to maintain it as leverage over Ukraine. Surkov's mission was to integrate Donetsk and Luhansk back into the Ukrainian polity as a Trojan Horse and use them to influence Ukrainian politics—for example, to prevent Ukraine's accession to NATO and other Western alliances. Glazyev did not understand this objective, nor did he want to. He set about rebuilding the areas entrusted to him. As a result, he was quickly removed from the process by Surkov, who set up the political bodies of the DNR. Moscow spin doctor and nationalist publicist Aleksandr Borodai was appointed DNR's prime minister, while Girkin became defense minister (Zygar 2016).

Surkov endorsed Borodai instead of the local candidate Zakharchenko reportedly because Surkov thought Borodai to be more easily manageable than a local unknown. It would also be convenient for the Kremlin to terminate the technical "government" at any moment by sacking Russians if Kyiv were to finally accept Moscow's terms on the federalization and autonomy for Donbas. Zakharchenko returned to Donetsk as "prime minister" later in the summer of 2014 after the meeting with Surkov in Rostov-on-Don in Russia (Hosaka 2019, 758).

Western officials say that Surkov was known to patronizingly refer to the rebel leaders as his "wards", while Borodai called Surkov "our man in the Kremlin". Access to the Kremlin leadership was arguably Moscow's most important means of control over the rebel leaders in the rebellion's early stage. Senior rebel officials and commanders have consulted regularly in Moscow. There is, however, no indication that any rebel leader has met with anyone at the highest levels. Surkov was their most senior contact. At that time, Moscow could punish, reward or neutralize rebel leaders by controlling their access to financial and material resources (International Crisis Group 2016).

Russian journalist Vladimir Dergachev claims, based on his sources in DNR and LNR, that the Russia's Presidential Administration largely improvised in the delegation:

> "In nine months, the general line towards Ukraine has changed three times. The supervision of the Ukrainian issues can in no way be called successful, no matter who was in charge. There is no "ironclad plan." Everything has been situational. It is the same with the selection of cadres [for administering so-called people's republics]" (Dergachev 2014).

According to Russian investigative journalist Roman Dobrokhotov, Surkov played a rather technical role and cared primarily for his personal PR instead of being a grey cardinal who organized all political affairs in the rebel territories (Radio Svoboda 2021).

4. 3. 1. 1) Surkov's "Delegation Team" in the Russian Presidential Administration

Russian spin doctor Alexei Chesnakov, the director of the Center for Current Politics (*Tsentr politicheskoi konyunktury*), has been Surkov's right hand in the PA's delegation chain. The information leaks show that Chesnakov did not hold an official position in the Kremlin but attended important meetings with Surkov's staff (Hosaka 2019, 752). Chesnakov was reportedly directly connected to Borodai when he was DNR's head. In an intercepted conversation, Chesnakov asked Borodai about the internal affairs and the financial situation of the rebels, in particular, relations with the commander of the *Vostok* battalion Alexander Khodakovskiy. Chesnakov asked Borodai to arrange Girkin's interview with the media to refuse that he is following Putin's orders publicly but at the same time express his "greatest respect" to Putin. After that, Chesnakov promised to transfer another 180 million rubles "through the same channel." (Horvath 2021, 247-248; Dozhd' 2014).

Another member of the closest Surkov's team responsible for PA's delegation chains was Boris Rapoport. He worked in PA as the deputy director of the Department for Socio-Economic Cooperation with the CIS countries, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. This department has been responsible for political relations with DNR and LNR, and Rapoport was one of the curators until December 2014, when he left the PA (Galimova and Dergachev 2018). According to Dergachev's sources, the task of Rapoport and his colleagues was to instigate a pro-Russian sentiment in southeastern Ukraine (Dergachev 2014). The money of Russian oligarchs like Malofeyev, which was used to implement media projects in Ukraine, also reportedly went through Rapoport (Zolotukhin 2020).

Surkov dispatched trusted members of his team to implement his decision in Donbas. Some of the so-called curators (*kuratory*) were those tasked with the "managed nationalism" in late the 2000s transferred from domestic politics to the fledgling republics. In the Donbas Kremlin curators supervised rebels to achieve a political goal (Horvath 2021, 247-248). However, decentralization of the delegation chains caused confusion. The source of the Russian opposition media, Meduza, close to the leadership of the State Duma, claimed that Surkov did not have a decisive voice on the issues of Ukraine:

> "He could not call the security forces and say: here we cancel the operation, and here, on the contrary, we intensify; something was decided in the Foreign Ministry, something at the level of business contacts" (Zolotukhin 2020).

Local people nicknamed Surkov's personnel in DNR and LNR "Surkov's political technologists" (*polittekhnologi Surkova*). They were not numerous; even in Donetsk, they allegedly numbered fewer than five. Their responsibility was to confirm the selection of leaders. Surkov's political technologists were not, by nature, public figures. They could not attend "parliamentary" sessions, be interviewed by the mass media, or meet with foreign delegations or researchers. They implemented their control only via conversations with a handful of top leaders. Therefore, many DNR parliamentarians did not even know about their very presence in Donetsk. If one of the top leaders declined his privilege to consult with Surkov's political technologists, his position was endangered (Matsuzato 2022, 45).

Whereas the DNR was assigned to Borodai, the LNR was said to be trusted to a "Pavlov," who later turned out to be Pavel Karpov, Borodai's colleague in the imperialist newspaper *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), and aide to Nikita Ivanov, former chief of pro-Kremlin youth organizations in the Presidential Administration (Hosaka 2019, 759). Karpov has been the most prominent veteran of Surkov's team to participate in the onset of the rebellion. Known also under the alias "Nikolai Nikolaevich," he was reputed to have been involved in distributing Kremlin funds to the DNR and LNR (Horvath 2021, 247-248). Karpov worked as political advisor of the first LNR's head Valeriy Bolotov, presumably to control him. Karpov had been an LNR curator at least since April 2014.

Another spin doctor working as a PA's curator in LNR was Marat Bashirov, who shortly became LNR prime minister in the summer of 2014 from July 4 to August 20 (Sorokyna 2015). Karpov's work in the rebel territories was assisted by one of his closest colleagues, Leonid Simunin, the former local leader of *Mestnye,* a pro-Kremlin vigilante youth organization. In Donetsk, Simunin appeared as a functionary of the newly created Ministry for Energy. He was a link in the money trail from Moscow to the secessionist "republics." According to an unnamed senior official in DNR, the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung reported that Russia was bankrolling all the local ministries, entrusted with distributing funds to leading separatists was Leonid Simunin (Horvath 2021, 247-248).

4. 3. 1. 2) Presidential Administration's Outsourcing to Nationalist Para-State Actors

To supply rebels in Eastern Ukraine with arms and people, the Kremlin partnered with Konstantin Malofeyev, an "Orthodox oligarch" close to the Kremlin, who reportedly funded Girkin's militants (Frye 2021). A lawyer by training, Malofeyev began his career with the major investment fund Renaissance Capital before founding Marshall Capital Partners, an investment fund specializing in telecommunications, in 2005. Political Orthodoxy and connections to supposed Putin's "confessor," Father Tikhon, seemed to guarantee Malofeyev the benevolent protection of the head of state (Laruelle 2018).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, he has positioned himself as a fervent supporter of the Russian Orthodox Church. Malofeyev created the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation (*Blagotvoritelnyi fond Svyatitelya Vasiliya Velikogo*), which manages an annual budget of US$40 million and oversees 30 programs ranging from church renovation to anti-abortion campaigns (Laruelle 2018). Malofeyev presumably became part of Surkov's expanded team by the end of 2013 (Hosaka 2019, 753). In 2014, Malofeyev entered the media spotlight as the main private funder of both Crimea annexation and the Donbas rebellion (Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020, 90-91).

There is a further detail which provides a window onto how the Kremlin's arm's-length deniable operations such as this work. Russia's state bank VTB had accused Malofeyev of misusing a $225 million loan and threatened to sue him in a London court. Coincidentally or not, the two parties reached a resolution on 27 February – the day before the Crimea operation – and VTB declined to sue. That must have removed a major cloud hanging over Malofeyev's future at precisely the moment the Kremlin sought his financial help to secure Crimea. In other words, Malofeyev was, deniably, a private citizen spending his own money, while the Kremlin could claim it had no finger in the pie and that Crimea's decision to secede and join Russia was spontaneous (Clover 2016, 325-326).

Since 2005, Girkin had worked in Malofeyev's security detail, a position secured for him by his friend and collaborator Alexander Borodai, who had also worked for Malofeyev (Clover 2016, 325-326). However, at the end of 2014, Malofeyev had to pull back from the Donbas after the Kremlin decided the rebel narrative had gone too far in calling for a national revolution that would threaten Putin himself. Marlene Laruelle defines people like Malofeyev as nationalist entrepreneurs, para-state actors with genuine room to maneuver, determine their ideological preferences, and cultivate their own networks. But their entrepreneurship remains fragile and must work in permanent negotiation and tension with competing groups and the Presidential Administration (Laruelle 2017).

Hosaka argues that the financial resources for projects can be provided by various actors other than the government, but in the Russian kleptocracy system, the ultimate sponsor is always the state. Para-state actors, "philanthropists," such as Malofeev, who has a proven track record for the Kremlin, support allegedly non-governmental initiatives with funds embezzled from the state. Unofficial resources provided by oligarchs are attractive for the Kremlin because such a scheme serves as a smokescreen for state-sponsored, often unlawful, operations, ensuring plausible deniability in international conflicts in which Russia is covertly involved (Hosaka 2019, 765).

As the full details of Russia's role are still not available, it is still unknown whether Girkin was directed from Moscow and operated under Russian command, or he was given an informal green light from the Russian officials for his deniable adventure and acted on his own. Also, it is unclear whether (and how) the seizures of the government buildings in Donbas in April 2014 by incipient rebel militias were coordinated with Russian authorities (Bukkvoll 2016; Kofman et al. 2017). One overall interpretation of this early stage of the rebellion is that substantial initiative was local but that operators from the Kremlin quickly got involved and that Putin gave them a degree of freedom of maneuver in order to see what they could achieve (Bukkvoll 2016).

Russian nationalist Aleksander Zhuchkovskiy, who was present in Sloviansk in April-July 2014, believes that Girkin went to Donbas on the off chance: “Go, and we'll see if you create proper conditions, if you see that the situation there is the same as in Crimea, then we will support you, there will be a military invasion” (Zhuchkovskiy 2018). According to the former chairman of the DNR People's Council Andrei Purgin, former leader of the Donetsk Republic, initially, the entry of the Girkin’s group had a “local task,” and Girkin did not expect to become one of the leaders of the entire rebellious region (Meduza 2019).

4. 3. 2) Secret Services

Russia’s secret services are central to the country’s geopolitical campaigns, reflecting both their privileged position within decision-making circles and the essentially wartime mentality they and Putin share. They are not simply or primarily gatherers of information: active measures from blackmail and subversion to assassination and sabotage are central to their mission. The Federal Security Service (*Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB) is the first among equals, a domestic agency that has expanded its remit into international operations (Galeotti 2019c, 88).

The department responsible for Ukraine within the FSB is the Fifth Service of the FSB under the Colonel General Sergei Beseda (Zolotukhin 2020). The key unit in the Fifth Service is the Department of Operational Information (*Otdelenie operativnoi informatsii*), which deals with Ukraine. Beseda’s first deputy and the head of the department is Georgiy Grishayev. He and his deputy Dmitriy Milyutin were directly responsible for the information that was reported to the Russian leadership on the situation in Ukraine (Anin 2022).

GRU, since 2010 technically known as the GU, *Glavnoe upravlenie,* and Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vneshnei razvedki*) are the principal foreign intelligence agencies in Russia (Galeotti 2019c, 88-89). The involvement of the secret services is more difficult to reveal than the Presidential Administration or para-state structures. We have only anecdotal evidence of the delegation chains organized by FSB and GU. Secret services were largely involved in outsourcing recruitment of the Russian volunteers to Eastern Ukraine, who played a significant role in the fights in Donbas. The Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, an important port, road and rail hub, has become the logistical base for the rebellion’s delegation. It houses arsenals and warehouses with weapons and other matériel to support Russian and rebel forces, and the GU maintains a significant presence there. Potential volunteers and mercenaries for the militias were screened, armed, and mustered in the city (Galeotti 2019a, 37-38).

The GU and the FSB have their clients amongst the rebels, and the FSB also has so-called curators, political agents, in both Donetsk and Luhansk. They have their own ideas on how the war should be fought, as well as differing agendas in Moscow (Galeotti 2019a, 37-38). Russian intelligence officers undertook training, coordination and providing leadership to rebel militias throughout 2014. Intercepted telephone conversations of FSB intelligence officer Colonel Igor Egorov ("Elbrus") provide evidence that he coordinated the so-called LNR Ministry of Defense (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2020a). Egorov is a senior officer from the FSB elite spetsnaz unit, a successor to the KGB's V Department's Vympel spetsnaz unit (Kuzio 2020).

In 2014 and 2015 had traveled extensively – under two different identities – as Igor Egorov (his real name), and as Igor Semyonov (his cover name), between Moscow and the three control centers for Russia's military operations in the Donbas: Rostov, Simferopol, and Krasnodar (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020a). The earliest public reference to "Elbrus" came from the pro-Russian blogger and war correspondent Boris Rozhin ("Colonel Cassad"), who wrote in January 2015 that "Elbrus" was based in Luhansk, and together with "Delfin" – based in Krasnodon in LNR – were tasked with, and failed in, creating a new joint army of the two pro-Russian unrecognized republics. A Novaya Gazeta investigation from February 2016 quotes local sources as describing "Elbrus" as a senior, retired FSB officer who was based in Luhansk in 2014. Elbrus called himself the FSB advisor to the LNR leadership (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020a).

Rebel administrations in Donetsk and Luhansk formed the so-called Ministry of State Security (*Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, MGB) with the assistance of the FSB-linked cadres from breakaway Transnistria. Borodai facilitated the arrival of these people once involved in Transnistria who were no longer welcome after a leadership change there in 2011. Vladimir Antyufeev, a Transnistrian ex-security chief, became the first deputy chair of the "DNR Council of Ministers" responsible for the security bloc (July–September 2014) and his lieutenants, Oleg Bereza and Andrei Pinchuk, were appointed "ministers" of interior and security (Matveeva 2018, 132). The MGB structure has been copied from the Russian FSB and is strictly controlled by the FSB headquarters in Lubyanka, Moscow. MGB is basically an FSB department in the rebel-controlled territories, enforcing the loyalty of the civilian population and the rebel administration to the Kremlin (TSN 2019a).

According to unconfirmed information, regional FSB offices were charged with creating MGB in "people's republics" – an FSB office in Voronezh with MGB in Luhansk and FSB office in Rostov-on-Don with MGB in Donetsk. Except for supervising MGB activities in the rebel-held territories, FSB has also lobbied for their candidates for various positions as ministers, deputy ministers and all kinds of local officials, i.e. they give their conclusion that this person may or may not occupy the corresponding position, which gives them serious power over the local matters. They prefer to choose people they have compromising materials on them and, for those reasons, are supposed to be loyal (Nemezida-LNR, 2016).

An important link in the FSB-led delegation chain was Andrei Burlaka, deputy director of the Border Guards, a security structure subordinated to FSB, under the call-sign "Vladimir Ivanovich." No later than the beginning of July 2014, he played a critical role in the chain of command between ostensibly local rebels and the principal. Surkov Leaks provided a document from 13 May 2014, apparently sent by oligarch Malofeyev or one of his associates, to Surkov containing a list of candidates for the newly formed government of the DNR. At the end of the document, the author suggests asking the opinion of "Vladimir Ivanovich" about the commander of the DNR's *Vostok* Battalion, Alexander Khodakovskiy (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020b). In general, Burlaka was responsible for logistics through the borders to secure supplies to rebel militias (Radio Svoboda 2021).

4. 3. 2. 1) Outsourcing the Delegation to the Nationalist Para-State Actors

FSB worked through infiltrated and controlled pro-Kremlin nationalist organizations and military-patriotic clubs, which offered training to the people willing to join the rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Military-patriotic clubs train in weapon-handling, combat and military discipline. More than 5,500 military-patriotic organizations are registered all over Russia, comprising about 250,000 youth. Some of them are affiliated with schools or municipal authorities, others are linked to the Orthodox Church or army, while others entirely depend on private financing. Former military personnel, including from the security services, run most of these clubs. They tend to be Afghanistan war veterans or former *Spetsnaz* members (Laruelle 2019b).

Nationalist organizations and military-patriotic clubs assisted in the mobilization of the volunteers to the battlefields in Donbas. Russian secret services worked with targeted groups of young people through curators, often from neo-Cossack structures tied to state institutions, by spreading disinformation about the genocide of the Russian people in Crimea and Donbas. Cossacks proposed volunteers bring them to Crimea and Donbas for free if they wanted to fight.

One of the prominent recruiters in the Far East regions of Russia was “chieftain” of Ussuri Cossack Host (*Ussuriyskoe kazachie voisko*) Aleksandr Mamoshin (“Samurai”), who formed his own rebel militia Steppe (*Step*) in 2014 comprised of the Cossacks from Russia (Interview 22).

At the early stage of the conflict, a vast amount of funds circulated to support recruitment. I. from St.-Petersburg, MMA fighter and instructor, told the author that the recruiters offered him and his friends 200 thousand rubles per month (around $3-3,500) through different channels. According to him, recruitment was managed through nationalist military-patriotic clubs controlled by Russian state structures (Interview 26). Nationalist activists assisted in the development of the recruitment networks all over Russia, such as Mikhail Polynkov (“Khrustalik”), who recruited volunteers for Girkin. The pro-Kremlin nationalist structures which assisted in the training and mobilization to Donbas most enthusiastically were Eurasian Youth Union (*Evraziyskiy soyuz molodezhi*) and the People’s Assembly (*Narodnyi sobor*).

ESM was founded in 2005 as a pro-regime vigilante organization to prevent the Orange Revolution in the Russian streets. The ESM organized the first Russian March in November 2005 and committed several violent attacks against the liberal opposition (Kozhevnikova 2007). Except for the Donetsk Republic, ESM cooperated with Vitrenko’s PSPU as Ukraine’s major radical anti-Western political party. In the preparations for the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of Donbas secessionism, the ESM was probably the most active among Russian nationalist organizations.

People’s Assembly was also founded in 2005 by Oleg Kassin as a pro-regime imperial nationalist organization. Kassin was one of the leaders of *Pamiat’* (Memory), then one of the deputies of neo-fascist Russian National Unity (RNE) leader Aleksandr Barkashov. People’s Assembly directly supports the Russian Orthodox Church. The movement is relatively marginal in Russia, but it started to be active in Ukraine when it opened chapters in 2012 in Donetsk and Luhansk with the assistance of the Belgorod branch led by Oleg Miakinin (Goncharov and Druz 2012).

People’s Assembly leading members in Ukraine - Igor Druz, Sergei Zhurikov (“Romashka”) and Dmitriy Zhukov (“Kedr”) - came from Kyiv, where they participated in structures affiliated to Kyiv-Pechersk monastery. They were part of the Igor Girkin’s subversive group, which came to occupy Sloviansk in April 2014. Druz, presenting himself as a political scientist, became Girkin’s advisor for ideology affairs. In his words, rebels wanted to create “a socially responsible state of Novorossiya" that will protect Orthodox and traditional family values (Ekho Kavkaza 2014).

Russian secret services assisted in recruitment to Donbas through known nationalist activists using the stick-and-carrot method. For instance, Aleksandr Valov, then nationalist leader in Murmansk, was charged with establishing an extremist group. In the summer of 2014, Valov was invited into the FSB's investigative department and presented with a choice: either he agreed to set up and lead a provincial branch of Barkashov's RNE and send volunteers to the Donbas or he would face additional charges. If he agreed, the FSB promised that the existing charges would be dropped, and he would receive financial aid and political backing. Valov refused and fled to Ukraine. Others apparently accepted the "generous offer" when placed in similar circumstances. The former leader of Moscow Shield (*Shchit Moskvy*), Aleksei Khudyakov, was spotted in Donetsk in spring 2014. Previously, he appeared in Russia on criminal charges of conducting an armed raid on a migrant workers' hostel but was amnestied (Likhachev 2016).

Leaders of the Russian ethno-nationalist organizations were the primary target for the recruitment efforts because they were one of the few in Russia with the potential to mobilize their supporters. One the Russian ethno-nationalist leaders, Dmitriy Demushkin, told in an interview with Russian liberal opposition activist Lyubov Sobol that Russian officials proposed to him in February 2014 to organize recruitment of the Russian volunteers to fight in the Donbas; to organize an anti-Ukrainian rebellion in some Ukrainian province as Girkin did in April 2014. In his words, he refused because he considered Ukrainians part of the Russian nation and did not want to kill Russians in the Kremlin's name (Lyubov Sobol 2021).

Demushkin was arrested in October 2016 and sentenced to 2,5 years in prison. The story of another nationalist leader, Aleksandr Potkin (Belov), who also refused to recruit nationalist volunteers for the war against Ukraine, was even more absurd. The state prosecutor accused Potkin that he helped Kazakhstan's BTA-Bank to launder more than $5 billion through front companies and, allied with Kazakh oppositionist Mukhtar Ablyazov, created an extremist organization for preparing the "color revolution" against Kazakh President Nazarbayev. In the end, Potkin was sentenced to 7,5 years in prison. Opposition media and experts explained such harsh sentence as revenge for refusing to recruit volunteers (Torocheshnikova 2016; Nekhezin 2016).

4. 3. 3) Military: General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and Military Intelligence

Overall responsibility for the military aspect of the Donbas war rests with the General Staff and the newly built National Defense Control Center in the Defense Ministry. It is important to stress that they did not have direct operational command over the rebels in the initial stage of the rebellion. Some rebel militias, at least in the past, have been essentially Russian-run. Some rebel militias have been more beholden to Moscow than others, but command and control, and coordination, have been perennial challenges because the Kremlin has traded off operational effectiveness for deniability (Galeotti 2019a, 35).

GU's Special Forces (*Spetznaz*) have been tasked with covertly training, mobilizing and leading irregular proxy forces. That is especially relevant in the Donbas, where the GU appears to have primary responsibility for marshalling the 'volunteers' and supporting and sometimes disciplining local rebels. Ukrainian sources have claimed that there have been three to five spetsnaz units in the Donbas at any one time, numbering at most a few hundred operators. Much of their work has been training rebel militias, conducting reconnaissance and directing artillery strikes when government forces attack. However, they also have been credibly associated with operations to assert Moscow's control over the local warlords (Galeotti 2019c, 76).

4. 3. 3. 1) Outsourcing the Delegation to the Retired Officers of the Russian Army

In the first stage of the rebellion, the principal often used retired military officers who decided to join and organize the rebels' military efforts due to their experience that many rebels lacked (so-called curators-vacationers, or *kuratory-otpuskniki*). Sergey Dubinskiy was one of the key channels between the Russian Army and DNR, responsible for the supply of Russian arms, including the Buk anti-aircraft system that shot down the MH17 flight (Krutov 2019). Dubinskiy allegedly left the Russian Armed Forces with the rank of colonel in 2014 and moved to Donetsk province in Ukraine (Kanygin 2017). He was in regular contact with the Russian authorities (Crimea-News 2019). He is also known under the fake name Petrovskiy and call sign "Khmuryi" ("Grumpy"). Dubinskiy worked for Girkin as his deputy responsible for intelligence.

Dubinskiy left Donetsk province at the beginning of 2015 after disputes with local rebel officials. He was not the typical curator but someone who worked in collusion with Russian state authorities, to whom they outsourced some delegation tasks (Krutov 2017). Dubinskiy's aide was Oleg Pulatov ("Gyurza"), who commanded the 2nd department of the DNR GRU at the time of the downing of flight MH17. Pulatov is a former lieutenant colonel in the Russian

Airborne Forces who, according to investigators, was involved in guarding the Buk missile system in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas (Crimea-News 2019).

Another part in this chain had been the Russian officer with call-sign Delfin ("Dolphin"). Bellingcat has identified Delfin as Colonel General Nikolai Tkachev, the Chief Inspector of the Central Military District of the Russian Federation. A separate channel for gathering information about Delfin's involvement in the war in the Donbas was through a number of pro-Russian sources, most notably the blogger "Colonel Cassad," or Boris Rozhin, and an interview with Igor Girkin, published in 2014-2015 (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2017).

These sources indicate that Delfin was a high-ranking Russian commander stationed at least part-time in Krasnodon for a brief period in the summer of 2014. Delfin was described as having been tasked with the re-organization and consolidation of the fragmented rebel militias in LNR. The Kremlin press service announced in 2010 that Tkachev was officially dismissed from military service. However, he continued to fulfill military duties elsewhere. In 2011, he became Russia's Head Military Advisor for Syria until the advising apparatus was dissolved in 2012 (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2017).

In May 2018, Bellingcat identified and publicly disclosed the identity of one of the key Russian military supervisors in the Donbas, who had operated under the cover name "Andrey Ivanovich" and the call sign "Orion". This operative was Oleg Ivannikov, a colonel from Russian military intelligence who had previously served – under the cover name of Andrei Laptev – a two-year stint as the Defense Minister of the Russia-backed breakaway territory of South Ossetia. From 2012, Ivannikov served – under his real name and credentials as a military expert – as director of the Russia-Caucasus Research Center of the state-funded International Institute of the Newly Established States (*Mezhdunarodnyi institut noveishikh gosudarstv*) (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2018).

Ivannikov was a military adviser to the LNR political leadership in 2014. He was deployed to Ukraine in the first half of 2014 and remained there at least until early 2015. During his undercover deployment to LNR, he coordinated and supervised the military activities of the rebels and the procurement and transport of weapons across the Russian-Ukrainian border. Ivannikov worked with former LNR leader Igor Plotnitskiy in a military commissariat building. He was allegedly in close contact with the authorities in Moscow, even providing recommendations on political appointments in Luhansk to Surkov (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2018). According to Russian investigative journalist Roman Dobrokhotov, Tkachev and

Ivannikov worked on behalf of Russian Military Intelligence (GU) with responsibility for military supplies to the rebel militias (Radio Svoboda 2021).

Bislan Yelimkhanov ("Lavina") also reportedly coordinated the supplies of heavy weapons from Russia into Ukraine - tanks, Grad multiple rocket launchers, howitzers, and self-propelled artillery systems. In the summer of that year, such weapons appeared in Bezler's rebel militia in Horlivka, the Kalmius and *Oplot* formations in Donetsk, and the *Zarya* in Luhansk. He was recalled back to Russia in November 2014. At first, Yelimkhanov served as a military adviser to Igor Bezler, a rebel commander in Horlivka, but in June 2014 began to carry out more serious tasks. Yelimkhanov had been probably a member of the loyalist Chechen Spetsnaz group. In May 2014, Yelimkhanov appeared in Donetsk oblast at the head of a GU unit *Lavina* (Avalanche) manned by his compatriots from the former Chechen special battalion West (*Zapad*) (TSN 2019b).

5.) Incessant Fragmentation of the Rebel Groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts

Since late April 2014, there was increasing anarchy in Donbas. Too many criminals had been recruited, and there was infighting over looting the local resources, Russia's funding and supplies. Looting and theft became commonplace (Wilson 2014, 135). Many rebels used the opportunity to pursue their own economic self-interest. The rebels were extremely fragmented. In virtually every city, different armed groups existed side by side with varying levels of autonomy from the principal. Fights erupted between and within these disparate groups. The war effort was secondary for many rebels. The uneven distribution of weapons and recruits caused frequent quarrels between commanders. Local commanders, gangs, and rebel militias operated with little oversight or any regard for the rebellion's political goals (Bowen 2019).

The "minister of state security" in DNR, Andrei Pinchuk, complained that the number of rebels willing to fight was decreasing while more and more people preferred to stay far from battlefields (Pinchuk 2018, 55). Gubarev noticed that it was an unrepeatable opportunity for anyone who could gather weapons and people and start their own "business": "banal robbery in muddy waters of the revolution (…). The easy availability of spoils gave birth to mini wars, the second edition of criminal street wars of the 1990s" (Gubarev 2015, 200).

Operating like warlords, rebel militias led by commanders, often with previous criminal records, established a quasi-feudal system of rule in the territories they controlled, relying on the extortion of local entrepreneurs, kidnapping for ransom, illegal extraction of resources (coal), and slave labor (Malyarenko and Wolf 2018, 201). There were many rebel militias, some with agendas of their own, since local proxies were harder to control from a distance (Matveeva 2018, 140). One rebel told *Gazeta.ru* that cases of infighting "couldn't be counted." Usually, the squabbles were related to the division of the sphere of influence:

> "For example, we were moving to a new base, a former firefighter's station, which was claimed by others. The moment we moved in there, a mortar from the city - our MGB - started shelling us. In the DNR, they [rebels] were not so divided yet, but in the LNR things were much worse: infighting, confiscations, murders. Many fought for the idea, but there were also many who 'fought' solely for money and power. Because of these squabbles, many volunteers left the "republics" (Dergachev 2016).

Rebel commanders Igor Girkin and Aleksandr Khodakovskiy admitted in the interviews that mostly declassed antisocial elements with criminal records joined the rebellion. Khodakovskiy stated that around 20-30 per cent fighters in DNR rebel units had criminal records. Donbas journalists Denys Kazanskyi (Donetsk) and Maryna Vorotyntseva (Luhansk) said that assault rifles have become useful tool of the social mobility for many people at that time (Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva 2020, 56).

5. 1) Main Rebel Militias in Donetsk Oblast

The People's Militia of Donbass (*Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa*, NOD) was formally established in March 2014 by Pavel Gubarev, the self-proclaimed "people's governor" of Donetsk oblast. However, NOD was not the armed rebel militia, it was rather a backup structure recruiting volunteers for Girkin in Sloviansk (See Gubarev 2015; Zhuchkovskiy 2018). NOD had no real command structure or coordination, being simply an umbrella title for various local gangs and militias, the same as Army of the Southeast (*Armiya yugovostoka*) in Luhansk oblast (Galeotti 2019a, 21).

Over time, Girkin and other figures, with the encouragement of the principal, managed to establish some kind of meaningful structure, though this was still far from being as disciplined or efficient as a regular military chain of command (Galeotti 2019a, 21). Some units splintered from Girkin later or swore allegiance to Girkin instead of so-called LNR leaders as the war escalated in Luhansk oblast (for instance, Alexei Mozgovoi and Pavel Dremov). From April to July 2014, Girkin controlled Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, to some extent his people also controlled Druzhkivka and Kostyantynivka (Novosti Donbassa, 2018).

The rebels in Kramatorsk were disparate groups of local Cossacks, Cossacks from Russia, Chechen mercenaries, local people with military experience, and criminals. Girkin appointed military commander in Kramatorsk - Vadim Ilovchenko ("Vadim Ilovaiskii", "Terets"), who came with Girkin to Sloviansk in April 2014[7]. Ilovchenko was commander of the small Cossack militia participating in the annexation of Crimea, where he met Girkin. In Kramatorsk, Ilovchenko led the Terek Cossack Host with its reconnaissance unit Wolves' Hundred (*Volchya sotnya*)[8], sometimes called Wolves' Pack (*Volchya staya*), led by Evgeniy

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[7] After withdrawal from Donbas, Ilovchenko became ataman ("chieftain") of Crimean Cossack District of the Terets Host ("*Krymskii kazacheskii okrug Terskogo voiska*").

[8] The "Wolf Hundred" was the name of a well-known White Guard formation during the Civil War, responsible for Jewish pogroms in Kyiv. It was created and commanded by General Andrei Shkuro, who sided with Nazi Germany during WWII as the commander of the Cossack Military Reserve Force, operating at the SS Central Office in Berlin.

Ponomarev (“Dingo”) from Belorechensk in Russia, who was killed in battle in August 2014.

According to local pro-Ukrainian political activist, there was 20-30 Cossacks from Crimea and Russia, and 100-150 people from Girkin’s rebel forces, several dozens of local people and Chechen mercenaries in Kramatorsk. However, the numbers were constantly growing as new volunteers were coming from Russia and other parts of Ukraine, Crimea, and Donbas. Sometimes, infightings occurred, especially between Cossacks from Russia and Chechen mercenaries (Interview 11). When rebels retreated from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk to Donetsk, fighters from Wolf Hundred complained that Girkin left them without artillery support, and then accused them of desertion (Ozhegova 2017).

A specific phenomenon of the rebellion in Eastern Ukraine was so-called “phantom units,” actively promoted in the online sphere without evidence of their physical existence. They were often supposed to be formed by far-right and far-left foreign fighters from Hungary, Serbia, Germany, southern Europe and other regions fighting for Russian interests in Donbas. They had probably never existed and served as a propaganda tool to demonstrate international support for pro-Russian militias. For instance, Pro-Kremlin Orthodox nationalist activist Nikolai Malishevskiy asserted that among the so-called “antifascist volunteers” there was a Hungarian unit Legion of Saint Stephen, made up of ethnic Hungarians and “traditionalists” who are fighting for “a New Europe, in which Hungary could become a key partner for Russia and Poland.” There was allegedly also a unit of German volunteers calling itself the Ernst Thälmann Battalion, which was the name of the German unit in the International Brigades in Spain, circa 1936-39 (Schindler 2014).

5. 1. 1) Situation in the Cities Controlled by Igor Bezler (“Bes”)

Igor Bezler formed his rebel group in mid-April 2014 out of the local militia in Horlivka and soon his control extended to neighboring Yenakieve, Dzerzhinsk (now Toretsk) and part of Makiivka. He defended Horlivka relatively well as he was one of the most effective and brutal rebel commanders with call sign “Bes” translated as Demon. Bezler was not a native of Donbas but a Russian citizen originally from Crimea and of German descent, who lived in Horlivka long before the conflict and had a Ukrainian residency permit since 2003 (Matveeva 2018, 130).

In Ukraine, Bezler worked at funeral parlor and in private security guards at the Horlivka machine-building factory. He headed the Horlivka paratroopers’ veteran association and had his paramilitary network ready which later proved instrumental. In 2013 Bezler visited Crimea where he was involved in the events preceding the Russian takeover (Matveeva 2018, 130-131). Bellingcat has identified Bezler as a GU asset with a second, Russian, passport under the name "Igor Beregovoi" (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2019a).

He was more talented when it comes to organization and discipline with his rebel militia than other commanders in Donetsk oblast, and he was the only who strictly controlled the distribution of arms to his fighters. Rebels in other militias often sold their arms to Ihor Kolomoiskyi's administration in Dnipro via intermediaries or to anyone else for money, alcohol, and cigarettes (Interview 10). In Anna Matveeva's interlocutors accounts, Bezler had been better at military organization than Girkin and consequently Horlivka and Yenakieve which he controlled held on longer than other places (Matveeva 2018, 130-131).

However, Bezler's people were not the only rebels in Horlivka. Sergei Zdryliuk ("Abwehr"), Girkin's right hand in Sloviansk, was active in Horlivka. His militants beaten up general director of the state-owned enterprise Artemvuhillya (Artemugol in Russian) Mykola Alyshev at the end of April 2014. Rebels probably had the command to neutralize urban leaders who could somehow resist the occupation (Efimenko 2018). Zdrilyuk, exploiting his experience from work in Crimean SBU in Simferopol, was the chief of the "counterintelligence service" of Girkin's rebel forces, coordinating with him the seizure of police buildings in Horlivka. Soon, Bezler entered in the conflict with Zdrilyuk (Zhuchkovskiy 2018).

Bezler did not recognize the authority of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, mocked by him as "banana republic" (Zhuchkovskiy 2018). He pursued his policy autonomously from DNR, fiercely criticized 'authorities' in Donetsk, and provoked conflicts with DNR's head Aleksandr Borodai (Nykonorov 2016a).

He had frequent conflicts with Girkin regarding the military strategy and other issues. Due to the lack of mutual understanding, the two commanders had practically stopped cooperating by July 2014, and Dubinskiy, Girkin's deputy, had to communicate with Bezler instead of Girkin. Another source of discord was that during the defense of Sloviansk, at least three Girkin's units defected to Bezler (Zhuchkovskiy 2018). A couple of days before Girkin's arrival to Donetsk in early July 2014, Bezler's people seized the regional command of Ukrainian police in Donetsk, which willingly cooperated with the rebel administration anyway. Bezler's fighters had to be ousted by Khodakovskiy's *Vostok* by force (Ivanova 2014).

After retreat from Sloviansk, Bezler accused Girkin of cowardice, treachery, and ignorance. He messaged to Girkin:

"You were running, Mr. Fugitive Commander [*gospodin beglokomanduyushchiy*], to

> Gorlovka, but then you had a bump in the road. You sit naked in my basement in the sauna. I wanted to shoot you, you "genius of military thought" and military theorist, for your cowardice. And believe me I would have done it, if it were not for Borodai, to whom you owe your life. It was he who asked me with threats and later with arguments not to do it. Thanks to Borodai, you are now alive, writing scribblings and smearing with shit everyone who disagrees with your opinion of the madman. That's why I didn't shoot you" (Nykonorov 2016a).

Except for Bezler, many smaller rebel militias operated around Horlivka, using the window of opportunity provided by chaos and anarchy for robberies and looting car dealerships, supermarkets, and jewelries. The small neighboring city Holmivskyi was controlled by the thirty-man rebel militia of Aleksandr Filippov ("Che Guevara"), who had several criminal records prior to war (Novosti Donbassa 2014). Other group called itself The Donbas Knights (*Rytsari Donbassa*). It controlled several roadblocks at the outskirts of Horlivka commanded by Yuriy Afonin (Bellingcat 2019).

In some cities, the so-called "domestication" of the rebels had taken place; the city was controlled by local rebels who let the local Ukrainian administration stay. Local rebels imitated the rebellion and tried not to "let the war into their city." The local administration often "bought out" itself from main rebel commanders in nearby cities (Girkin in Sloviansk or Bezler in Horlivka). However, these cities had not been controlled by the Ukrainian government either. Andrew Wilson refers to these cases as "quiet secession" (Wilson 2014). It was primarily associated with a high degree of local autonomy when some cities were controlled by the main rebel commanders, such as Girkin and Bezler, indirectly and nominally.

The "domesticated" rebels took advantage of the weak resources of the main rebel commanders. It was often not clear to whom they were subordinate. Girkin's deputy Sergei Dubinskiy ("Chmuryi") was supposed to form rebel garrisons in Kostyantynivka, Druzhkovka, and Toretsk, but apart from Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, Girkin controlled virtually nothing, except for minor influence in Druzhkivka (Interview 19). In Toretsk, the rebels solved the political issues with "people's republic" leadership in Donetsk, and military affairs with Bezler, because Bezler did not care much about politics (Interview 15).

A similar situation took place in nearby Yenakieve, where Bezler had only nominal control over this industrial city until Girkin arrived amid his retreat from Sloviansk in early July (Interview 16, 17). Bezler also kept loose control over part of Makiivka, adjacent to Donetsk, through the group of 20-25 people in local rebel militia led by taxi driver "Sasha Salat" and ambulance driver “Oleg Sever” (Interview 12).

Local ‘self-defense’ militia in Toretsk seized city administration buildings in April-May, under the command of Valeriy Stelmakh (“Nayomnik”, or “Mercenary”), local miner and Afghanistan war veteran (Interview 15). Stelmakh was subordinated to Bezler, and allegedly it was him, who reported civilian flight MH17 as a military aircraft to Bezler a few minutes before being shot down (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2019). Stelmakh’s deputy commander was Vitaliy Akulov, DNR deputy and electrician in coal mine, who organized checkpoints at the outskirts of Toretsk. Akulov was active in Cossack groups prior to rebellion (Interview 15).. In late May 2014, Akulov complained at a public secessionist meeting that local people are hesitant to join rebels at the checkpoints. Locals in Toretsk were unwilling to man even a couple of checkpoints in a small city (Dzerzhinsk – gorod shakhterov 2014, 2016). Local source estimated the number of fighters in rebel militias in Toretsk to twenty people (Interview 15).

Since May 2014, there were two rebel militias in Bakhmut (former Artemivsk). The first one was close to the local PSPU structures, led by Andrei Gontarev, that maintained contacts with Girkin. The second one seized the prosecutor’s office building. Militants in that building wore balaclavas, because most of them worked in local law enforcement and were unwilling to be publicly recognized. That militia was well-organized and imitated the rebellion in coordination with local authorities who struck a deal with Bezler in Horlivka to leave them alone in exchange for money. Their commander “Veles” was killed in early June 2014. The head of the police’s Department for the Fight against Corruption, Sergei Iochkov, hid under this alias (Interview 18).

Instead of risky actions in confrontations with government forces, many rebels stayed in their hometowns and began to “dispossess” local entrepreneurs in the spirit of the Leninist motto “steal the stolen.” In Kostyantynivka, local armed people used the curfew for looting the homes of the affluent people. Even at the end of May 2014, these rebels were not ready for combat. Those who wanted to fight went to Sloviansk, but only a few actually joined Girkin. The rest remained in the city as long as possible. Active participation in the activities of local rebels was more of an amusement for them than real engagement in the war (Interview 10).

In June 2014, pro-rebel sources admit that the principal supplied four rebel commanders in Donetsk oblast with tanks, armored vehicles, and heavy weaponry: Aleksandr Zakharchenko (Oplot), Aleksandr Khodakovskiy (Vostok), Bezler in Horlivka and Sergei Dubinskiy, Girkin’s deputy in Sloviansk. Aleksandr Zhuchkovskiy remembers in his book:

> “Weapons arriving in the Donbass were not distributed by any one person to where they

> were needed. Each of the commanders had their own handlers and supply channels. Supplies went separately to Slavyansk, separately to Gorlovka, and separately to Donetsk. Therefore, Bezler already had two Grad rocket launchers in mid-June, and Oplot and Vostok had five tanks each, while Slavyansk, despite two months of heavy fighting, had only two tanks and no Grads by the end of June. On behalf of the Slavyansk garrison, Sergei Dubinsky ("Khmuryi") cooperated with the handlers" (Zhuchkovskiy 2018).

5. 1. 2) The Situation in Donetsk before Girkin's Arrival in early July 2014

Since early May 2014, Ukrainian state ceased to control Donetsk and rebels extended their control of Donetsk from downtown to all city districts. There was dual power in Donetsk in May-July 2014, and it was not clear who exactly is in charge. The existence of the Donetsk People's Republic was declared already in April 2014, but city administration continued running the daily business. Checkpoints emerged behind almost every corner and Donetsk lost its identification with Ukraine. State symbolic disappeared. Many people from Russia popped out in the streets in small groups (Interview 13).

New and new rebel militias were formed from former riot police and SBU officers, Afghanistan and paratrooper veterans, war reenactors, and criminal underworld. In May-June 2014, there was no intensive fighting in Donetsk except for fights for Donetsk Airport that broke out in late May 2014. The dual power reigned in the city but the armed bands roaming the city held real control, looting ATMs, supermarkets, banks, and car dealerships. Moscow political spin doctor Aleksandr Borodai was formally the leader of the DNR but had no authority over what was happening in the almost one-million city. Rebel militias fought each other for their turfs (Interview 3, 4, 5).

The strongest rebel militias in Donetsk until Girkin arrival in July 2014 were *Oplot* (Bulwark) and *Vostok* (East). Oplot was originally founded in Kharkiv by Evgeniy Zhilin as a fight club and pro-Russian vigilante group, but members of the group later fled to Donetsk, where they seized the Donetsk City Council in mid-April 2014. Aleksandr Zakarchenko became the commander of the group. The commander of the Vostok group, Aleksandr Khodakovskiy, was a commander of the Ukrainian SBU's Alfa counter-terrorism unit who defected to the rebels (Galeotti 2019a, 22).

Rebel militia Kalmius was set up by staff and miners of Donetsk Metallurgic Factory in June 2014 (Matveeva 2018, 134). This militia, led by Valentin Motuzenko ("Ataman Ivanych") involved in much hard fighting, especially around Donetsk and Debaltseve, and became a relatively well-organized force (Galeotti 2019a, 22). It was one of the very few relatively disciplined rebel militias (Stop Terror 2015b).

International Brigade *Pyatnashka* was founded amid chaos and anarchy in Donetsk at the end of June 2014. Allegedly, the group originally consisted only of fifteen fighters tasked with guarding a checkpoint on Stratonautov Street near Donetsk airport, hence the name "Pyatnashka" (meaning "fifteen" in Russian). The International Brigade later expanded its ranks to several hundred fighters and participated in all major attacks against Ukrainian Army positions. Its first publicly known commanders were Arkha Avidzba and his deputy Stavros Bagatelia, both from Abkhazia. Bagatelia had arrived in Donetsk from Abkhazia already in 2012 to work as a taxi driver (Krutov 2021; Shariya 2021).

Subgroup of Pyatnaska, Dugin-inspired Unité Continentale, was the only group comprised entirely of Western far-right activists. It was founded in June 2014, when French citizens Guillaume Cuvelier, Nikola Perović and Mickael Takahashi arrived in Moscow and met Russian nationalist Mikhail Polynkov, who recruited volunteers for Girkin and assisted foreign fighters in getting to Eastern Ukraine. On the way to Donetsk, they met with Victor-Alfonso Lenta, another far-right French activist. However, their goal of reaching Slovyansk was made impossible by the besieging Ukrainian government forces and the French far-righters stayed in Donetsk instead (Shekhovtsov 2014).

Other rebel militias, founded before Girkin's arrival to Donetsk, were following: Kerch, commanded by Vadim Pogodin ("Kerch") with base in seized SBU administration building in Donetsk from May 2014 (Stanko 2017; Coynash 2020); Mirazh, led by commander Roman Voznyak ("Tsygan"); Khan, which splintered from *Vostok* as a special purpose unit, was located in Donetsk and linked to the Stalinist movement The Essence of Time (*Sut' vremeni*) led in Moscow by propagandist Sergei Kurginyan (Stop Terror 2015a).

Russian Orthodox Army (*Russkaya pravoslavnaya armiya*, RPA) was Donetsk-based rebel militia formed in April 2014 from a mix of locals and Russian volunteers, initially loyal to Girkin. It had a particularly unsavory reputation for looting and violence but was well equipped, reportedly by the FSB (Galeotti 2019a, 24). First base of the RPA was the seized building of the regional administration in Donetsk. RPA's commander Mikhail Verin ("Pyatyi"), former manager of a fast-food restaurant in Moscow (Stop Terror 2015c), told that:

> "My comrades and I decided to make our own movement, which we called the Russian Orthodox Army, but at that time there was no clear hierarchy under my command, there

> were several commanders like me, and people were divided between them.” (Myrotvorets 2015).

It is not clear who the RPA commander was. Some sources claim that Dmitrii Boitsov, who coordinated his activities with Aleksandr Barkashov, leader of the notorious neo-fascist Russian National Unity (RNE). Lee Myers describes how SBU claimed to have captured a recording of Boitsov, complaining that he could not oversee a vote in a May 2014 “referendum” because a large force of Ukrainian troops and weaponry remained in the region. The man allegedly on the other end of the line was Barkashov. He told him to press ahead anyway, fixing a result of, say, 89 percent. “Are you going to walk around collecting papers?” Barkashov barked at him. “Are you fucking insane?” (Lee Myers 2016, 414). Later RPA merged with Zakharchenko’s *Oplot*.

Neo-pagan rebel militia *Svarozhichi*, active in Petrovskiy district in Donetsk was also very closely tied to Oplot. However, militia’s commander Oleg Orchikov (“Vargan”), scrambled with Zakharchenko and other commanders for lucrative control over transport and commodity flow to DNR, because their “turf” was close to the Ukrainian checkpoints around Mariinka – ideal place for smuggling. An infighting regularly broke out between various rebel militias in the DNR for control over that lucrative business (Kanygin 2016; Zarovnaya 2020).

The MGB (Ministry of State Security) also included rebel militias, most notably *Varyag* (The Varangian) commanded by former Nazi skinhead from Makiivka Aleksandr Matyushin, leader of the youth wing in pre-war Donetsk Republic led by Andrei Purgin. According to Matyushin, Varyag militia was formed in May 2014. In the summer of 2014, the militia reportedly took part in the battles for Donetsk airport and Peski, but in the fall 2014, the militia was forced to leave MGB structure due to the internal conflict. The militia was transferred to the commandant's office in Donetsk and tasked with bringing the unruly rebel militias to order (Klich molodosti 2015).

When it comes to rebel unity and hierarchy in Donetsk, even the rebel sources admit the chaos and fragmentation. Gubarev, very critical of Aleksandr Borodai, wrote in his book that:

> “There has been no unified command in the DNR. My attempt to connect Borodai with Strelkov [Girkin] and do something for the state [DNR] failed completely. “Ivanovich, I need security!” - said the prime minister. He discussed a single issue with him: personal security. I then, I must say, was simply dumbfounded. In the republic, every battalion commander is his own commanding officer. It is clear that some of these feudal freemen have to be disarmed, but who is going to do that? We can't remove Strelkov’s fighters

> from their positions! Borodai is still working mostly “orally” - he makes speeches at press conferences, but no one really respects him” (Gubarev 2015).

5. 1. 3) The Situation in Donetsk after Girkin’s Arrival

With Girkin’s arrival after abandoning Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, Donetsk descended into even more infighting and anarchy, because many armed militias did not intend to subordinate to Girkin who could not control the situation in one-million city and its surroundings with his fighters. The rebels and common criminals decided to use the opportunity and start looting. When 2,000 hungry and battered Girkin’s troops of the so-called Sloviansk Brigade entered Donetsk on July 5 and discovered a peaceful megapolis with open restaurants and functional public transport, they drank and looted for a week (Matveeva 2018, 150). Within the space of a few months Donetsk, a city of one million people, was turned into a military hellhole, of which Girkin, who became “defense minister” and formal head of rebels in DNR, is in fact proud of it. (Zygar 2016). “When we entered Donetsk, everything was serene,” recalls Girkin:

> “Kiev still had jurisdiction over the police. It was a typical dual-power arrangement. The city was totally unprepared to defend itself. The checkpoints were poorly manned, all the roads were open, you could go wherever you wanted […] It was peaceful. People were out sunbathing, swimming, jogging, drinking coffee in outdoor cafés. It was like summer in Moscow” (Zygar 2016).

Girkin finished with the dual power in Donetsk. Local sources say that shooting was heard everywhere in the streets as there was a lot infighting after a couple of thousands loosely controlled and heavily armed people came with Girkin. Frequent shootouts occurred also because rebel militias did not know each other and rumors of subversive groups of Ukrainian nationalists spread like steppe fire (Interview 13). Armed militants started seizing offices, dormitories, hotels, and company offices for their bases (Pinchuk 2018, 57). Several small rebel groups splintered from Girkin, such as Ryazan, led by Eduard Gilazov (“Ryazan”), who disappeared without the trace in Donetsk in summer 2015 (Kazanskiy 2016). As the conflict progressed, rebel militias rose to prominence out of smaller units. Aleksandr Borodai explained:

> “There were no DNR and LNR in any serious way at first, the idea was to join Russia.

> The republics came together from small fighting groups. I used to joke that we have feudalism of some sorts: Gorlovka khanate, Donetsk fiefdom, Sloviansk principality. Oplot and Vostok were the largest units, but there were all sorts of groups, like the Russian Orthodox Army with up to 600 troops, such exotic thing as Russian Orthodox Sunrise, a separate DNR Cossack brigade etc." (Matveeva 2018, 134).

Tensions between rebel militias and the way they aligned themselves were evident from the start. Relations were characterized by rivalry, making it hard to establish a command-and-control structure. A Military Council (*Voennyi sovet*) was founded by Girkin in an attempt to unite the main DNR groups whose members included Girkin, his chief of staff Eldar Khasanov ("Mikhailo")*,* Alexei Mozgovoi (Luhansk oblast), Sergei Dubinskiy, and Igor Bezler, but Aleksander Zakharchenko, the commander of the *Oplot,* was present only twice and Aleksandr Khodakovsky of *Vostok* did not wish to conduct joint operations with them at all. They were pulling in a different direction to focus everything on Donetsk and did not want to bow to the authority of outsiders. Khasanov called that he believed that Zakharchenko and Khodakovskiy were diverting weapons which were destined for Sloviansk when they finally started to be sent from Russia, and they were outgunned as a result (Matveeva 2018, 134).

Rebel sources consent that the level of chaos among the rebels was constantly increasing. "The number of rebels willing to fight at the front began to fall. They preferred to be far from battlefields," Andrei Pinchuk wrote in his book (Pinchuk 2018, 56). Another reason for disarray in Donetsk were conflicts between Girkin and his people on the one hand, and Borodai and MGB (Antyufeev, Pinchuk) on the other. Pinchuk blames Girkin for that "Borodai and Antyufeev, unable to cope with Girkin's despair and moping, began to form a parallel headquarters to control the rebels. More and more groups, even receiving direct commands from Girkin, turned there for more precise commands" (Pinchuk 2018, 57).

Gubarev blames Borodai that he was unable or unwilling to prevent looting and other criminal activities of the rebels, which put bad light on the whole rebel cause. Gubarev says that first they welcomed Borodai when he became DNR head in mid-May 2014 because they considered it to be a sign that he was sent by Moscow and that "Russia is with us", but:

> "[Borodai] convened useless meetings, where he tried to "resolve" conflicts between rebel commanders, but they usually didn't give a damn about him. Like, who are you to boss us around? We're all from here, we know each other, and you're a newcomer. The rifle gives birth to power, and we have the guns and the fighters. Borodai was notable for

> his total lack of punctuality and his terrible disorganization. He was not engaged in any economics, in supplying the [rebel] army. It was Borodai who would later call this neo-feudal mess a “successful start-up” of the DNR. Only the extreme weakness of the Ukrainian government saved the republic from immediate failure” (Gubarev 2015).

5. 1. 3. 1) Vostok (The East) and its Commander Aleksandr Khodakovskiy (“Skif”)

Vostok controlled, jointly with *Oplot*, Donetsk, Snizhne and Shakhtarsk until July 9, when Khodakovsky quarreled with Girkin who came to Donetsk. It resulted in splitting of *Vostok* with one part going to Makiivka, and the other joining Girkin (Matveeva 2018, 134). Until July 16, Khodakovsky also served as first “Minister of State Security of the DNR” before Pinchuk replaced him. As Sloviansk distracted the main conglomeration of the Ukrainian forces, the areas to the south and east had the time to build their defenses, but, in Girkin’s view, *Vostok*’s operations around Donetsk were disastrous, an opinion confirmed by Borodai (Matveeva 2018).

Vostok’s attack in May 2014 to capture Donetsk airport was ill prepared with poor reconnaissance, as a result of which the enemy’s strength was underestimated. *Vostok* fighters shot down a truckload of rebels who died in friendly fire. The rebels lost fifty people, some of them were volunteer combatants from Russia who arrived just the day before (Matveeva 2018). The friendly fire from the Vostok Battalion, which confused another rebel militia for Ukrainian units, is emblematic of the lack of communication among the disparate rebel militias (Kofman et al. 2017). Khodakovskiy did not squabble solely with Girkin but with Borodai’s “security team” from MGB as well. Pinchuk said that in August 2014,

> “Antyufeyev ordered my staff to arrest several *Vostok* fighters, who cut the equipment of one of the enterprises for scrap metal. The piquancy of the story is added by the fact that it was the competitors in this business who detained them. As a result, on Khodakovskiy's command, *Vostok* encircled the MGB base, where the arrested were held by order of Antyufeyev, and brought their armored vehicle to get them out” (Pinchuk 2018, 17-18).

Probably the most acute conflict during the entire period of 2014-2015 occurred between the groups of Khodakovskiy and Sergei Dubinskiy (“Khmuryi”), who headed the so-called “DNR military intelligence” at that time. On November 22, there was an infighting between Dubinskiy's fighters and a group of Ossetians led by Zaur from Khodakovsky's *Vostok*. The reason for the confrontation was the redistribution of looted property. Khodakovskiy's group won this struggle (Nykonorov 2016c). Vostok’s commander had complicated relations with many other rebel commanders as well (Nykonorov 2016a).

Khodakovskiy, admitted in an interview that he directly maintained contacts with Colonel General Vladimir Lentsov, and that the appearance of Russian generals in the rebel-occupied territory of Ukraine and their interaction with the militants is a “constant, normal process.” Khodakovskiy added that he has consulted with Lentsov the demands and points of view of the Kremlin in order to take the right decision as Khodakovskiy and other commanders have not the direct access to Putin. According to Ukrainian sources, Surkov sought to use Khodakovskiy's potential and create a “DNR Security Council” under his control in November 2014. This political decision would open up broader political opportunities for Khodakovskiy's “handlers” – curators (Nykonorov 2016c).

5. 1. 3. 2) Sparta and Somali

Sparta militia emerged in Donetsk from Motorola’s unit in Girkin’s Slovyansk Brigade. Arsen Pavlov (“Motorola”) is one of the iconic commanders favorited by the Russian media as the story of “simple young man who decided to do the right thing” (TSN 2016). Pavlov came to Ukraine even before the war has started. He participated in street fights between pro-Russian militants and Ukrainian nationalists in March 2014 in Kharkiv. Later he came with Girkin to Sloviansk, where he led small rebel militia with 40 people. When Girkin’s forces came to Donetsk in early July 2014, “Motorola” splintered and became more autonomous (TSN 2016).

Somali militia was led by Mikhail Tolstykh (“Givi”) in his early thirties who was born in Ilovaisk and trained as an industrial rope access technician with his last job as a heavy truck factory driver. Somali later got famous for fighting in Ilovaisk and Donetsk airport (Matveeva 2018, 134). Along with Pavlov (“Motorola”), Tolstykh was also one of the most media-promoted “heroes” of the people's republic. Tolstykh was known for his cruel treatment of captive Ukrainian soldiers and his own subordinates, who repeatedly complained about torture in Somali he was in charge of (Krutov 2017b).

5. 1. 3. 3) Cossacks in Donetsk

Cossacks in Donetsk were commanded by local “chieftain” Yuri Safonenko (“Batya”) and his deputy Alexey Bogdanov (“Senya”), deputy in so-called DNR parliament. This Cossack militia was infamous for kidnappings, extortions, robberies, and killings. Safonenko founded Cossack

Union of the Don Host (*Kazachii soyuz "Oblast' voiska Donskogo"*, KSOVD) in 2009, which had presumably only nine members before the war (Berezhneva 2018). With the onset of the rebellion, Safonenko and Bogdanov formed so-called Rapid Response Task Force KSOVD (*Gruppa bystrogo reagirovaniya, GBR KSOVD*), based in Budenovskiy district in Donetsk. The group was most active from October 2014 to March 2015, when its members terrorized the civilian population in Donetsk. KSOVD's head of the special department was Sergey Bulgakov ("Yurist"), former police officer with two criminal records. Safonenko reportedly lured people from other rebel structures to his militia in exchange for higher salaries (Colonel Cassad 2015; 24 kanal 2019; Ronin_077 2018; Antikor 2016). Pinchuk, the state security minister in DNR, complained that thanks to this group, which did not recognize the central role of the DNR "government", Cossacks' reputation was seriously discredited. Pinchuk remembered Bulgakov, who approached him to plead:

> "Comrade Minister! What should we do to give us officially a couple of district police departments and the Sokol marketplace? And appoint our Cossacks as deputies in the elections to the People's Council [DNR parliament]. We will come to an agreement with anyone there" (Pinchuk 2018, 136).

5. 1. 4) Fragmented Rebels in the Rest of Donetsk Ooblast

Steppe (Step)

This Cossack battalion was founded by Aleksandr Mamoshin ("Samurai"), colonel of Ussuriysk Cossack Host from Russia, who, according to one of the Russian voluntary fighters on the Ukrainian side, recruited racist skinheads form the Far East of Russia (Interview 22). Mamoshin was criticized and accused by his own fighters from incompetence when reportedly about fifty fighters of his groups were killed in the battle at Kozhevnya, part of fierce battles around Savur Mohyla in the summer of 2014, which was poorly planned and organized. In July 2014, around thirty rebels from this battalion left Donbas for Russia. In total, it is estimated that this group had 150 fighters, and few armored vehicles without artillery (Golikov undated). After that battle at Kozhevnya, *Step* fighters scattered, some joined the other rebel militias (Donbass – Ukraina undated). During the fights in Kozhevnya, the conflict broke out between Evgeniy Skripnik ("Prapor") from Girkin's rebel forces and Cossacks of the Step battalion based in the village of Dmitrovka near Snizhne. “Prapor” intended to disarm these Cossacks (GG_Hohia undated).

Troya

This small reconnaissance company is interesting case of internal fragmentation. The group of around twenty people was led first by Vladimir Novikov (“Belyi”) from Kirovske in Donetsk oblast with many criminal records. The command of the group was, however, contested by another man also named Vladimir Novikov (“Alabai”) from Zaporizhzhya, also with criminal records. He was former member of the local biker gang Slavs - “Slavyane” MC (Gorlovka.ua 2016; Krasnyi komissar 2018). Fun fact is that Novikov from Zaporizhzhia called in March 2014 to fight against pro-Kremlin bikers from Night Wolves in Ukraine for their subversive activities in Crimea (Fakty.ua 2014b). According to unconfirmed rumors, “Alabai” called himself an officer of the Russian secret services, presented the fake ID and demanded sole command of the group (Serg Karnaux 2017; Dergachev 2016; Razina 2016). That situation led to infighting within the group (Spravedlivaya republika, 2019). Also, Troya entered into conflict with another small rebel group Olkhon, led by Russian citizen Maksim Tkhorzhevskiy with call sign “Olkhon” (Kazanskiy 2021; Nykonorov 2017).

Berkut

When Bezler was forced to go to Crimea in fall 2014, his people were reorganized in Berkut militia, while other rebel militias came to Horlivka, such as Givi’s Somali. Berkut, named after the former riot police under Yanukovych, was commanded by Russian General Igor Sokolov (Gorlovka.ua 2014). After Bezler was dismissed, infighting between Russian soldiers and local rebels was observed in Horlivka. According to former director of Inform Napalm, Dmytro Tymchuk, Russian military units destroyed a rebel base on the territory of one of Horlivka's enterprises (Nykonorov 2016a). Also, after Bezler’s departure from Horlivka, infighting and shootouts among the rebels broke out (Gorlovka.ua 2014). Mikhail Tolstykh with his Somali group entered Horlivka, and fights for metal scrap erupted with local criminal groups led by local criminal boss Yurii Krikulenko, known as “Benya” (Bilinskiy 2017, Depo.Donbass 2017). Krikulenko fled and Tolstykh began to cut out the equipment of the Uzlovskaya and Kalininskaya factories for scrap metal (Pivovarov 2015). Reportedly, he coordinated these activities with General Igor Sokolov (Crime.ua 2015).

Olkhon (Special Purpose Unit)

Maksim Thorzhevskiy ("Olkhon") arrived in Donbass in May-June 2014 and initially joined the Step rebel militia. He was reportedly linked to Russia's GU Special Forces and after he left Step, Tkhorzhevskiy formed his own Special Purpose Unit "Olkhon," which served, according to some Ukrainian sources, as cover for the engagement of the Russian special forces, saying that groups like "Olkhon" were formed to camouflage the actions of the GU structures in the Donbas (Nykonorov 2017).

5. 2) Rebel Militias in Luhansk Oblast

The rebels in so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) emerged, as in the DNR, at first as an often-haphazard array of local militias. Initially, Army of the Southeast (*Armiya yugo-vostoka*) was the first militant structure that emerged out of the blue in the mid-March 2014, when masked armed men from Stakhanov recorded video uploaded on YouTube. Three men in balaclavas, carrying weapons, stood against some tarpaulin-covered boxes, and one of them spoke monotonously into the camera, addressing the Ukrainian government:

> "We, the united people's brigades [*druzhiny*] of Donetsk, Lugansk and Kharkov provinces, appeal to the self-proclaimed government. We will never recognize a government that came [to power] illegally under the fascist slogans. Now, there is a self-defense unit in any of the cities of the southeast. These units are several times larger than your hastily formed army. We will not tolerate any National Guard, and your fighters will never be present on our soil. We know all your locations and control all your moves. […] We declare that any actions - incursions, arrests, threats against the southeast - will be regarded as a declaration of war. We suggest that you withdraw your military equipment and gangs from our territories as soon as possible. Do not forget that we are on our land, and you are strangers here" (Sakadynskiy 2020, 273-274).

As it will later turn out, these three men were Valeriy Bolotov, Alexei Karyakin, and Alexei Relke from Stakhanov. The video was shot in the basement of a gun store, which belonged to Karyakin, who was selling airsoft guns and hunting rifles. Several videos with their announcements appeared on the internet until SBU detained Karyakin and Relke in the night of April 4. The next day, Valerii Bolotov went public, took off his mask, stated his name and called on the population to support anti-government action planned for April 6 (Sakadynskiy 2020, 273-276). That day, the violent mob in the head with Afghanistan war veterans seized the Luhansk SBU administration building and seized the huge number of guns stored inside.

On April 9, the rebels announced the creation of the United Headquarters of the Southeast Army. In the following days, many high-ranking politicians, including Ukrainian deputies and presidential candidates, repeatedly tried to negotiate with representatives of the Southeast Army sitting in seized SBU building but to no avail. On May 5, Bolotov ordered to form the Battalion *Zarya*, the first official rebel unit of the Southeast Army. Retired Artillery Major Igor Plotnitskiy was appointed its commander. The same day, so-called People's Council (*Narodnyi sovet*) summoned in seized regional state administration building where Bolotov was "appointed" as the "people's governor".

After illegal referendum held on May 11, Bolotov became the head of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), although he had no control over rebel militias in Luhansk and Luhansk oblast. In August 2014, Bolotov lose power struggle with *Zarya* commander Igor Plotnitskyi, then LNR defense minister, and went to Russia, where he died under suspicious circumstances in January 2017. From the very moment of its foundation, the lack of a unified command had been one of the main problems of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic. Only Plotnitskiy's Zarya was subordinated to Bolotov, while other popular rebel commanders, such as Mozgovoi and Dremov, swore loyalty to Russian warlord Igor Girkin based in Slovyansk and then Donetsk (Koshik 2014).

5. 2. 1) Aleksei Mozgovoi and Onset of the Fights in Lysychansk and Severodonetsk

Fighting in Luhansk oblast sparked off in its northern part in May 2014. The most intensive fights erupted in the industrialized triangle of Lysychansk, Severodonetsk, and Rubizhne. These three cities were located a short distance from each other, forming an agglomeration. There was no single leader who would lead the rebel militias in this "triangle" (*Spravedlyvist' zarady myru*, 2016). The oblast had an advantage of a better access to the Russian border, but there were fewer commanders with military skills. The most potent Cossack militias of Pavel Dremov and Alexei Mozgovoi' rebel militia did not recognize the LNR leadership and aligned with Girkin (Matveeva 2018, 151).

Lysychansk and Severdonetsk were controlled by several rebel militias. The main rebel militia in Lysychansk was under command of Alexei Mozgovoi. Mozgovoi in his civilian incarnation was a local singer and used to perform in a club in Svatove. He came from the village near Svatove in the northern agricultural part of the Luhansk oblast without any stronger support to pro-Russian secessionism. Already in March 2014, according to an eyewitness account, Mozgovoi with his group was active in weapons' seizure from army troops, but this acquisition did not seem to have a clear purpose (Matveeva 2018, 135-136).

He reportedly joined the pro-Russian militias due to Valeriy Lopin ("Kupol"), organizer of the rebellion in Stanytsia Luhanska and Valeriy Bolotov's aide, who met with Mozgovoi on March 7 and invited him to join disorganized pro-Russian secessionist movement. At that time, Mozgovoi had, in Lopin's words, group of four people and a lot of ambitions. Lopin became Mozgovoi's mentor, while Mozgovoi took the role of a public figure, who agitated for secessionist cause during the whole March. Mozgovoi and his men set up several tents near the city administration building and began to speak on the square and talk to people (Zhuchkovskiy 2020, 18-21). Mozgovoi also addressed the problem of secessionist movement's fragmentation:

> "The fragmentation of organizations and the ambitiousness of many leaders is a direct threat and a crime aimed at destroying all resistance. Many organizations were created only for rallies and speeches, some with the prospect of future elections, while others are projects of local authorities and moneybags [*tolstosumy*]. All three of these categories are parasites on the body of the entire liberation movement. And because of them, truly ideologically grounded and independent organizations do not find the public support they need for a full-scale struggle. [...] The worst thing for our struggle is our fragmentation!" (Zhuchkovskiy 2020, 25-26).

In early April, Mozgovoi commanded group of circa 150 people with Lopin's support, who was intermediary between him and Bolotov. However, Mozgovoi entered into the conflict with Bolotov, who did not let him in the seized SBU building. According to Zhuchkovskiy, Mozgovoi left Luhansk and set up a camp near the Russian border in village Verkhnya Vilkhova for receiving supplies and Russian volunteers. In early May the camp moved near Sverdlovsk, to the territory of a vacant tourist base, just half a kilometer from the Russian border. In Zhuchkovskiy's words, by mid-May 2014, rebels in the seized SBU building started to immerse in drunkenness and clashes due to idleness while the more active militants joined Mozgovoi or Alexander Bednov (Batman) in Luhansk (Zhuchkovskiy 2020, 31-37).

In the second half of May, Mozgovoi left for Lysychansk with his People's Militia of Lugansk oblast (*Narodnoe opolchenie Luganshchiny*). In Lysychansk, his militia allied with Girkin's command (Matveeva 2018, 135-136). Mozgovoi's rebels were not the only group in Lysychansk, however. Several rebel militias were active in the city, stationed in the premises of administrative buildings and industrial enterprises. Mozgovoi's rebels resided in Lysychansk Glass Factory (Tsentr hromadyanskykh svobod 2015).

Except for him, Lysychansk deputy mayor in 2006-2008, Andrei Skoryi organized rebel militia of 50-100 militants comprised from Afghanistan War veterans stationed in SBU administration building. He was rather a political leader than military commander as Mozgovoi. Additionally, dozens of Chechen fighters were reportedly present in Lysychansk and some anonymous armed group seized the military enlistment office (Interview 23). Another rebel militia in Lysychansk, *Vostok-13*, was led by local Viacheslav Yakovenko with call sign "Kerch" (Antimaydan 2014).

Neighboring Severodonetsk was controlled by Cossacks commanded by Stakhanov-born Pavel Dremov, and some other groups, such as rebel militia of Sergei Pak, reportedly a former member of the local criminal underworld, who engaged in infighting with Dremov and was probably killed by the rebels (Gorelov 2019). Mozgovoi and Dremov protected metallurgic and energy objects and acted like armed protection companies - not a single object was damaged if the owners paid properly and on time (Interview 24).

In early July 2014, the "triangle" area of Severodontesk – Lysychansk - Rubizhe was abandoned by the rebels on Girkin's orders, allegedly in order to avoid encirclement by Ukrainian forces. According to available information, Dremov was ready to defend Severodonetsk despite Girkin's order, but Mozgovoi retreated, which resulted in Dremov's accusations of Mozgovoi calling him a coward (Spravedlyvisť zarady myru 2016). After that, Dremov broke off relations with Mozgovoi and retreated to his homeland, Stakhanov. Mozgovoi's rebel formation, known as *Prizrak* (Ghost) after the retreat, came in Alchevsk, where it was joined by local rebels and Cossack militias from the Alexander Nevskiy Battalion (Yadocent 2016).

5. 2. 2) Ghost of Alexey Mozgovoi and Rebel Militias in Alchevsk

There were few militants in Alchevsk in spring 2014 — no more than a hundred in the whole city — and they lacked weapons and permanently argued with each other (BBC Ukraiina 2014).

Before Mozgovoi's retreat to Alchevsk, at least two rebel militias were active here: one linked to Plotnitskiy's battalion *Zarya*, headed by Vladislav Dubina, councilman connected to local criminal underworld, who represented LNR authority in Alchevsk (Yadocent 2016). The second rebel militia was known as First Liberation Battalion of Alexandr Nevskiy (*Pervyi osvoboditeľnyi batalion im. Aleksandra Nevskogo*) comprised of Cossacks, who seized SBU administration building in early June 2014. This battalion with imperial nationalist and Orthodox monarchist ideological orientation merged with *Prizrak* in late July 2014.

Other rebel militia, which merged with Ghost was *Varyagi* (Varangians; do not confuse with Matyushin's Varyag militia in MGB), formed by Russian nationalists and commanded by Konstantin Kovalev ("Stilet") from St. Petersburg. Kovalev came to Donbas in June 2014. He said in interview with Russian nationalist resource *Klich molodosti* ("Calling of the Youth") that:

> "It all has started with the *Varyagi* bikers club [in St. Petersburg]. We had been involved in national patriotic activities for several years, including the Old Ladoga historical re-enactment festivals, as well as organizing and guarding "Russian Marches" and other Russian nationalist events. Further *Varyagi* participated in the Russian Spring and the return of the Crimea. We became a structural part [of Mozgovoi's Ghost] in October 2014. In October 2014, we created the Security Service of the Ghost Brigade. […] For us, Mozgovoi best embodied the struggle for Novorossiya and Russian World" (Klich molodosti 2015).

After seizing control of Alchevsk in July 2014, the Ghost Brigade occupied the Metallurg Sport Palace (Spravedlyvisť zarady myru 2016a). Mozgovoi stylized himself into the role of local "Che Guevara", revolutionary zealot for social justice and bright future. That's why his rebel group could attract not only Russian imperial nationalists and neo-Nazis but also communist groups from all over the world (Interview 24; Crime.ua 2015a). Luhansk communist Aleksandr Chalenko characterized Mozgovoi as artistic, a Facebook creation and a "YouTube hero" whose reputation was made up by social media in search for fame (Matveeva 2018, 135-136).

Mozgovoi liked to pose on cameras, looked well on billboards and had the image of professional revolutionary. He ignored warnings from rebel political administration in Luhansk not to be too independent, and organized military parade and international communist conference in May 2015 (Interview 24). His reputation and ambitions irritated Plotnitskiy's administration in Luhansk. International communist conference followed by military parade organized in Alchevsk was probably the last drop. He died in car explosion on May 23, two weeks after the conference and parade (Crime.ua 2015a).

Mozgovoi's rudeness and straightforwardness was often manifested in open and harsh criticism of the LNR leadership and personally of its head Igor Plotnitskiy. Mozgovoi criticized Plotnitsky for the embezzled humanitarian aid. In response, LNR's militias intercepted humanitarian aid deliveries to the Mozgovoi at the Russian border. LNR authorities called Don Cossacks and Mozgovoi's fighters bandit formations. Nevertheless, the LNR authorities had to reckon with them, because Kozitsyn's Cossacks and Mozgovoi's Ghost held, according to various estimates, from 50 to 100 km of the front line (Guselnikov 2015a).

The Debaltseve military operation in January-February 2015, during which the Ghost brigade suffered heavy losses, drastically reduced Mozgovoi's influence in the rebel territories. In the spring 2015, Plotnitskiy issued a decree declaring all rebel groups that were not part of the "official" People's Militia as bandit formations, and Mozgovoi was forced to make peace with the LNR administration. According to some reports, he hoped for the post of LNR deputy defense minister but received only the legitimization of his rebel group. Mozgovoi repeated the path of Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman") - he surrendered the brigade to the rebel central command and soon parted with his own life (Guselnikov 2015a).

Ghost's deputy commander Aleksander Kostin ("Avgust") left the Ghost and formed his own rebel tank battalion August (*Avgust*), officially Alexander Nevskiy's Battalion of the Blessed Virgin of August (*Batalion Presvyatoi bogoroditsy avgustovskoi imeni Aleksandra Nevskogo*), in August 2014. In January 2015, he was ousted from the commanding by LNR officials for failed military offensive near Sanzharivka (Yadocent 2020). In his own words, Kostin fought for "Holy Rus'" ("*Svyataya Rus'*") against USA and "fascism" (Etoonda 2014).

After Mozgovoi's death, Ghost was led by Mozgovoi's deputy commander Yuriy Shevchenko, retired Russian military officer from Taganrog in southern Russia. According to some opinions, Mozgovoi was only public face of Ghost militia incapable to command such a rebel force. In reality, retired Russian military officers Yuriy Shevchenko, Aleksei Markov, and Petr Biryukov commanded military operations of Mozgovoi's rebel militia (Crime.ua 2015a, 2016; Yuriy Shevchenko 2021).

5. 2. 3) Rebel Militias in Luhansk

The main Luhansk battalion was *Zarya* (Dawn) commanded by Igor Plotnitsky, later the LNR head - it is the official title (*Glava DNR* or *LNR*). Plotnitsky used to be head of a market checking department of the Luhansk oblast consumer rights inspectorate. *Zarya*'s core was made up of the former security personnel with an anti-Maidan orientation and veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan ("Afgantsy"), who were joined by local Luhansk men of all kinds of social origins (Matveeva 2018, 135). Except for Zarya, many other rebel militias were active in Luhansk, such as Rapid Task Force "Batman" or "Leshiy."

5. 2. 3. 1) Rapid Task Force (Gruppa bystrogo reagirovaniya, GBR) "Batman"

Rapid Task Force "Batman" derives its name from the nom de guerre of its commander, Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman"), a former Soviet anti-riot policeman, dismissed for corruption, and bouncer in Luhansk's Colosseum night club. Initially his group was part of the Mozgovoi's People's Militia of Luhansk oblast, but after Mozgovoi clashed with Bolotov and left Luhansk in early May, Bednov formed his own rebel militia. GBR by then numbered over 400 members. Even by the standards of this rebellion, the militia acquired a troubling reputation for looting, criminality and human-rights abuses. Bednov's political ambitions, brutal methods, and criminal enterprises made him many enemies. In January 2015 his convoy was ambushed, and he was killed in a hail of grenades and gunfire (Galeotti 2019a, 29-30). Anonymized rebel respondent told Matveeva that:

> "Bednov was a committed rebel who was fighting for a cause, but then it all went as usual. He didn't take much part in active combat and had no frontline of his own, thus his authority among other commanders wasn't great. Bednov wasn't a figure who could influence the situation. That's why the LNR authorities could openly state that they had liquidated him due to his reputation of a bandit, who raided businesses and looted houses" (Matveeva 2018, 177).

Bednov refused to subordinate to Girkin or LNR administration in Luhansk. Reportedly, Girkin made him a proposal to subordinate to his command in exchange for several tanks, but Bednov refused (Sakadynskiy 2020, 424-425). Luhansk journalist Serge Sakadynskiy who was arrested by Bednov's fighters and spent half a year in captivity, says that Bednov's militia looted enterprises, extorted money from civilians, exported stolen goods, including cars and factory equipment. The headquarters was in seized premises of Eastern Ukrainian University. Most of the Batman's members were locals from Luhansk - market sellers, taxi drivers, workers, or unemployed people without military experience (Sakadynskiy 2020, 429-433).

Bednov’s GBR was popular among Russian ultra-nationalists and outspoken neo-Nazis, who joined his militia. GBR included so-called “Kornilovtsy” and “Rusich” reconnaissance units, or the militia led by “Ratibor” and nationalist Evgeniy Mazepin (“Get’man”) from Voronezh, activist of far-right organization People’s Assembly, and admirer of the Romanian fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Mazepin arrived in Luhansk in February 2014, and established training camp close to Voronezh for (pro-)Russian volunteers in April 2014 (Russofashisto 2015; Blog Evgeniya Mazepina).

Russian neo-Nazis formed reconnaissance unit Rusich within GBR Batman. This unit was infamous for its war crimes. Popular website *Sputnik i Pogrom* run by the Russian ultranationalist, Egor Prosvirnin[9], called on people to join this group and the St.-Petersburg neo-Nazi Kirill Rimkus served as the contact person for the recruitment (Omelianchuk 2015). The first group of Rusich fighters arrived on 22 June 2014. Rusich’s commander is Aleksei Milchakov (“Fritz”, “Serb”) from St Petersburg. He became notorious for the photos he took with dead Ukrainian soldiers in the background and his admission in an interview that his unit ‘took no prisoners’ (Vernyi 2014; Polit UA 2016). His deputy in Rusich has been Yan Petrovskiy (“Slavyan”), a National-Socialist Black Metal fan living in Norway prior to war (Gonta 2015).

According to Sakadynskiy, neither Bednov, nor his fighters were eager to confront Ukrainian forces. The only battle in which that rebel militia participated was near Metallist on June 17, when the rebels clashed with the Ukrainian Aidar battalion. It ended miserably – GBR fighters reportedly fled the battlefield abandoning their weapons and wounded comrades (Sakadynskiy 2020, 437). In general, GBR was not a combat unit. Some combatants from GBR sat in the trenches and participated in military operations, but the core of the militia – the so-called Special Department (*“osobyi otdel”*), the commandant’s platoon and Bednov’s entourage – did not take part in combat and did not go to the front lines. Sakadynskiy says:

> “In Luhansk, GBR Batman performed purely policing functions – policing public order, catching spies and saboteurs. But “spies and saboteurs” were rarely caught, and none of them were real saboteur, so they mostly harassed the local drunks who were drinking beer in the back alleys. At first it was done sporadically and out of boredom, but then someone had the genius idea to get these people to work for the good of the republic. From that

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[9] Prosvirnin died in December 2021 by falling down from the window in the Moscow downtown.

> moment on, bounty-hunting was on stream. The head of the Special Department, a short, former welder Petr Vasilievich with the call sign Omega, was involved in this business on a regular basis […] There were two investigative bodies within the group: Counterintelligence and the Special Department. The Counterintelligence was commanded by a young guy with the call sign Said […] In September 2014, for reasons unknown to me, Batman arrested entire Counterintelligence unit except Said, who escaped with unit's funds. The very widespread use of slave labor in all areas of militia's life was simply shocking. People were detained precisely for the purpose of having a source of free labor at disposal […] Money and other material values in general were one of the reasons why some people ended up in the captivity" (Sakadynskiy 2020, 454).

To Sakadynskiy, Bednov was unable and unwilling to negotiate with anyone. Incompetent and unpredictable rebel commander with military and political power was bound to become a bone in the throat for those who tried to establish at least a semblance of state order in Luhansk:

> "He constantly poked his nose into someone else's turf, clashed with everyone, including the top rebel leaders, and was in no hurry to follow orders. He repeatedly said that neither Plotnitskiy nor Moscow should tell him what to do. All these seemingly insignificant and minor conflicts, becoming more and more frequent, slowly but inevitably grew into one a big, serious conflict. But he did not notice the clouds gathering around him" (Sakadynskiy 2020, 499).

By the local standards, Bednov's group was quite large and well-armed, but unreliable and the group began to be methodically ousted out of Luhansk to Krasny Luch (Sakadynskiy 2020, 500-504). Another source of problems between Bednov and LNR leaders was trade with Ukrainian prisoners for ransom. It was lucrative business for many rebel groups and Bednov was very active in this field, but he refused to share with the LNR authorities. According to some rebel sources, Bednov got greedy, and people around Plotnitskiy wanted to oust him from the business (Kikhtenko 2016a). GBR was closely tied to smaller rebel group Hooligan (*Khuligan*), led by the commander Vladimir Tsvyakh ("Kombat") from Rovenky, who died in May 2017 (Lenta.ru 2017).

5. 2. 3. 2) "Leshiy" ("Troll", "Forest Spirit"), and "SMERSH LNR" Commanded by Alexei Pavlov ("Leshiy")

Leshiy Battalion, originally headquartered in the captured SBU offices in Luhansk, was named after the call sign of its commander, Aleksei Pavlov from Stakhanov. He took active part in the local Cossack movement since mid-1990s. In 2007, Pavlov became the "chieftain" of Kadiivka Village Don Cossacks, funded by the Union of Cossack Formations (*Soyuz kazachikh formirovaniy*) from Russia, headed by Valeriy Starokon, closely tied to the commander of the Don Cossack Host Nikolai Kozytsin. On 6 April 2014, Pavlov participated in the seizure of Luhansk SBU administration building as a member of the Army of the South-East. In May 2014, he was injured and taken to Rostov-on-Don. After his recovery, he returned to Luhansk and founded his rebel militia named after his call sign initially consisting of around fifteen people (Spravedlyvist' zarady myru, undated).

Originally, *Leshiy* rebel militia held itself apart from the main LNR-loyal rebel structures and was closer to Girkin. It recruited equally from Luhansk locals, local Cossacks, and volunteers from Russia, including his deputy commander Igor Orzhentsov ("Vedun") from Novgorodskaya oblast in RF (Gorokhov, undated). Pavlov's militia soon got into a conflict with Plotnitskiy's *Zarya*. Pavlov distanced from the activities of other rebel commanders. On the base of Leshiy militia, Pavlov created a formation called SMERSH LNR[10] in September 2014, specialized, as the name implies, on repressing pro-Ukrainian activists as an analogue of Stalin's military counterintelligence (Bezpeka ta vzaemodiya v Ukraini, undated). Due to the activities of SMERSH LNR, aimed for "catching Ukrainian spies," Pavlov had disputes with Vladimir Gromov, who commanded the LNR Counterintelligence, and who earned such position due to his friendship with Bolotov. Gromov and Bolotov served together in Soviet army as paratroopers. Russian curators in Luhansk had to resolve these conflicts.

5. 2. 4) Smaller Rebel Militias in Luhansk Oblast

Among the many smaller rebel militias, Sergei Sakadynskiy mentioned the rebel group "KGB", which robbed more than fifteen hundred abandoned apartments in July and August 2014 in Luhansk during the siege of the city by Ukrainian forces (Sakadynskiy 2020, 429-431). Small

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[10] SMERSH was counterintelligence agency in the Red Army formed during the Second World War. Stalin coined the name from a combination of the Russian words for 'Death to Spies' (Smert' shpionam).

Cossack group in Lutuhyno, on the Luhansk outskirts, was led by Cossack activist Igor Shevelev ("Che Guevara") from Kaliningrad. His group consisted of roughly twenty Russian fighters from Kaliningrad oblast, and volunteers from Central Asian countries. Shevelev participated in fights for Lutuhyno in July-September 2014. During those days, eyewitnesses on social media wrote about drunkenness and looting among the rebels. This information was later confirmed by Shevelev himself:

> "We often had disagreements between locals and Russians. When we captured Lutugino, the military offensive stopped, the booty was counted. Some Russians went on a binge, got drunk, stole weapons, and sold them. Some showed up at the store drunk, ordering the personnel they must serve them for free. I had to punish them severely, introduce draconian measures. Some people left us, some went to Russia in handcuffs, because they sold two MANPADS" (Lutugino/Trezvyi zaryad 2015).

Ossetian mercenaries were reportedly active in Lutuhyno under command of Albert Algurov. Ossetian fighters were also present in Stakhanov commanded by Askarbek Agaev (Nykonorov 2015a).

5. 2. 4. 1) Rebel Militias in Krasnodon

Krasnodon was another Cossack "fiefdom" with a number of rebel militias. In particular, the *Vityaz* ("Knight") battalion, commanded by Dmitry Yeliseev ("Mojahed"), who was known for his active participation in the local Don Cossacks Host prior to war. He reportedly maintained close ties with the local police, in particular, he was deputy commander of the Krasnodon auxiliary formation for law enforcement, *Peresvet*, which became the core of the rebel militia since local Cossacks seized administration buildings in Krasnodon (Patria-o-muerte 2015). Rebel militia "Rus'" was formed on the basis of the mine guards of Krasnodonvuhillya and commanded by Viktor Veremeyenko. Later it merged with Yeliseev's Cossacks (Patria-o-muerte 2015; Mirovich, undated).

Another rebel militia based in Krasnodon was Brigade of Special Purpose "Odessa", commanded by Aleksei Fominov ("Foma"), which was disarmed by the LNR command in January 2015 (Spravedlyvist' zarady myru 2016c). Fominov comes from Odesa and after the violence on May 2, 2014, he fled to Luhansk oblast, where he contacted Mozgovoi. In July 2014, Fominov formed his "special purpose brigade" consisting mostly of Russian volunteers and criminals (TSN 2019c). Krasnodon also served as a base for several "Kadyrovites", Chechen groups led by commanders known only by their call signs "Magi" and "Dikiy" (Nykonorov 2015a).

5. 2. 4. 2) Rebel Militias in Brianka

This small depressive town between Alchevsk and Stakhanov was terrorized by rebel militia Brianka-USSR of young commander Dmitriy Pindiurin ("Liutyi", or "Fierce") (Guselnikov 2015b). Former members of this rebel militia described the engagement of Brianka-USSR on the battlefields against Ukrainian forces in 2015 in the following way:

> "We went on subversive operations: we shot and run away. At least we were still fighting then. Now we don't fight much. Our last major military operation was in Debaltsevo, where we stayed in one street for several days. Our militia kept itself busy with PR. We went out into the field, fired a Grad rocket, and shot a spectacular video - we needed to draw attention to ourselves so that people would help in order to get humanitarian aid come to us. We are not part of the LNR rebel militias, under today's laws we are considered a bandit formation. […] There is no recruitment process or requirements: they give weapons to whoever comes. The commanders said we were against the LNR and for Novorossiya" (Guselnikov 2015b).

Brianka-USSR participated in fights jointly with Mozgovoi's Ghost in neighboring Alchevsk, but reportedly they were in conflict with Alchevsk-based Aleksandr Nevskiy Brigade (Lugansk_LG_UA (2015). "Liutyi" and his militia, initially consisting of twelve people, looted local economic resources, cut out the equipment of twenty factories and companies to metal scrap, and exported coal from local illegal mines (Pauluskp 2015; Kyrylov 2019).

5. 2. 4. 3) Rebel groups in Stanytsia Luhanska

Commander of the local rebels in Stanitsa Luhanska was Valeriy Lopin ("Kupol"), Mozgovoi's mentor who was in the late 1990s in charge of the local collective farm *Rassvet* as the low-ranked part of the patronage system developed by Oleksandr Yefremov in the whole oblast. Lopin was also active in local Cossack groups as deputy chieftain responsible for youth and religion affairs. In 2014, Lopin formed a Cossack militia. He led the storming of the Border

Guard Unit in Stanytsia Luhanska. Later Lopin became political officer ("politruk") of Sergei Sivak's militia, who led one of the so-called self-defense units in Luhansk in April 2014 (Lugansk_LG_UA, 2014).

5. 2. 5) Territories under the Control of Cossack National Guard of Great Don Host ("Kazachia Natsionalnaya Gvardiya Vsevelikogo Voiska Donskogo")

Loosely connected militias of Don Cossacks under nominal control of its chieftain Nikolai Kozitsyn were probably the worst in terms of indiscipline and fragmentation. Owing to their control over borders with Russia, they detained a large share of military equipment sent by Russia, which was desperately needed at the frontlines. The only more or less disciplined group subordinate to them were Cossacks, led by Pavel Dremov in Stakhanov, except for the autonomous subunit commanded by Vladimir Timofeyev ("Babai") from Belgorod (Russia), whose members kidnapped, robbed, tortured and killed dozens of civilians (Soshin 2017; Nykonorov 2016d).

Don Cossacks controlled almost 80 per cent of rebel-held territories in Luhansk oblast since May 2014. The overall number of Kozitsyn's Cossacks operating in the territory of the Donbas was said to have reached at least 4,000 men (Sukhankin 2022, 201). In early May 2014, Nikolai Kozitsyn, the "chieftain" of the loosely organized Don Cossacks came to Antratsyt, officially to mobilize local people to defend Sloviansk. Cossack militias were the law unto themselves and did not recognize the authority of the LNR leadership. Cossack behavior often worked to discredit the rebels' reputation (Matveeva 2018, 97, 136-137). After a short stay in Antratsyt, Kozitsyn moved to Perevalsk in early June 2014 and ordered the transfer of 90 per cent of all incomes to him by ordering the opening of all bank depositories in the town. Antratsyt, Rovenky, Krasny Luch, and other cities were ruled by complete lawlessness where fragmented Cossack groups fought against the LNR-loyal militias and among themselves.

In 1990's, Kozitsyn, born in Toretsk in Donetsk oblast, represented the radical wing of the Cossack movement, which defended the formation of the Don Cossack Republic from Volgograd to Luhansk and Donetsk. Kozitsyn became famous for his initiative in 1994, when the "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Great Don Army and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" was signed. The agreement also included a clause on non-passage of the Russian Military to Chechnya through the Cossack territory This position of the Cossack chieftain caused a split in the movement. Moscow did everything possible to prevent the Cossacks from becoming too excited about the ideas of "independence" and Kozitsyn was removed from the post of chieftain in 1996 (Matveeva 2018: 136-137).

After the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, Kozitsyn was living in "Cossack capital" - Novocherkassk - until rebellion's breakout in the Donbas, in which he decided to take an active part. He operates independently of the registered Don Cossack Troops and has openly carried out missions entrusted him by the Kremlin. As he has stated, he is subject only to the Lord and to President Putin (Darczewska 2017). Kozitsyn was allegedly backed by the political support of Vladislav Surkov (Dikhtyarenko 2014). Before his Cossack activities, Kozitsyn worked as a prison guard in the notorious Novocherkassk penal colony, called "Buchenwald". He was fired for professional misconduct, started a private enterprise, and was involved in the renaissance of Don Cossacks (Darczewska 2017).

Perevalsk is very close to neighboring Alchevsk, where a commandant's office from the LNR, or rather from the *Zarya* battalion, had been operating since May 12, so the appearance of parallel rebel structures caused dissatisfaction (it was before Mozgovoi came to the city in July). Aleksandr Sokol was Kozitsyn's chief of security in Perevalsk, commanding his own autonomous militia, who died in a first offensive of Ukrainian forces in mid-July 2014 (Yadocent, 2015a). Local pre-war Cossack structures joined Kozytsin after his arrival to Luhansk oblast, such as St. Nicholas Cossack Regiment (*Svyatonikolaevskiy kazachiy polk*), which controlled a larger checkpoint south of Chernukhyne. Vladimir Borodinov was a "chieftain" of this group since 2008 (Bellingcat 2019).

From the very beginning, activities of Kozitsyn's Cossacks were harshly criticized by LNR authorities in Luhansk and led to internal disputes and infighting among rebels. In June 2014, the LNR leadership and Bolotov made harsh accusations of looting and betrayal against the Kozitsyn's Cossacks (Yadocent (2016). For instance, on June 16, Valeriy Bolotov drafted a letter addressed to Kozitsyn, where the "chieftain" and his forces were accused of "banditry and pillaging." The latter also unequivocally stated that "if this behavior continues, we will have to use force to put an end to it" (Sukhankin 2022, 201).

5. 2. 5. 1) Antratsyt

Until March 2015, several independent rebel militias, both Cossack and non-Cossack, constantly looted the city. The first "chieftain" in Antratsyt, delegated by Kozitsyn, Vagif Kerimov, stole money from the Cossack "fund" and fled the city (Soshin 2017). Kerimov's successor, mineworker Viacheslav Pinizhanin ("Prapor"), managed to unite under his leadership all disparate Cossack gangs, with the exception of the Leshiy militia (do not confuse with Leshiy in Luhansk), which continued to act separately. In autumn 2014, Kozitsyn left for Russia at that time, but his Cossacks for a long time controlled the territory from Krasny Luch to Perevalsk and Sverdlovsk. These were also the main smuggling routes from and to Russia.

In November 2014, armed infighting between Cossacks and LNR-loyal rebels broke out. There were two military commandants in Antratsyt at that time – one appointed by LNR, Aleksandr Chernyi, and Cossack commandant – Pinizhanin. People from the LNR "interior ministry" arrived in late November to conclude an agreement on the protection of a state-owned coal enterprise, controlled by Cossacks. Pinizhanin refused, opened fire, and was killed with several other Cossacks (Lugansk_LG_UA 2016; Glavred 2014).

Cossacks created several pseudo-state structures, such as police, traffic police and the protection service, all focused on extortion and racketeering. Chernyi and Bondarenko, commanders of competitive rebel militias, took control over the police and Cossacks were left only with "protection service." After many episodes of infighting, Antratsyt was still under Cossack control, although at least four autonomous rebel militias conflicted in turf wars in Antratsyt until spring 2015 (Yadocent 2015b; Zdorovo, Kazaki!; Lugansk_Lg_Ua 2016):

a) Cossack militias subordinated to Kozitsyn, who delegated command to Pinizhanin ("Prapor"). After the killing of Pinizhanin, Kozitsyn's Assistant for Civil Affairs, Britsyn, replaced him in Antratsyt. Britsyn "protected" coal mines in Krasny Luch, Rovenky, Perevalsk, and controlled almost the entire sale of coal in the Cossack-held territories.

b) LNR "military commandment office" led by Aleksandr Chernyi, who spent 12 years in jail prior to war. The main task of the military commandant's office was to collect information on all rebel militias in the city and pass it to LNR administration in Luhansk. This group "protected" up to twenty coals mines. In their racketeering schemes they often clashed with Cossack "protection service" (Lugansk_Lg_Ua 2016).

c) "Rus" led by Sergey Bondarenko ("Bondar"), also with previous criminal records, who allied with Chernyi against Cossacks. Later he entered into the conflict with LNR during raid against Cossack "chieftain" Kosogor in Krasny Luch in spring 2015. LNR-loyal rebels attempted to assassinate him, but he fled to Russia, where he was arrested. The group was dissolved in 2015, part of it joined Gaidei's Cossacks in nearby Sverdlovsk (Yalovkina 2015).

d) “Leshiy” militia commanded by Cossacks from Berdiansk - Alexei Kichigin, Stanislav Selivanov and Igor Mamanazarov (“Uzbek”), who balloted for mayor in Berdiansk and led local anti-Maidan. In January 2015 Kozitsyn appointed Rashid Shakirzyanov, the deputy commander of the “Leshiy” group, as military commandant in Antratsyt and Britsyn was detached to Perevalsk (Yadotsent 2015b; Regnum 2017).

5. 2. 5. 2) Krasny Luch

The situation in neighboring Krasny Luch was not any better. The “Cossack pluralism” of three Cossack chieftains led to frequent clashes over coal and other spoils between Sergei Kosogorov, nominally subordinated to Kozitsyn’s Don Cossacks, Viacheslav Petrov from Kuban Cossack Host and loyal to Mozgovoi, and Vladimir Kolintsov, later disarmed and arrested by Kosogorov (Yadotsent 2015a). Petrov seized the mines of the Donbasantratsyt Association and began to manage all the coal mines in the city. After that, an infighting broke out between the Cossack militias of Petrov and Kosogorov-Kozitsyn for the right to dispose of the coal of local mines. Kozitsyn ordered Kosogorov to arrest Petrov (Kazansky 2018).

In October 2014, Cossack faction led by Kosogorov toppled Petrov, who was dumped in jail and killed (Yadocent 2015c; Kazanskiy 2018). The colorful “chieftain” Sergei Kosogorov (“Kosogor”) emerged as a winner from this infighting. Kosogorov proclaimed his own “Cossack Republic” (Matveeva 2018, 176). All power was passed into his hands. Kozitsyn appointed Yuriy Kondratenko for “mayor” of Krasny Luch, but Kosogor soon arrested him too (Kazansky 2018). Kondratenko formed his own militia in April 2014 in the premises of the Standard Plant and fought in August 2014 close to Miusinsk, several kilometers from Krasny Luch/Chrustalny. According to Denys Kazanskyi, Kosogorov was one of the most epic Cossack “chieftains” like from the movie about the Civil War of 1918: “He established a one-man dictatorship in Krasny Luch, threw the mayor into jail, made businessmen to pay “taxes” and forbade civilians to leave the city and celebrate the New Year” (Kazanskiy 2018).

5. 2. 5. 3) Rovenky

The coal-mining town of Rovenky was another theatre for Cossack infighting. Power was divided between militias that were formally controlled by LNR and Cossacks with frequent gunfights as a result. The chaos did not stop for several months. At the end of April 2014, local

Cossacks led by Aleksander Konkin ("Foton"), entered the hall where the City Council session was held and demanded that the deputies vote for a referendum on LNR independence. At another rally they allegedly elected a "people's mayor," Vladimir Verevka, who headed with his father Viktor Verevka obscure organization for protection the rights of disabled miners (Interview 25).

Verevka was elected "deputy of the LNR People's Council," although very soon conflicts commenced between him and Konkin, who had proclaimed himself head of the local chapter of the Kozitsyn's Don Cossacks, while Vladimir Verevka became head of the local chapter of Mozgovoi's Ghost battalion (Interview 25). Aleksandr Konkin ("Foton") was active in the local pre-war Cossack movement. He received heavy armored vehicles and artillery from Bezler and coordinated his military actions with Gaidei from neighboring Sverdlovsk (Soldatskaya Pravda, 2021b).

In May 2014, Pavel Reznikov ("Ilich") appeared in the town and declared himself as a military commandant (Interview 25). "Ilich" came from Russia's Stavropol Krai, where he was active in Terek Cossack Host and was member of Union of Russia's Cossacks (*Soyuz kazakov Rossii*). He appeared in Rovenky with his militia, swearing loyalty to LNR and Plotnitskiy (Yadotsent 2015a). However, Reznikov was arrested in September 2014 and replaced by another "chieftain" Armen Mkrtchyan, who was soon replaced by local miner Igor Kulkin. Kulkin approved Reznikov's planned execution, but Reznikov was released and named military commandant of an area closer to the border, which gave him an opportunity to control the smuggling rings.

In January 2015, heavy clashes that included armored vehicles and artillery broke out between Konkin and Reznikov. As a result of a brief battle, the Cossack militias controlled by Reznikov were disarmed and arrested. Reznikov fled to Russia while his deputy, a local racketeer and pre-war councilman Aleksandr Rak, was presumably killed (his body was never found). The exact death toll is still unknown. The figures vary from one to twelve people (Vlada.io 2016; Stepova 2016). Konkin won this round but few months later he was shortly arrested and jailed by the LNR authorities.

5. 2. 6) Semi-independent Cossack Warlords in Stakhanov and Sverdlovsk

5. 2. 6. 1) Stakhanov

From the very first days of the rebellion, Stakhanov fell under the control of the Don Cossacks, although the city was ruled by the local warlord Pavel Dremov. His star rose in April 2014 when he emerged out of the chaos as the charismatic speaker in local anti-Maidan rallies (Kazanskiy 2015b). Dremov formed his own militia recruited from the locals and invaded the "chemical triangle" Lysychansk - Severodonetsk – Rubizhne in June 2014 jointly with Alexei Mozgovoi. However, after Girkin's retreat from Slovyansk to Donetsk, Dremov accused Girkin and Mozgovoi from cowardice and returned to Stakhanov (Yadocent 2015a).

During the August 2014 battles, when regular units of the Russian Armed Forces invaded Ukraine, Dremov and his Cossacks stayed in relatively calm Stakhanov and did not intend to go to the battlefield. In fall 2014, Dremov's Cossacks participated in the battles on the Bakhmut highway, and in winter 2014-2015 in Debaltseve (Kikhtenko 2016b). Dremov's rebels were relatively disciplined except for ruthless militia commanded by Vladimir Timofeyev ("Babai").

Dremov had tense relations with LNR's head Bolotov, and even more conflicting relations with Bolotov's successor Igor Plotnitskiy. Cossack chieftain in Stakhanov believed that Plotnitskiy reproduced the old Ukrainian oligarchic order and betrayed the ideals of people's self-rule (*narodovlastie*). Dremov also opposed the Minsk peace accords. In particular, he called Igor Plotnitskiy "a Kike", and the Minsk Truce - "a trick of the Jewish oligarchs". Dremov believed that the war should continue until the creation of Novorossiya in southern and eastern Ukraine. At the same time, Dremov managed to quarrel with the then chief military curator of LNR, chief of staff of the 58th Army of the Russian Armed Forces Sergei Kuzovlev with call sign "Tambov" (Kikhtenko 2016b).

5. 2. 6. 2) Pervomaisk

The city of Pervomaisk was occupied since May 2014 by Cossacks in the head with local Evgeniy Ishchenko ("Malysh") after previous commandants (Milyutin) died or fled (Subbotin). Ishchenko worked in local coal mines since the second half of the 1980s, in 1998 left for work in Russia and was convicted in a criminal case. Then he worked as a miner in northern Russian city of Vorkuta. In the spring of 2014, he returned to his homeland and joined the Cossack rebel militias. First, he fought in Dremov's group and then splintered and moved to Pervomaisk with own Cossack militia. In September 2014, in coordination with Kozitsyn, Ishchenko was appointed military commander and interim mayor of Pervomaisk. Ishchenko, in company with Dremov, often harshly criticized Plotnitskiy, reproaching him for his lack of help and embezzlement of aid directed to rebel militias (Yadotsent 2015a).

5. 2. 6. 3) Sverdlovsk

Sverdlovsk had been the fiefdom of local Cossack chieftain Aleksandr Gaidei ("Rim"), former councilman from the Communist Party (KPU), chairman of the local Afghanistan war veterans' association (*Soyuz veteranov Afganistana*) and former low-ranked member of the organized crime groups. In spring 2014, he started to organized self-defense groups in Sverdlovsk, build roadblocks and recruit rebels. In March 2014, Gaidei was already manipulating the demoralized local government bodies and intimidated local councilors with his armed militia (Interview 27, 2019). Jointly with Mozgovoi's militants located nearby, Gaidei carried out raid on the Dolzhanskaya-Kapitalnaya coal mine, where they stole enormous amounts of explosives (Svetikov 2014). Gaidei's group was officially called Stas Sinelnikov's First Cossack Hundred (Stepova 2015b).

Gaidei became Kozitsyn's right hand in Sverdlovsk and took control over Cossacks from surrounding villages with around 300 people in arms. They reportedly respected him only because Kozitsyn told them to do so because Gaidei was not previously active in the Cossack movement. The task of his armed militants was to block all roads leading to the near border with Russia. Gaidei controlled Sverdlovsk district, including Chervonopartyzansk (Voznesenivka) on the Russian borders. His deputy commander was Aleksandr Volkov, commanding the "Wolves" subunit, participating in the fights in Debaltseve and Izvaryne. Volkov is former police officer, who was reportedly dismissed for sadistic methods used during interrogations (Zik 2017).

Gaidei's group almost immediately involved in looting car dealerships and supermarkets (Interview 27, 2019, 2020). Raids, robberies, shootings, and killing people for profit were common at that time in Sverdlovsk. Looting in the city reached a level where one militia killed the members of other militia to pick up the booty (Stepova 2015). Several minor infightings occurred on the territory controlled by Gaidei, mostly for economic reasons. Ukrainian sources mention that Gaidei established a "tax" on all goods exported to Russia through "his" territory. Conflict erupted between Gaidei and small rebel gang of ten people from Antratsyt led by known Russian radical nationalist Yuriy Belyaev ("Kot")[11] from St.-

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[11] Belyayev recruited Russian volunteers for the conflict in Yugoslavia in 1990s and participated in war in Donbas as a commander of the small unruly Cossack militia in Antratsyt. At the rebellion's onset, Belyayev became close to Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman") and his Rapid Task Force. He became Bednov's press secretary and assistant, organized TV channel in Lugansk (Zapolskiy 2020). Belyaev was also known as the founder of the marginal

Petersburg because of control over the checkpoint close to the border with Russia (Nykonorov 2015a).

5. 3) Discussion on the Delegation Problems and the Fragmentation of the Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine

Measuring the fragmentation of the rebel movement in Donbas prior to the forced merger leads to the conclusion that the rebels in Eastern Ukraine were extremely fragmented. Rebels admitted that the fragmentation was one of the gravest problems of the rebellion (Pinchuk 2018, Matveeva 2018, Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 2020; Gubarev 2015). I will try to measure the fragmentation according to categories of a number of the rebel militias, their institutionalization and power relations between them, as introduced by Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour (2012).

LNR "Prosecutor's Office" mentioned the figure of 162 rebel groups, ranging in size from several people to several hundred, which had multiplied in the Luhansk oblast in 2014-2015 (Sakadynskiy 2020, 420). During my research on the rebel fragmentation in Donbas, I counted more than fifteen major rebel militias with a membership of over one hundred fighters and more than twenty minor rebel militias in both oblasts, except for Don Cossacks. The actual number with be probably much higher because the existence of many small rebel militias was not recorded in the media and memories of the main participants in the rebellions.

It is impossible to know the exact or at least approximate number of the rebel militias because the situation on the ground was extremely chaotic in the spring and summer of 2014: there was a myriad of semi-independent armed formations over which rebel commanders struggled to assert their authority (Gilley 2019, 321-323). Conflicts between rebel militias erupted daily in every city that was not subsumed by a single rebel group, which rarely occurred. Donetsk, Luhansk, and many other places were the battlefields where the rebel commanders clashed for the spoils of war (Pinchuk 2018, 55).

Attempts by the rebel administration to institutionalize the rebel movement and create coherent rebel forces under their supervision were largely unsuccessful until the forced merger in 2015. Main rebel commanders except for Zakharchenko and Plotnitskiy, such as Bezler, Khodakovskiy, Mozgovoi, Dremov, or Bednov, did not recognize the authority of DNR and LNR as a political wing of the rebellion they should be subordinated. The conflicts were regular even within DNR and LNR. Girkin had tense relations with Aleksandr Borodai as DNR's head

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Freedom Party (*Partiya svobody*), a militant far-right St Petersburg-based organization that lasted from 2001 to 2009, which attracted Nazi skinheads. He died in 2020.

and security organs, such as the Ministry of State Security (MGB) led by "security specialists" from Transnistria (Antyufeev, Pinchuk, Bereza).

Tension and rivalry made it hard to establish a command-and-control structure of the rebel movement. Girkin's Military Council, an attempt to unite the main DNR rebel militias, was largely ignored by other commanders. Borodai and Antyufeev, conflicting with Girkin, began to form a parallel headquarters to control the rebels, but to no avail. The loyalties also came across "people's republics", which complicated the potential coordination even more. While rebel commanders in Donetsk oblast, such as Bezler or Khodakovskiy, mostly ignored Girkin, commanders Dremov and Mozgovoi in Luhansk oblast swore loyalty to Girkin.

However, it lasted only to July 2014 and Girkin's retreat to Donetsk. After that, rebel territories in Luhansk oblast had no institutionalization whatsoever. It was divided into many fiefdoms where every city was ruled by a different commander who fought with other intrusive militias, which were sometimes nominally subordinated to LNR or Mozgovoi. Don Cossacks were the main contenders for power in Luhansk oblast. Cossack militias reported to Kozitsyn, who loosely held large swaths of territory and defended the idea of creating a Cossack state from Luhansk to Volgograd. Controlling most of the rebel territory, the Cossacks recognized neither Plotnitskiy's authority nor the republic itself (Vikrov – Butchenko 2016).

The institutional power of the LNR was extremely weak in summer-autumn 2014. In July 2014, the rebel lost Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, and even in Luhansk, Plotnitskiy's LNR relied only on his *Zarya* battalion with some aligned militias in Alchevsk, Rovenky, or Antratsyt, which had to co-exist either with Don Cossacks or Mozgovoi's fighters. Rebel militias commanded by Leshiy and Batman in Luhansk did not recognize LNR power and legitimacy. The situation slightly improved in the autumn of 2014 with the founding of the LNR armed forces, People's Militia (*Narodnaya militsia*), under Plotnitskiy's control in coordination with the principal. However, the unruly Cossack submitted to LNR-loyal militias only in spring 2015 after all main battles fought by the Russian military, such as Ilovaisk and Debaltseve.

Not a single rebel militia until the spring of 2015 was the powerbroker, which would be able to facilitate the hierarchy or coherence of the rebel movement. The power was divided between militias led by Girkin (until August 2014), Bezler (until October 2014), Zakharchenko, and Khodakovskiy in DNR; Plotnitskiy, Mozgovoi, Dremov, and Bednov in some parts of LNR. The situation with territories held by Don Cossacks was even more complicated as Kozitsyn only loosely controlled Cossack militias in cities, such as Antratsyt, Krasnyi Luch, Rovenky, and Sverdlovsk. As a result, from May 2014 to March 2015, we have dozens of rebel militias with non-existent hierarchy and institutionalization and very tense, non-hierarchical, and conflicting power relations between them.

5. 4) Opening the Black Box – Decentralized and Extended Delegation Chains

Timothy Frye in his book on Putin's Russia noted that it is hard to monitor subordinates directly under your command in the state bureaucracy and even more complicated when ties must remain obscure, and Kremlin seeks to maintain plausible deniability. Multiplying the delegation channels from the Kremlin to the rebels with inevitable slippage down the lines of communication was problematic because, as Frye states, Putin's much-vaunted "vertical of power" is creaky at best: "Putin oversees a range of security agencies that have mixed motives, overlapping agendas, and compete with each other for access to state funds, influence with the Kremlin, and opportunities to shake down private businesses" (Frye 2021).

Was the principal's delegation master plan thoroughly prepared or was it rather reluctant improvisation that contributed to the rebels' fragmentation? When we look at the functioning of the state institutions in Russia, Mark Galeotti noticed that ideas and initiatives are guided by the sense of the Kremlin's desires rather than any detailed masterplan. Putin himself tends not to be an originator; he would much rather arbitrate between rival approaches, pick from a menu of options or give people enough rope to hang or lift themselves (Galeotti, 2019c, 60). In Zygar's opinion, Kremlin encouraged incipient rebel movement but did not give specific instructions for delegation and expected that the eastern regions would follow Crimea into Russia's embrace. The locals would be in favor and there would be no need for military assistance (Zygar 2016).

The Presidential Administration controlled only the political wing of the rebellion - the rebel administration of "people's republics" - but it had no say over the activities of the rebel commanders, who did not recognize DNR and LNR and openly despised political intrigues of the Kremlin puppets in Donetsk and Luhansk. In their words, they fought for oligarchs-free Novorossiya, not for political officials in obscure banana republics, who reproduce the same corrupt patronage system as Yanukovych before the war. Rebel commanders could rely on the military and other assistance from other principal's delegation chains – FSB, Military Intelligence or General Staff of the Russia's Armed Forces. It gave them more maneuvering space vis-à-vis rebel administration, which sought to centralize rebel forces.

According to Kimitaka Matsuzato, the low quality of Surkov's machine was neutralized by the fact that he was never a monopolist in the Kremlin's decision-making concerning the delegation. As post-Soviet politicians and experts often remark, “the Kremlin has ten towers and Putin sits among them.” Each of the towers (Putin’s aids) may have its own policy toward one or another de facto state (Matsuzato 2022, 45). Kremlin’s actions toward Donbas were shaped by multiple actors within Russia whose visions of what Moscow’s policy towards Ukraine did not often align, a point illustrated by visible disagreements in the emails between Surkov’s office and the FSB (Nitsova 2021).

5. 4. 1) Resentment of the Extended Parts of Delegation Chains and Rebel Militias

The delegation chains for dealing with Donbas were fairly diffused. Vladislav Surkov, backed by the Presidential Administration, was traditionally in charge of political affairs and served as a chief negotiator with Ukraine. Surkov oversaw the personnel appointments but had no authority over the military and security agencies who followed their own line and often did not see eye–to-eye with the political level. FSB tried to leverage DNR and LNR internal politics, and Surkov could not always get an upper hand (Matveeva 2022, 456). Such multiplicity of the delegation chains could not stop the endless fragmentation of the rebel militias in both oblasts.

Arguably, such decentralization of the delegation gave the rebels more maneuvering space for bargaining vis-à-vis the principal and the opportunity to play on the competing interests of principal’s subsystems. It has also incited the resentment of the para-state hardliners whom the principal outsourced some delegation tasks, and who called for immediate annexation of the region, which would thereafter be called Novorossiya - the entity which included whole southeast Ukraine that would secede from the rest of the country (Yablokov 2018; O'Loughlin J., Toal, G. and Kolosov 2017). Active supporters of Novorossiya – most notably Igor Girkin – suggested that a “fifth column” of pro-US supporters had been working in Putin’s government and Presidential Administration.

Girkin, after his return from Donbas, accused the political establishment of undermining the rebels in eastern Ukraine. In December 2014, Girkin named Surkov as one high-ranking bureaucrats working in consort with the West (Yablokov 2018). Imperial nationalists or neo-Nazis fighting in Donbas either subordinated to popular rebel commanders – most of them fought under Bednov and Mozgovoi – or fighting autonomously, were no internal threat for the principal and his authoritarian style of running the country, but it could create problems with legitimacy of further steps in the delegation and internal discords within the rebel movement, especially concerning the Minsk Accords and other controversial steps, from the point of view of hardline rebel positions (Galeotti 2019c).

Russian nationalist Aleksandr Zhuchkovskiy, recruiting Russian volunteers for Girkin in 2014 confirmed the conflict between Girkin and Borodai, although they were friends for more than twenty years prior to the rebellion. Zhuchkovskiy claimed that Girkin accused Borodai of being a traitor working for the "gravedigger of Novorossiya," Vladislav Surkov. For his part, Borodai repeatedly made personal attacks, presenting Strelkov as a "schizophrenic," accusing him of an inadequate assessment of the situation in Donbas, and pointing to his lack of military experience to lead the defense of the DNR (Zhuchkovskiy 2018). Kremlin dropped discussion of Novorossiya completely, which was considered by many hardline empire-builders as treason by Putin or senior figures around him (O'Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2017). Another bone of contention were Minsk peace accords, unaccepted by many autonomous rebel commanders, such as Bezler, Dremov, Mozgovoi or Bednov.

Hatred between political wing of the rebellion – people heading the "republics" backed by Surkov – and hardline rebel militias, who refused Minsk Accords and advocated Novorossiya, led to Kremlin's conclusion that ruthless rebel militia commanders should abandon its social revolutionary fervor, and the rebel-held territories should be limited to a geopolitical project resisting EU and NATO expansion (Matsuzato 2022, 52). Kovalev, the commander of Varyagi rebel militia (do not confuse with Matyushin's *Varyag* militia – auth.), serving as a "security service" in Mozgovoi's Ghost, left Luhansk oblast:

> "Because there is no Novorossia. There are banana republics pretending that the war is still going on. For them it is just business. We are not interested in protecting other people's business (Jewish or local bandits). Almost all the irreconcilable field commanders were killed or imprisoned, some were able to leave. General prosecutor's office and the MGB cracked down on my unit back in June 2015. They disarmed and looted as much as they could. They took advantage of the fact that I was on vacation and that some people were in the field. So, I took people out and left on my own" (Klich molodosti 2015).

As demonstrated in this work, there were numerous personality conflicts with commanders such as Khodakovskiy openly criticizing the political leadership of the secessionist "people's republics." The various rebel militias saw little utility to the political organization placed in charge of the DNR (Kofman et al. 2017).

5. 4. 2) Vacationers-Curators without Authority

The delegation problems were deepened by the informal institutions of "vacationer-curators" ("*kuratory-otpuskniki*") as pro-Russian blogger Boris Rozhin aka Colonel Cassad called them. Those people are usually retired high-ranked Russian military officials, who tried to coordinate the rebellion, but had no clear powers from the principal and were mostly unable to subordinate the rebels. For instance, in summer 2014, there was more than twenty different rebel militias in Luhansk that were not subordinate to anyone. Vacationers-curators were unable to handle the chaos and fragmentation on the ground and often involved in looting, corruption, smuggling and other criminal operations. In DNR, the most notorious vacationers-curators were Sergey Dubinskiy ("Khmuryi", or "Grumpy"), who was responsible for creation of the DNR Military Intelligence (GRU DNR).

In LNR, the main vacationers-curators, who unsuccessfully tried to mold out from the amorphous fragmented rebel groups a more-or-less functioning army structure, went under call signs Delfin ("Dolphin") and Elbrus. However, neither of them could handle the huge conglomeration of rebel ragtag militias (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2017). According to Bellingcat, the Kremlin sought to consolidate the disparate rebel formations already in June 2014 and had streamlined the flow of weapons across the border. Bellingcat claims that while previously both GU and FSB had run their own proxy military groups in the Donbas and had supplied them with weapons independently — sometimes leading to infighting between the two groups — by early July 2014, this process had been centralized under the FSB's control (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2020b).

5. 4. 3) Confused Objectives of the Principal

The effectivity of the delegation chains was affected by the confusion in principal's objectives. In the onset of the rebellion, the principal arguably orchestrated a fragmented secessionist movement as leverage to force Ukraine into accepting federalization, which was rightfully seen by incumbent as a stalking horse for the political partitioning of Ukraine in an attempt to divide and destroy Ukrainian statehood (Kofman et al. 2017). However, the political purpose of the "people's republic" with small public support was unclear. The rebels wanted to follow Crimea out of Ukraine and into Russia, but Moscow wanted them to remain part of Ukraine so that they could influence Ukrainian politics into the future (Allison 2014).

There was an evident tension between carving out a chunk of Ukraine that would be effectively controlled by Russia on the one hand and gaining influence over Ukrainian decisions to prevent moves inimical to Russian interests on the other. Kremlin had backed secessionist agitators and rebel militias in the hope that they would have a major political effect, without being sure what that effect should be. It was not even able to ensure that its agents would act in such a way as to maximize their effectiveness (Freedman 2019, 96-97).

As the chronology indicates, Russia had ample military opportunity to invade Ukraine, defeat its forces, and conquer any eastern region if it chose so. However, the principal decided not to invade Ukraine in the moment when the Ukrainian state was weakest and thought it may do the job with a low-cost use of nationalist volunteers and local disparate rebel militias using the political cause of creating Novorossiya (Kofman et al. 2017).

Notes on Novorossiya implied that Russia intended to dismember Ukraine in pursuit of a larger irredentist cause. Historical overtone of the term Novorossiya helped Moscow appeal to imperialist nationalists, rekindling memories of when large swaths of Ukraine belonged to Russia (Kofman et al. 2017). However, the principal pretty soon abandoned the idea of creating Novorossiya, but large number of the rebels fought precisely for that, and refused any compromises and peace accords, such as Minsk Accords. Many rebel commanders aspired to create a renewed Novorossiya that incorporated all of eastern and southern Ukraine from Kharkiv to Odesa oblasts (O'Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2017).

It was Girkin in Donetsk oblast and Mozgovoi in Luhansk oblast, who had nurtured early hopes of creating a unified, professionalized army for Novorossiya, but this foundered on Moscow's half-hearted commitment to the idea of an independent Novorossiya. After all, the Kremlin's goal had never been to occupy Donbas itself, but simply to use it as a lever against Kyiv; consequently, at the beginning of the delegation, it was interested neither in outright annexation nor in supporting the creation of an independent state. Instead, in Mark Galeotti's opinion, its goal has been the reincorporation of a Moscow-dominated Donbas into Ukraine on its own terms, giving it the power to veto any moves by Kyiv that it dislikes (Galeotti 2019a, 20).

5. 4. 5) Incompetence, Unprofessionalism and Other Problems with the Quality of the Delegation Chains

People in Kremlin may have expected that an unrealistic level of popular resistance to the post-Maidan Kyiv government would follow later in spring 2014 in eastern and southern Ukrainian cities. This could reflect wishful thinking by Putin and those he consulted, once they had been drawn towards an agenda of Soviet and imperial revisionism, previously confined to a fringe of Russian nationalist politics (Allison 2014, 1288). Intelligence agencies in general, and FSB in particular, instigated such unrealistic expectations as the intelligence agencies in Russia agencies are often poorly tasked and poorly managed, set unrealistic objectives, granted extensive latitude for corruption and encouraged to compete (Galeotti 2019c, 88-89).

As Russian journalist Roman Anin wrote, the level of competence and professionalism of FSB's Fifth Service, dealing with Ukraine, is spectacularly low. Anin and his sources, former FSB officials, said that people working in this department were making things up, misinterpreting, and sometimes fantasizing, while superiors were happy to believe it. Ukraine was not considered a priority by the FSB for many years. Russian authorities always looked at Ukraine as a Moscow's province, and a few people in the FSB made much effort to understand what was really going on there. All bets were placed on Yanukovych, and no one paid attention to the fact that by 2013 he was extremely unpopular (Anin 2022). Anin's source noted that:

> "The level of professionalism there [in the Fifth Service] has been close to zero. People who didn't know how to work were dumped there. We encountered cases where we brought to Beseda information on one of the CIS countries, and the responsible officers did not recognize the names of the main officials of this country, did not understand who these people were. They had to explain it to them" (Anin 2022).

The FSB appears politically oriented and unused to external constraints (and hence especially corrupt) which, of course, reflects in the delegation chains. Mark Galeotti notes that secret services tell the president what they think he wants to hear rather than what he needs to know:

> "The result can be disastrously poor decision-making, based on the rational assessment of unreliable information. The Donbas intervention in 2014 [not speaking of the invasion in 2022 – auth.] seems to reflect guidance that Kyiv would quickly realize that it could not escape Moscow's orbit and capitulate. One Western diplomat suggested to me that Putin's apparent belief in some more outré conspiracy theories – such as that the Ukrainian Maidan revolution was a CIA plot – probably stem from FSB briefings, 'which

> seem as much culled from the press and the lunatic think-tanks as from actual intelligence'." (Galeotti 2019c, 89).

Given the dominance of individuals with background from the security services at the strategic level of decision-making, a significant danger of group-think emerged during the planning and realization of the delegation. Group-think means that decision-making suffers from among other things close-mindedness and stereotyped views of enemies, and that this is a result of the individuals involved being too similar in background and not often enough in contact with alternative groups (Bukkvoll 2016).

Last but not least problem related to the delegation is the pervasive corruption in Putin's Russia and its institutions, especially intelligence agencies such as FSB (Galeotti 2019c). Arguably, the longer the delegation chains are, the more opportunities for corruption emerge, which diminishes the impact of the financial and other assistance to the rebels. Only a small part of supplies and money sent from Moscow has arguably reached the final destination in Eastern Ukraine. A huge amount of funds was embezzled by the Russian officials even before they departed from Moscow, while the rest was embezzled by people around the DNR and LNR heads.

6.) Solving the Problem of the Fragmentation - Direct Military Invasion and Forced Merger of the Rebel Militias

The overall discipline, morale, and commitment of the fragmented rebels were low, especially when the Ukrainian forces started their military advance in summer 2014. Many locals participated in the rebellion merely as part-timers to improve their grim financial situation (Kudelia 2019). Only a small number of locals who joined the rebellion were willing to engage in real fights, partly because only a small fraction of the locals had actual military experience.

The rebels admitted that in the first few months, more battlefields like Sloviansk could emerge, but this did not happen because most rebel militias did nothing for increasing the fighting capabilities of the fragmented forces until July-August 2014. While the fighting persisted in Sloviansk, anarchy took hold in the territories of the "people's republics." Some commanders formed criminal gangs unwilling to fight the Ukrainian state. Under these conditions, few thought of helping Sloviansk (Zhuchkovskiy 2018*,* 103,132).

The rebel weakness laid not only in limitations of military supplies from initially hesitant principal but also in insufficient number of recruits who were ready to confront an adversary due to rebels' weak social ties in local communities. Many pro-Russian idealists were disillusioned and disappointed by the rebels' behavior. Some locals who initially supported Russia sided with Ukraine for this reason. Many others perceived rebels as "criminals" and "gangsters" attempting to seize power and money (Aliyev 2019, 1221-1222).

To pro-Ukrainian activist from Mariupol, the face of the rebellion was a drunk, toothless woman dressed in three expensive fur coats (Interview 21). Declining local public support and a popular preference for returning to the status quo ante due to lawlessness and criminality, caused by low barriers-to-entry, was a serious issue for the principal and rebel proxies (Malyarenko and Wolf 2018).

The fragmented nature of rebel structures contrasted with an increasingly cohesive Ukrainian government's efforts. Rebel fighting capacities had risen very slowly, and arguably only due to increasing military supplies from Russia, while the incumbent government quickly improved tactics and strategy. Ukraine gradually consolidated its forces and pushed into the rebel territory. The rebels began to lose ground as Ukrainian military command regained control and competence (Bowen 2019). That led to serious drawbacks and defeats in June and July 2014, resulting in the near-total encirclement of Donetsk and Luhansk and the loss of many strategically important cities Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, Kostyantynivka, Rubizhne, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk. At a July 20 briefing, Valeriy Bolotov said that

> "There are separate disparate militias that are trying to dominate and bend some areas under themselves. We are actively fighting this now: it is impossible to fight one enemy and have an enemy in your backyard" (Koshik 2014).

Due to the lack of coordination, the rank-and-file rebel fighters periodically found themselves in conflict situations. Infightings occurred regularly (Koshik 2014). Another problem lied in seemingly insufficient support from the principal. The members of rebel militias, both locals and Russian citizens, did not hide their disappointment at what they interpreted as the Kremlin's lack of support. All had been hoping for a quick and easy annexation/reintegration into Russia on the model pioneered by Crimea, but this never materialized. Although discouraged, many rebel commanders have nevertheless remained loyal to the principal and have hesitated to move into open opposition to the Kremlin, even if the Russian authorities' approval of organized grassroots support for the conflict ceased as early as 2015 (Laruelle 2019a, 722).

6. 1) Imminent Military Defeat of the Fragmented Rebel Proxies in Donbas

In April and May 2014, the fights with the use of light weapons were rare, the casualties few, and hostilities mostly confined to the informational sphere. Significantly, at this early stage the initiative lied primarily with the rebels who carried out a series of successful surprise attacks against Ukrainian checkpoints and military convoys, and effectively managed to secure the quasi referendum in the territories outside government control on May 11. No less importantly, by early June, the rebels wrested control of multiple border-crossing points, ensuring the uninterrupted access of fighters, weapons, and supplies from the Russian territory in the weeks ahead (Melnyk 2022, 128).

The military strategy of the Ukrainian government during this period amounted to little more than efforts to isolate rebel strongholds from the rest of the country and to prevent takeover of strategic infrastructure, such as airports and armament depots. The initial passivity of the Ukrainian forces began to change after the presidential elections in late May 2014 and the completion of the third wave of military mobilization. The offensive operations of the Ukrainian armed forces involved the use of heavy weapons, although the army rarely attempted to storm rebel strongholds head-on. The goal was rather to destroy weaker checkpoints on the roads and isolate stronger garrisons from the border and from each other, and to force the rebels either to retreat from populated areas or to cease resistance altogether due to the supplies and ammunition running out. This strategy bore some results. Although the rebel casualties from April until the end of July probably did not exceed a few hundred, the rapid advance by Ukrainian forces was exacting a toll on the morale of many rebel militias (Melnyk 2022, 129-130).

Rebel militias in both oblasts were poorly trained, organized, and motivated (Freedman 2019, 122). Anarchic Cossacks were the most undisciplined. Their involvement in fights had been a disaster and met harsh criticism from Igor Girkin in particular. Due to the reported Cossack desertion, Ukrainian forces liberated the town of Krasny Liman at the beginning of June 2014. This marked the start of the siege of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Later, Kozitsyn's Cossacks reportedly deserted important frontline sector between Sloviansk and Lysychansk. Girkin bitterly remarked that in his post from June 6:

> "Almost all the "glorious Cossacks" (both local and Russian) fled from the Krasnyi Liman section [of the frontline] the day before yesterday. At night I ordered Yerema, the commandant of the Krasnyi Liman, to return to his position. "Cossack General" (who ran from Liman as far as to Antratsit - to another hero – "Cossack General" Kozitsyn) did not carry out my order. Instead, he sent ten people who refused to dig trenches and said they had come only to "escort refugees to Antratsit". What the fuck do we need them […]? To create a panic? Commander of our unit sent them straight back to the rear - there is not a shred of hope for them, they can only incite panic... We can hold our own positions without them. […]. Why the hell did hundreds of "Don and Kuban heroes" come here at all? What do they protect in Antratsit? Who are they fighting with? With the local chicken population and cisterns full of vodka? Nothing has changed in more than 20 years in our "revived Cossack movement." The masquerading scumbags [*ryazhenye podonki*] and looters have ruled there, and they still do." (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 235).

Above-mentioned military commandant of Krasny Liman in May-June 2014 was Sergei Grashchenko ("Yerema"), active in Donetsk oblast as a "Lieutenant General" of Kozitsyn's Don Cossack Host since 2007. However, the desertion in such important section of the frontline did not prevent him to become a DNR deputy in November 2014. Girkin met Grashchenko in person later on 24 July in Donetsk, where he expressed his desire to shoot "Yerema" for repeatedly abandoning his positions at the battlefields. The order to shoot Cossack chieftain was given, but not executed (Nou pasaram! 2019). During the first week of July 2014, Ukrainian forces scored decisive victories. “My explicit orders were not to give up Slavyansk,” Girkin said:

> “When I said I was planning to withdraw, I was repeatedly ordered to defend the city to the last. ‘Keep defending Slavyansk. You’ll be relieved,’ I was told. ‘How will you help?’ I asked. Silence. By then I had a thousand people and thousands of their family members. I had no right to place the burden on them. So, I took the decision to break through” (Zygar 2016).

On July 5, 2014, when Slavyansk was nearly surrounded by Ukrainian forces, Girkin and his people broke the encirclement and headed for Donetsk. That was the beginning of the next phase of the war (Zygar 2016). On the same day the towns of Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, Kostyantynivka, and Artemivsk (now Bakhmut) returned to government control. Column of rebel troops was allowed to retreat into the oblast center. Rebels fortified the defenses in Donetsk, expecting Ukrainian forces to eventually besiege it or attempt a storm. Along the southeastern border of Donetsk oblast, Ukrainian troops advanced quickly until on July 11, near the town of Zelenopillya (five kilometers from the Russian border), they were covered by rocket and artillery fire originating from the principal’s territory (Wynnyckyj 2019, 169-173).

The principal saw that its clients were at risk. It intensified the supplies and began to move more advanced equipment to the rebels, including anti-aircraft weapons as well as Grad rockets. Surface-to-air missiles made the skies more dangerous for Ukrainian military aircraft, and a number were taken down. Deployment of airpower by Ukraine became risky. During subsequent weeks, shelling by Grad and Tornado rocket systems across the border became systematic (Freedman 2019, 112). From June until the end of August, Russia trickled in mechanized equipment, armor, and advanced munitions to the militias, as well as medium air defenses operated by its own units (Kofman et al. 2017).

On 17 July 2014, the principal’s gradual escalation of the conflict in the Donbas hit a climax. On this day Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 was shot down by Buk-M2 surface-to-air missile causing the death of 281 passengers and crew. The system itself originated from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade based in Kursk in Russia. Because Moscow could not admit that either its own forces or its proxies could be responsible for such a crime, it put forward a series of fanciful and contradictory alternative theories, from a shoot down by a Ukrainian fighter aircraft to a Ukrainian Buk to a bomb on board, none of which survived scrutiny. Western sanctions, first introduced after the annexation of Crimea, were intensified (Freedman

2019, 112; Wynnyckyj 2019).

On the day MH-17 was shot down, the rebel-controlled territory shrunk to a fraction of its size just a month earlier. By mid-August 2014, looking at the map one could not be faulted for believing the conflict was on the verge of completion. Luhansk was completely surrounded by Ukrainian forces, and its outskirts had been entered by volunteer battalion fighters; Donetsk was not yet surrounded, but its main supply line to Russia has been cut; a thin strip of territory stretching eastwards from Torez though Krasny Luch, Antratsyt and Krasnodon to the Russian border had not yet been retaken by government forces, but this territory included no large cities, and so clearing it of rebel proxies was deemed a matter of weeks (Wynnyckyj 2019, 169-173).

Rebel sources confirm that increasing asymmetry of fighting capabilities of both sides was caused first of all by the incessant fragmentation of the rebel groups. Andrei Pinchuk, minister of state security in DNR, said that due to the lack of united rebel forces:

> “The control over the rebels was reduced to handwritten notes by Girkin and the non-functional Commanders’ Councils against the backdrop of a gradual increase in the combat readiness of Ukrainian forces. Initially, Ukrainian forces often shied away from direct combat […] After the abandonment of Slavyansk, the situation began to change. The enemy believed that it could win […] which dramatically increased his activity, relative cohesion, aggressiveness, and readiness to confront us” (Pinchuk 2018, 56-57).

According to Matveeva’s rebel respondents, the rebels were in such grave situation through their own fault because of bad organization. Military conscript points in each town were answerable to their own rebel commanders and did not send individuals with appropriate military experience to where they were needed. Preparation and intelligence collection were non-existent (Matveeva 2018, 161-162).

In late July 2014, the Ukrainian security forces published a recording of an intercepted phone conversation between Borodai, and rebels’ sponsor Konstantin Malofeyev. “If nothing changes in military terms, we won’t last two weeks,” said Borodai, underpinning troubles of the DNR (Zygar 2016). The situation became critical in August. It was clear that the Ukrainian army was on the cusp of strangling the rebels, cutting them off from the Russian border. If that happened, Moscow would lose its levers of influence over Ukraine (Zygar 2016).

Kyiv proclaimed that a military victory was days away. The government forces seized settlements on the strategic communication lines cutting off different groups of rebels from each other. That further undermined their ability to move around and send reinforcements where they were most needed. By August 10 the Ukrainians blocked the approaches to Donetsk–Makiivka–Horlivka agglomeration. The LNR was in an extremely bad shape by then. The government troops were completing their maneuver to isolate and block Alchevsk defended by Mozgovoi's Ghost and liberated the villages nearby. Rebels still fought for Luhansk and Stanytsia Luhanska under an artillery fire (Matveeva 2018, 161-162).

Girkin issued an order to withdraw from Donetsk, but Vladimir Antyufeyev, then "deputy prime minister for state security affairs" dismissed the order, and the local commanders—Zakharchenko, Khodakovskiy, and Alexei Dikiy, a former Donetsk chief of the anti-mafia police—refused to give up the city. Girkin resigned as the DNR "minister of defense" on August 14 ((Matveeva 2018, 161-162). The situation became critical for rebel militias, as Ukraine edged closer to regaining control of the border and encircling them completely. A wedge was being driven between Donetsk and Luhansk, threatening to separate two breakaway territories (Kofman et al. 2017). The prospect was that they would be first be pushed out of Donetsk and then Luhansk (Freedman 2019, 112).

6. 1. 1) Direct Military Attacks of the Principal

The principal decided to get a grip on the situation. It made a number of moves. One, was to give the rebel leadership more authenticity by replacing the Russian citizens. One notable departure was Girkin — "too much of a loose cannon for the shadowy Moscow operatives running the war in Eastern Ukraine" (Freedman 2019, 113). Surkov probably decided for indigenization of the conflict to present it as a civil war and give rebel leaders more domestic legitimacy. This reshuffle completed the indigenization process, though only superficial, of the DNR (Hosaka 2019, 758; De Waall 2018). Putin decided to deploy military personnel—in secret, just as he had in Crimea, to provide higher-order firepower and more disciplined forces (Zygar 2016; Galeotti 2019a, 17).

It was looking much more like a conventional (even if undeclared) war, in which both sides fielded mixes of regular forces and militias in sporadic but brutal conflict (Galeotti 2019a, 17). A full-scale war between the two countries appeared much closer (Freedman 2019, 114). Russian military commanders moved to assist their rebel proxies. Ground forces of the Russian army were ordered to cross into Ukrainian territory, and the successes of Ukraine's primarily volunteer forces were quickly reversed (Wynnyckyj 2019, 169-173; Stent 2019, 201). The rebellion would have had almost no chance of success if the principal had not intervened directly in the summer of 2014 (De Waal 2018).

The exact circumstances and scale of the insertion of Russian Army ground forces into the Donbas conflict remains unclear, but the sequence seems to have occurred as follows: on 23 August Special Forces troops dressed in uniforms without markings set up a checkpoint near Amvrosiivka, ten kilometers from the Russian border inside Ukraine; on 24 August a column of Russian vehicles crossed the border into Novoazovsk and took control of the main road leading to Mariupol; on the same day a column Russian tanks and self-propelled artillery vehicles crossed the southeastern Ukrainian border, and moved north towards Donetsk. A mixed column of vehicles, was spotted on August 26, followed the next day by another two columns entering Ukrainian territory from Russia (Wynnyckyj 2019, 173).

The Russian contribution was not only in troops, but crucial for designing the military strategy. The General Chief of Staff's hand was evident in collecting and processing intelligence and strategic and operational planning. The rebel commanders did not have the skills of that level of coordination across a large theatre and appropriate timing, so that their simultaneous attacks from different directions made an overall strategic sense (Matveeva 2018, 164). Luhansk airport, which had been used as a base for Ukrainian forces shelling rebel positions, was destroyed. Russians seized the border town of Novoazovsk and threatened the port of Mariupol (Freedman 2019, 115).

The battle of Ilovaisk was the heaviest defeat inflicted on the Ukrainian army, when an attempt to encircle the rebels failed and up to a thousand people perished as a result. The Russian side also suffered its first losses. Fresh graves with the bodies of paratroopers killed in Eastern Ukraine were suddenly appearing at a cemetery in the Pskov oblast, back in Russia. It was already impossible to hide the Russian army's involvement, yet Putin continued to deny the obvious. The families of the killed were reportedly paid compensation on condition that they not talk to journalists (Zygar 2016).

Despite the growing ascendancy of Russian military and its proxies, on September 5 an agreement on a cease-fire was reached at Minsk, signed by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE, as well as the leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Freedman 2019, 115). Soon the focus was on Donetsk airport, which had come to symbolize Ukrainian resistance to Russian pressure. It had first been captured by the rebels and then recaptured by Ukrainian forces. This was seen at the time as a demoralizing blow to the rebels. Thereafter efforts to regain the airport had been regularly rebuffed by Ukrainian defenders, although at the price of wrecked buildings. This rebels' failure left many casualties and undermined claims to be controlling the region (Freedman 2019, 122).

In addition, the rebels and Russian forces launched an offensive against the town of Debaltseve, which had been retaken by Ukrainian forces in July 2014 and was important in maintaining communications between Luhansk and Donetsk. The battle for Debaltseve was extremely ferocious It was at the heart of a pocket of government-held territory wedged between the two rebel-controlled regions, the large Ukrainian garrison was cut off and denied supplies (Freedman 2019, 122). Ukrainian forces were eventually forced to withdraw under heavy fire, leaving behind a shattered city – and also a lesson to the world as to the scale of direct Russian involvement, and the degree to which this could tip the balance (Galeotti 2019a, 34). At two critical moments, in August 2014 in Ilovaysk and January 2015 in Debaltseve, Russian military units appear to have changed the course of events. On both occasions, a military defeat led the Ukrainian side to sign agreements in Minsk for a ceasefire and a special status agreement for the Donbas (De Waal 2018).

The principal maintained Armed Forces and FSB Border Guards along and close to the Ukrainian border. The numbers vary, but they peaked during military exercises at around 75,000. Thus, of a total Ground Forces field strength of 350,000, the principal kept almost a quarter directly engaged in the Donbas or within easy deployment range. This is not without significant cost. To generate the estimated 42,000 personnel rotated through or near the Donbas in 2014 meant drawing on some 117 combat and combat-support units. Battalion Tactical Groups are required to enable Russia to field substantial operational forces in the Donbas itself, and this has meant pulling in troops from all over the country, including marines from the Far North, mechanized infantry from the Far East, and elite troops from every single *Spetsnaz* and paratroop formation (Galeotti 2019a, 35).

When the possibility of a Ukrainian military victory over the rebels had become a real scenario by mid-August, the principal could have stopped and said to itself that ‘we tried, but it did not work the way it had done in Crimea’. However, by then considerable resources had already been invested, and Kremlin political appetites had probably also grown. These appetites were not for joining more territory to Russia, but for creating a lever on the Ukrainian leadership. Thus, backing out was not attractive. In Tor Bukkvoll’s opinion, the decision to use force in Donbas may have been more of the ‘mission creep’ type. A mixture of trial and error led to a situation where the principal suddenly, under great time pressure, had to decide on whether to give it all up or escalate (Bukkvoll 2016).

Moscow’s pretense that it was not directly engaged in fighting in Ukraine caused a problem. The charade was exposed regularly, yet the Russian authorities stuck to the same line. Arguably as the claim of non-involvement never had credibility, there was not much extra credibility to be lost with an even more substantial intervention, but an offensive that went well beyond anything the rebels could manage by themselves would make it impossible to maintain the fiction of non-involvement. This is what had happened in August 2014. Deaths were covered up and troops disavowed if captured in Ukraine. Documenting losses was the most newsworthy aspect of the report completed after the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in February 2015. This referred to the deaths of 220 Russian soldiers, while suggesting that the actual number was higher. This issue became so sensitive that disclosure of combat deaths as a result of "special operations" in peacetime was prohibited (Freedman 2019, 126-127).

6. 2) Forced Merger of the Fragmented Rebel Militias

Beginning in October 2014, the structures of the DNR and LNR's armed forces – 1st and 2nd Army Corps, called also People's Militia in LNR – were formed around the heads of the DNR and LNR – i.e. Zakharchenko and his *Oplot* and Plotnitskiy's *Zarya*. They began to impose control on independent rebel militias and centralize the structure of the fragmented rebel movement. The information available to Viacheslav Likhachev suggests that this centralization was directed by Russian military and secret service officers through the delegation chains (Likhachev 2016; Galeotti 2019a, 28).

In Matveeva's opinion, local rebel commanders have only themselves to blame for a lost opportunity to claim more ground because they were unable to establish a common platform and form a united military structure. When Mozgovoi attempted to call a Military Council in 2014 and tried to set up a single "Novorossiya Army," the other commanders largely ignored it. The situation of various militias fighting their own wars reminiscent of the White armies during the Russian Civil War who, unlike Trotsky, could not establish a single command-and-control system, created a power vacuum (Matveeva 2018, 180).

Understanding that the external patronage of the fragmented rebel proxies was an unsustainable solution for reaching its political goals in Ukraine, the principal started to act. Except for direct military inroads, the principal started to focus on the centralization of the rebel movement with the assistance of the heads of DNR and LNR. The steps taken by the principal imply that it decided to merge the rebel commanders into the single military-political command, which would formally be confined to Aleksandr Zakharchenko in DNR and Igor Plotnitskiy in LNR but coordinated by the Russian curators (Depo.Donbass 2015).

Donbas curators from Russia promoted pliant figures into politics and took out nonconformists. Rebel commanders had to integrate into the system not on their own terms and the rules of the game were determined elsewhere. Those who were prepared to accept, survived and gained appointments in the best case. War was a superfast social lift that skyrocketed rebel commanders to the prime positions. The principal supported selected rebel militias, their leaders Zakharchenko (*Oplot*) and Plotnitskiy (*Zarya*) and set out on building their capacities for them to evolve into political figures (Matveeva 2018, 180).

Autonomous rebel militias were refashioned as separate subunits of the DNR and LNR Armed Corps, gradually lost their autonomy and were merged into the "regular" rebel armed forces (Likhachev 2016). The principal helped so-called DNR and LNR heads to get rid of the competition of the other autonomous commanders in exchange for their loyalty. It was a win-win situation: Zakharchenko and Plotnitskiy got more power, became the primary actors administering whole rebel territories and had access to the spoils and Russian funds. That process was also aimed to solve the delegation problems and reduce the principal's costs via increasing coherence of the rebel groups and abolishing their autonomy.

In DNR, defense minister Vladimir Kononov ("Tsar"), who succeeded Girkin, tried to turn the ragtag collection of militias and private armies into a coherent fighting force. Some militias were folded into others or disbanded outright; their fighters being reassigned. Others were simply given new titles and places within the order of battle. A few, such as Girkin's Slovyansk Brigade, survived almost untouched (Galeotti 2019a, 26). Some rebel commanders were smart enough to join DNR/ LNR and merge their rebel groups before it was too late.

For instance, Aleksei Pavlov ("Leshiy") in Luhansk did not miss the opportunity to condemn and criticize Plotnitskiy's activities, who became the LNR head in August 2014. Many believed that Pavlov would eliminate Plotnitskiy and establish his own military dictatorship on the territory controlled by the LNR. However, the Russian special services and Surkov's people came into play. As a result, Pavlov swore loyalty to Plotnitskiy and refrained from participating in the local political life (Depo Donbas, 2015). In November 2014, Pavlov and his group were fully merged into Plotnitskiy's People's Militia as 16th Battalion "Leshiy" (Depo Donbas, 2015).

6. 2. 1) Killings

The principal delegated the governance over the rebel territories to the pragmatic local puppets, so-called heads of people's republics Zakharchenko and Plotnitskiy. The first thing the principal and his agents had to do was to settle the scores with autonomous rebel commanders. One of the three options had been available: killing, imprisonment, or expelling them out of DNR/LNR territory. The life of the rebel commander turned out to be hazardous, especially when being in opposition either to principal or his preferred proxies. The wave of rebel commanders' killings, blamed on invisible "Ukrainian diversion groups", occurred in 2015. The most notorious rebel commanders, such as Aleksandr Bednov ("Batman"), Alexei Mozgovoi, Pavel Dremov ("Batya"), Evgeniy Ivchenko ("Malysh"), and many others, had been killed during that time (Galeotti 2019a, 24).

It was often accompanied by the information campaign against the commanders and their militias. As they were regularly involved in criminal activities, it was not hard to get compromising materials that DNR/LNR leaders published to justify the imprisonments or killings. For instance, the "state" TV channel Lugansk 24 launched a series of stories about Aleksandr Bednov and his crimes. Confessions of arrested rebels from his militia who tortured detainees in the captivity, chilling testimonies of surviving prisoners, the story of a rebel fighter whose father was tortured to death, and statements by the LNR investigators and general prosecutor were part of this campaign (Kikhtenko 2016a).

Bednov also suffered the consequences for his attempts to engage in political life in Luhansk. In early October 2014, he organized the movement Liberation Front (*Front osvobozhdeniya*). However, he was not allowed to participate in the so-called elections on November 2. Rebel authorities did not want to register his political initiative and when Bednov came with his people to the administration building, the guards opened fire and shot one the Bednov's bodyguards in the leg (Kikhtenko 2016a). After that incident, Batman gave up his political ambitions and surrendered his rebel group to the LNR People's Militia, taking the position of chief of staff of the 4th Brigade. That, however, did not save him anyway (Guselnikov 2015a).

While other autonomous commanders, such as Mozgovoi or Dremov, criticized the LNR's leadership and demanded Plotnitskiy's resignation, Bednov took a moderate position, calling all opponents to dialogue, including LNR leaders and Cossacks. However, according to unconfirmed information, Bednov offered Dremov a joint revolt against Plotnitskiy in December 2014. Bednov was killed on 1st of January 2015 close to Lutuhyno, probably by notorious Wagner group. The GBR fighters accused Plotnitskiy of organizing the killing of their commander. After Bednov's death, his unit within People's Militia was disbanded, and his closest associates arrested (Kikhtenko 2016a).

When Pavel Dremov's last ally, Aleksei Mozgovoi, swore loyalty to the People's Militia of the LNR in April 2015, he had no other choice left but to do the same, although it did not save neither of them. Dremov implied his consent to join LNR People's Militia in 2015 when Plotnitskiy declared his intention to include Cossacks into the LNR rebel army as a separate regiment with the headquarters in Stakhanov, but in the end, Mozgovoi was killed in May 2015 and Dremov in his car on the road from Pervomaisk to Stakhanov in December 2015 after the celebration of his wedding (Kikhtenko 2016b).

6. 2. 2) Expelling

Girkin, harshly criticizing new DNR leaders around Aleksandr Zakharchenko, was blacklisted from crossing the border from the Russian side since his leave in August 2014 and, in early 2015, Malofeyev was discouraged from providing further sponsorship to him. Still, Girkin did not fall victim to an assassination (Matveeva 2018, 217). Non-conformist commanders were pushed out. Igor Bezler was lured to Moscow, prevented from returning and subsequently relocated to Crimea. He had good sense not to resist when purges of rebel commanders began. Bezler was not a figure of any political significance—unlike Girkin, whose popularity in Donbas and Russia was growing exponentially. On October 28, 2014, Bezler's assistant Elena Romanova announced his resignation as a field commander, which came as a surprise to many. She said that:

> "Our Nikolayevich called me on October 28 in the evening and said over the phone: 'Alena! By tomorrow, at 9 a.m., the group with my name on it needs to be closed! I will never return to Gorlovka and the DNR again. So, inform the group.'"

After that, Bezler packed his things and moved to Crimea. Reportedly, his "resignation" was connected with the struggle of interest groups in Moscow between different delegation chains. Bezler was allegedly GU asset and at the same time, the GU representatives were allegedly in conflict with both the FSB curators and the Surkov group, whose interests were represented by Borodai and Zakharchenko. Besides, Bezler publicly criticized Zakharchenko's activities, calling him a "stupid clown" or "*degeneral*," and questioned his military talents (Gordon.ua 2017; Hromadske 2016; Vchasno 2018).

In 2015, Zakharchenko, preferred by the principal as the DNR head, had only a few competitors within the DNR. One of them was Aleksandr Khodakovskiy, *Vostok* commander, presumably under the protection of FSB. Khodakovskiy's men controlled the western "border" of the DNR, having a stake in smuggling food and medicines between Ukraine and rebel-held territories or protection of the industrial infrastructure owned by Rynat Akhmetov. The growing influence of the *Vostok* led to fierce competition between Zakharchenko and Khodakovskiy in 2015. In October 2015, the military curators demanded the inclusion of *Vostok* fighters into the 1st Army Corps of the DNR.

The *Vostok* Brigade, nominally part of the DNR Republican Guard (*Respublikanskaya gvardiya*), was disbanded and disarmed, and the fighters were discharged or divided between the DNR Interior Ministry and 1st Army Corps. *Vostok* members stated that the disarmament was organized by "Russian special services and agents in the command of the 1st Army Corps, who work for the FSB (Nykonorov 2016a). Khodakovskiy was ousted from share on power, but he was the only prominent commander who opposed to DNR authorities, stayed in Donetsk, and survived, presumably due to the protection in Moscow.

Cossack chieftains were expelled to Russia. Nikolai Kozitsyn among the first ones as he left in November 2014 and lost nominal control over ruthless Cossack gangs in large part of occupied Luhansk oblast. Kozitsyn was followed in spring-summer by Aleksandr Gaidei ("Rim") from Sverdlovsk, and Aleksandr Konkin ("Foton") from Rovenky. Minor commanders were also forced to leave for Russia. Maksim Tkhorzhevskiy ("Olkhon") survived an assassination attempt in December 2015, reportedly by Zakharchenko's people. After that incident, he returned to Russia, where he supports Girkin and criticize rebel administration in Donetsk (Nykonorov 2017). Nationalist and neo-Nazi volunteers from Russia, who were part of Bednov's GBR Batman and/or Mozgovoi's Ghost, such as Rusich, Varyagi, Imperial Legion, and some neo-pagan militias, left people's republics in 2015.

Avidzba and Bagatelia, commanders of International Brigade *Pyatnashka* left Donbas in 2015 or 2016 and were replaced by Oleg Mamiev ("Mamai") from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, member of the Stalinist nationalist movement "Essence of Time" ("*Sut' vremeni*"). In Donetsk, Mamiev first joined the *Vostok* battalion, and then Pyatnashka. He was killed in May 2018 near Avdiivka, during a mortar shelling by the Ukrainian Army. Pyatnashka was integrated into the Special Purpose Regiment staffed with men loyal to Zakharchenko. It acted as a type of praetorian guard and consisted of four battalions: "Chechen," "Patriot," "International Brigade Pyatnashka" and the 4th Reconnaissance Battalion (Sheldon 2020; Krutov 2021; Shariya 2021).

6. 2. 3) Imprisonment

Many rebel commanders were jailed and tortured in prisons where they shared cells with top DNR and LNR officials purged by Zakharchenko and Plotnitskiy (Inform Napalm 2017). The leader of the Odessa rebel militia Aleksei Fominov ("Foma") was arrested and jailed for more than six months. He was set free reportedly due to the protection of the FSB and on the condition that he will go to Russia and never come back to LNR again. Other members of this militia did not end up any better. Alexei Gerikh ("Medved"), Odessa's chief of staff, was kidnapped in Krasnodon in 2015. Alexander Kapral, responsible for humanitarian aid, was asked to return from Russia on urgent business after he had "quit" the war. Kapral was arrested immediately after his arrival in Luhansk (Realnaya gazeta 2017; Polynkov 2018). Odessa was disarmed, and some members killed by Wagner para-state group (TSN 2019c).

The tragic fate awaited Aleksandr Kostin, the rebel leader of August ("*Avgust*"), a splinter militia of the Mozgovoi's *Prizrak*. According to his own statement, Kostin went to Russia for medical treatment in 2015. In August 2018, he returned to the LNR, worked as the head of the security service of the Antratsyt automobile depot (Yadocent 2020). Shortly after his return back to LNR, he was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison for "serious crimes, including murder and serious bodily injury, large-scale robbery and theft of vehicles" (UNIAN 2020).

Kostin was reportedly part of a group led by Mozgovoi, who riddled with bullets a car carrying the family of businessman Oleg Burykhin, director of the coal mine in Antratsyt in May 2014 and looted property belonging to the victims of this attack. The father of the family and his wife were killed, and their daughter seriously wounded (Yadocent 2020; Ostrov 2020). Kostin was found dead in his cell in May 2020 (UNIAN 2020).

Another story looks particularly confused. It concerns Troya rebel militia and their commander(s): this militia was disarmed by another rebel militia during a siege at the end of 2015 and beginning of 2016. Troya fighters were taken to jail belonging to MGB DNR. They were released after two months, and only one Vladimir Novikov ("Belyi") stayed in jail, while the second one, Vladimir Novikov ("Alabai"), fled to Moscow (Gorlovka.ua 2016; Dergachev 2016).

Oleg Orchikov ("Vargan"), a practicing pagan and commander of the rebel subgroup (as a part of *Oplot*) Svarozhichi in Donetsk, was arrested by DNR authorities in November 2014 on charges of rapes, car theft and robbery. "Vargan" says that he was subjected to brutal torture at the MGB. His relatives collected signatures in his support, including an open letter to Putin. However, none of this helped and Orchikov was sentenced to life in 2017 (Kanygin 2016).

The Donetsk-based Cossack militia KSOVD under command of Yuriy Safonenko was disarmed in 2015, allegedly by the Russian secret services, and many members, including the commanders, joined the Wagner group and dispatched to Syria. Some of them returned to Donetsk to be arrested and sentenced to many years in prison for crimes they committed in 2014-2015 (24 kanal 2019; Ronin_077 2018).

Rebel militia "Rus", led by Viktor Veremeyenko, was disarmed by LNR and merged with People's Militia jointly with another Krasnodon-based rebel militia *Vityaz (*Patria-o-muerte 2015). Rebel militia USSR-Brianka, led by Dmitriy Pindiurin and his deputy Mikhail Sotnikov ("Krym"), were arrested by LNR authorities for extreme violence against civilians and fellow rebels. Members of this militia, including another deputy commander Sergei Nemilostivyi ("Senya", "Vostok") from Volgograd, committed countless atrocities: abused civilians, captured rebels from other groups for ransom, killed own members for money. One rebel fighter survived by a miracle after they shot him in the head, another, after receiving four bullets, managed to get out of the grave in which they had buried him (Guselnikov 2015b).

Another Pindiurin's deputy commander fled to Russia because he was afraid for his life and spoke out about the terror of this militia. Local residents later unearthed a mass grave with the victims of Brianka-USSR. Seventeen bodies were identified. Some militants from the Brianka-USSR publicly told Russian journalists about their battalion: civilians were shot, buried, raped, enslaved or made "experiments" on survival without organs, hands, legs, or after taking poison and acid. Pindyurin was later released, reportedly on the order of the Russian curators. Crimes of the militia, pretending to provide police functions in Brianka and "taxing" civilians, were revealed to the public in August 2015 (Kyrylov 2019).

6. 2. 3. 1) Dealing with Unruly Cossacks

LNR authorities published a decree on the disarmament of "illegal gangs" in spring 2015. Many Cossack commanders, such as Kosogorov in Krasny Luch, were jailed during the process of forced merger. When the battle of Debaltseve was roaring in January-February 2015, and LNR central military command asked "chieftain Kosogorov" in Krasny Luch to send his people to the battlefield, the chieftain reportedly refused categorically in rude and vulgar form and motivated his refusal by the need to maintain order in the frontline city (Dmytro Tymchuk 2015). In late February 2015, so-called LNR Prosecutor's Office and People's Militia detained

Kosogorov after shoot-out[12]. LNR-loyal militants entered Krasny Luch, disarmed the Cossack checkpoints, stormed, and burned Kosogorov's house (Yadotsent 2015a).

At the same time, LNR's People's Militia disarmed and captured 48 members of Kozitsyn's Cossack National Guard in the village Petrivske near Krasnyi Luch. This group, led by Cossack with call sign "Magadan", did not take part in combat operations in Donbas. Cossacks settled in Petrivske, held the local civilians in fear and looted their property. LNR sources claim that the Cossacks were disarmed and arrested due to repeated complaints from the local population about looting, kidnapping, forcing to rewrite property rights, stealing cars and torture. Leonid Tkachenko from the so-called LNR General prosecutor's office said that the Cossacks accused of torture and looting were offered to join the "People's Militia", but they refused and were jailed (Military Review 2015).

The Cossacks in Antratsyt were disarmed by LNR-loyal forces in mid-April 2015. Part of them swore loyalty to LNR and could stay in the city – Leshiy, and his deputies Kozyr and Shakirzyanov (Lugansk_LG_UA 2016). That conflict provoked reaction of Gaidei's militants in neighboring Sverdlovsk, who maintained ties to Cossacks in nearby Antratsyt, especially to Bondarenko's "Rus". Plotnitskiy summoned Gaidei to Luhansk and ordered him to vacate all checkpoints manned by Gaidei's men. At the end of January 2015, an armed clash almost occurred in Sverdlovsk when LNR-loyal rebels went to disarm Gaidei, but his fighters, fully armed, met the "guests" on the outskirts of the city. The negotiations ended in peace, after which a large part of the Cossack garrison left Sverdlovsk for the frontline and LNR-loyal militias gained control over the border crossings with Russia (Guselnikov 2015a).

Gaidei had allegedly close ties to the Russian secret services and was allowed to go to Russia without being jailed or killed (Nykonorov 2015a; Interview 27, 2020). In Rovenky, LNR authorities arrested and jailed local Cossack commander Konkin ("Foton"). Later he was released in June 2015 due to his alleged contacts in FSB and links to Cossack leader Viktor Vodolatskiy, Russia State duma deputy (Interview 27, 2019; Soldatskaya pravda 2021a).

6. 2. 4) Repressions against the Rank-and-File Rebels

Thousands of people have ended up behind bars in the rebel-occupied territories. The reasons for the persecution vary from settling political scores to redistribution of property and random detentions. Arrested people have been tried under the Criminal Code, which is based on the USSR Criminal Code of 1961; they are declared “spies” and “saboteurs” by rebel enforcers. Entrepreneurs, who failed to reach an agreement with the rebel authorities, has been especially vulnerable group; their enterprises “nationalized” or “confiscated”. It means that relatives of major rebel commanders or their cronies got control over them. Arrests on the basis of anonymous denunciations have been frequent in both “people’s republics” (Kanygin 2016).

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[12] Kosogorov was born in Lutsk in western Ukraine, worked as a rank-and-file policeman in Krasny Luch until he was fired for petty thefts and sadist treatment of the arrested people.

Arrests of the rebel fighters has become regular since the commence of the forced merger. They have been tried for “espionage in favor of Ukraine”, high treason, lootings, murders, rapes, and thefts, among other crimes. The exact number of detainees is unknown: Ukraine’s security agencies do not have access to the rebel-controlled territory, and the DNR and LNR officials refuse to speak on the subject, even to journalists from Russia. It is impossible to calculate the exact number of rebels detained and convicted by the rebel authorities. The Russian opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, citing data from their source in the DNR, stated that 480 Russian citizens were sent to prison in areas outside of Ukrainian control in the Donetsk province between 2014 and 2018. Mikhail Polynkov, Girkin’s recruiter in 2014, said in 2018 that he registers around 300 Russian volunteers in jails and detention centers (Polynkov 2018).

Thousands of rank-and-file rebel fighters have been sentenced for actual or fabricated crimes and sent to the prisons, among them the large numbers of the Russian nationalists, who came to fight for Novorossiya as volunteers. The Kremlin pushed out the volunteer fighters, who had left the conflict zone at the latest in 2016 (Laruelle 2019a). Russian curators, sent by the principal to closely watch the rebels' behavior in DNR and LNR, dealt with the problems resulting from low discipline in brutal ways. Executions, imprisonment, or slave labor have been common in rebel territories. Harsh repression was used to introduce basic order. Prison provided a way to deal with rebels caught committing theft, looting, and drunken brawls (Kanev 2015).

6. 3) Delegation Chains in Forced Merge

The principal’s first attempts to bring order and centralize fragmented movement commenced relatively early but without any tangible success. The principal had too few of its own operatives in Ukraine at the onset of the conflict, especially given the size of the geography. It was not able to control the leaders and militias that it had sponsored — personalities with their own ideology and interpersonal conflicts. By employing fragmented rebel militias, Russia invested in a mess instead of a constructive means to achieve political objectives (Kofman et al. 2017).

Russian citizens with ties to Russia’s state institutions, such as Girkin, Borodai, Bezler or Kozitsyn were called back to Russia in August-November 2014. Since January 2015, principal in cooperation with the selected rebel administration, started the violent process of forced merge. According to Ukrainian sources, the Kremlin removed Vladislav Surkov's people from the management of socio-economic and administrative affairs in rebel territories in November-December 2015. The group of curators rotated, after which representatives of Russian secret services and the military strengthened their positions in DNR and LNR (Nykonorov 2016c).

Ukrainian sources claim that the main person responsible for the forced merger of the fragmented rebel groups in Luhansk oblast was Aleksandr Sadovyi (“Sedoi”). He was reportedly sent to Luhansk by Russian secret services to form special rapid task force (Special Operation Center, or *Tsentr spetsialnogo naznacheniya*). Supposedly, his main task was to plan and personally lead purging of autonomous rebel militias. The activities of the center were not limited to disarming unruly rebels, mostly from Cossack militias, but since 2015 Sadovyi allegedly participated in killing unruly rebel commanders starting with Bednov (“Batman”) in Luhansk and Ishchenko (“Malysh”) in Pervomaisk in January 2015 (TSN 2019d).

6. 3. 1) Russian Military and Military Intelligence

The main process that followed was an establishment of regular armed formations that replaced the autonomous rebel militias. The 1st and 2nd DNR and LNR Army Corps were formally created in October-November 2014 when combat-ready rebel units acquired a structure and organization (Matveeva 2022). Army Corps have been formed by the rebel officials backed by the principal in the effort to centralize the disparate rebel militias. They succeeded to form something remotely resembling the unified army structures only in 2015 after subjugating and merging all more or less autonomous rebel militias. Both Army Corps were managed by the Russian military officers, who have served as curators directly in the rebel armed forces.

Reported curators of the 1st Army Corps in Donetsk were: Major General Mikhail Zusko in autumn 2014 (now commander of the 58th Army); Major General Valeriy Solodchuk (now deputy commander of the 5th Army) in autumn 2014 – spring 2015; Major General Alexei Zavizion (Chief of Staff of the Western Military Okrug) in spring – summer 2015; Major General Valeriy Asapov in spring 2016 - 2022; and Major General Roman Kutuzov, who was killed in June 2022 in fight in Luhansk oblast (Holovne upravlinnya rozvidky, undated; Liga.novosti 2016; TSN 2017c; Fokus 2022).

Second Army Corps in Luhansk, also known as People's Militia, was commanded by following Russian generals: Major General Sergey Kuzovlev ("Tambov") in autumn 2014 – winter 2015 (Commander of the Southern Military Okrug); Lieutenant General Sergey Yudin in winter – spring 2015 (Chief of Staff of the 20th Army); Major General Yevgeniy Nikiforov (Deputy Commander of the 58th Army). The Chief of Staff of 2nd Army Corps in Luhansk in 2015-2016 was major general Boris Fomichev ("Stalingrad") under fake name Grigoriev, followed by General Gennadiy Anashkin under the fake name Volgin (*Odeskiy kurier* (2021; TSN 2017a; TSN 2019e).

Colonel Nurullin Naila ("Yustas") was the commander of the Territorial Defense troops of the 2nd Army Corps. His main task was to restore order in the newly created territorial defense battalions, whose fighters focused on looting property from local businessmen and embezzlement of the Russian humanitarian aid. Nurullin also reportedly kept in touch with Moscow handlers from the special services and provided them with information about Ukrainian fighters who had been captured by the occupants (TSN 2019f).

If the combined forces of the DNR and LNR counted 30 tanks in an early stage of the rebellion, by mid-2016 the rebel proxies fielded almost 600 tanks. The principal had increased deployment of armored vehicles from 124 in 2014, to 1260 two years later. Artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, such as Grad, had increased from 110 units to 1060, and the 50 anti-aircraft weapons Buk and Osa available to the rebel proxies had become 470 two years later after the start of the rebellion (Wynnyckyj 2018, 185).

Russian troops have been the key to LNR and DNR survival. The largely poorly led and undisciplined DNR/LNR militias have been reorganized by Russian officers and subsumed into a formal military structure. From the battalion level up, Russian officers command the rebel army units, with former local commanders sometimes acting as deputies. As a result of the reorganization, major DNR players like Zakharchenko and Khodakovskiy lost control over most of their large, well-armed personal forces. Since reorganization, even their access to their former rebel militias was limited (International Crisis Group 2016).

6. 3. 1. 1) Outsourcing Forced Merger to Para-state Actors

The process of forced merger consisted of killing autonomous rebel commanders, their expelling out of the rebel-controlled territories, purges of the undisciplined rebel fighters and ousting the idealistic volunteers back to Russia. The principal reportedly used the infamous private military company (PMC) Wagner for this dirty job. Wagner Group are rather Russian government-hired mercenaries aligned to the Military Intelligence (GU) than typical PMC. The members of the Wagner Group were called “the cleaners”, a name that alludes to their role in getting rid of local rebel commanders not to the principal’s liking, and to their participation in disciplining anti-Kyiv rebel groups that operated too freely (Bukvoll and Ostensen 2020; Galeotti 2019a, 37-38).

The Russians blamed these assassinations on the Ukrainian military. In this instance, Moscow appears willing to suggest that Ukrainian fields commandos with ninja-like powers to infiltrate the Donbas, carry out assassinations and then sneak out without leaving a single shred of evidence. However, most of these killings are widely assumed to have been carried out by GU or FSB *Spetsnaz*, or Wagner Group, which is to Mark Galeotti little more than a deniable arm of the Russian military (Galeotti, 2019c, 76).

Wagner Group was deployed into the Donbas as an additional force, both to stiffen and support the rebels and to assert principal’s authority over them. Commanded by an ex-Spetsnaz lieutenant-colonel, Dmitry Utkin (call sign “Wagner”), the group has its HQ at Molkino in Krasnodar krai on the base of the GU’s 10th Brigade of Special Forces as ascertained by multiple journalist investigations. Its chain of command has always been unclear, but undoubtedly stretched directly to Moscow rather than to 8th Army or the Rostov-on-Don staff (Galeotti 2019a, 37-38; Sukhankin 2021, 198-199).

Many accounts claim the Wagner personnel to be responsible for the assassination of Aleksandr Bednov and Aleksei Mozgovoi, the disarmament of the Odessa rebel militia; and of wide-scale repressions against Cossacks who had previously served in Luhansk oblast but grew more independent of the Kremlin (Nykonorov 2017). Bellingcat announced that the Ukrainian security services published an intercepted conversation between Plotnitsky and Dmitriy Utkin, reported field commander of the Wagner group, from January 2015 in which Plotnitsky is heard telling the latter “It would have been difficult without you” (Bellingcat Investigation Team 2022; Sluzhba bezpeky Ukraiiny 2018).

Phone intercepts subsequently released by Ukraine’s domestic intelligence service, the SBU, showed Utkin deferring to three Russian superiors on the battlefields of east Ukraine in 2015. The first was Oleg Ivannikov, whom Bellingcat identified as a senior GU officer who helped procure at least one Buk missile system for the militants in Donbas in the days before the downing of MH17. The second was Andrey Troshev, a former police colonel from St.

Petersburg. The third was Major General Evgeniy Nikiforov, at the time chief of staff of the 58th Western Army (Weiss and Vaux 2020).

Weaponry and munitions used by the Wagner (inter alia, T-72 main battle tanks, BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launchers) and methods of military training (simulating preparation of Spetsnaz) draw on the fact that ties between Russian *siloviki* (primarily, the GU and the MoD) and the Wagner group are quite real, and that it is another para-state actor in-between the principal and rebel proxies (Sukhankin 2021, 198-199; Bukvoll and Ostensen 2020).

6. 4) Discussion: What the Principal did to solve the Problems with the Delegation

The principal understood relatively soon that the fragmented rebel militias would fail militarily against the gradually coherent incumbent without any resolute action. Russian efforts to fight the fragmentation of the rebel militias suggest that sheer chaos and imperfect control were not the preferred outcome of the principal. To achieve increased control over the rebels, the principal had to impose sanctions for agency slacks and other delegation's setbacks, because it realized that the anarchy it fostered had become a liability (Bowen 2019).

The tap of military supplies from the principal switched on and off for the autonomous rebel commanders, depending on whether they fell in line. The principal tried to oversee the financial side of its assistance, and could punish, reward or neutralize rebel leaders by controlling their access to financial and material resources (International Crisis Group 2016; (Matveeva 2018, 217). Moscow exerted tremendous effort and provided more resources, resulting in higher visibility in upgrading the rebel proxies. The principal needed to make changes to restore order to the rebellion. The most important goal was to centralize, solidify and stabilize the rebel hierarchy and gain control of the rebellion (Bowen 2019).

Access to the Kremlin leadership was arguably Moscow's most important means of control over the rebel leaders in the rebellion's early stage, along with its military and economic support. Senior rebel officials and commanders have consulted regularly in Moscow, most at least monthly. There is, however, no indication that any rebel leader has met with anyone at the highest levels. Surkov was their most senior contact (International Crisis Group 2016).

The principal sanctioned the agents by the assassinations and imprisonment of the unruly rebel commanders and rank-and-file fighters. Considering that rebel militias were involved in unsanctioned violence against civilians (rapes, kidnapping for ransom), illicit financial schemes, such as smuggling, extortion, and racketeering, it was not difficult to find evidence against them and send them "legitimately" to jail. The most unruly and popular commanders were killed. Rebel commanders with protection in principal's delegation subsystems (Presidential Administration, FSB, Military Intelligence) were allowed to leave rebel territories without any harm.

Another method to solve the delegation problem the principal used was the joint military operations, which started in August 2014 and turned the tide of war when the fragmented rebels were on the brink of military defeat. The Russian direct military inroad resulted in a defeat for the Ukrainian forces, with several battalions trapped in Ilovaisk cauldron (Matveeva 2018, 164). The defeat at Ilovaisk set a new pattern; where it could, the principal would rely on its rebel proxies, but despite efforts to build them into a serious conventional army, they were still fragmented, undisciplined, or simply outgunned. Whenever Ukrainian government forces looked as if they were likely to make serious gains, the Russians would surge in their own troops to turn the tide (Galeotti 2019a, 17-18).

Since that moment, the presence of large numbers of Russian troops on Ukrainian sovereign territory has become a permanent feature of the conflict. According to different sources, Russian troops in Ukraine numbered between 3,500 and 6,000–6,500 by the end of August 2014. That number fluctuated, reaching approximately 10,000 at the peak of direct Russian involvement in December 2014 (Sutyagin 2015).

The police patrol" mechanism was another way of solving the delegation problems. Principals sent military advisors (curators, or handlers) to rebel militias, which were gradually subordinated to the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. The last two methods of delegation problem solving (joint military operations and "police patrols") were, as the literature suggests, not precisely low cost and deniably (Salehyan 2010, Hoekstra, 2021; Heinkelmann-Wind and Mehlr 2021).

The presence of the Russian curators tipped off Ukrainian and international audiences, while the direct military attacks against the incumbent, including the artillery shelling of the Ukrainian forces from the Russian territory, were quite costly and visible. Rebels did not defect or revolt against the principal. Nevertheless, the principal had to sacrifice the main benefits of delegation. On the other hand, the benefits of the forced merger were the takeover of the full control over the rebellion and shortening the delegation chains as the para-state actors were left out in order to enhance the delegation's efficiency.

7.) Outcome - Strict Control over Centralized Rebel Proxies

After finalizing the forced merger in 2015-2016, the rebel authorities have been completely subordinated to Moscow. Rebel territories became economically and politically fully dependent on Russia. The rebels' military command has been run from Rostov-on-Don, from the headquarters of the Southern Military District of the Russian Armed Forces (Mykhnenko 2020). The principal succeeded in the partial rectification of the delegation's setbacks at the expense of low costs and deniability. However, as Lawrence Freedman argues, the denying an active Russian role was never plausible (Freedman 2019, 96-97). The principal created the grey zone in the form of unrecognized secessionist states as an ineffective leverage over Ukraine (Toal 2017).

Rather than inducing Kyiv to capitulate, Russia's delegation has generated an unprecedented sense of Ukrainian national identity and has helped galvanize serious military reform. Meanwhile, the principal has to subsidize the unrecognized pseudo-states of the Donbas and defend them (Galeotti 2019a). I claim that the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian conventional armed forces in February 2022 is another, and so far the final piece in the chain of previous miscalculations. It is miscalculated response to the failure of the principal's strategy, caused by self-defeating patronage of the fragmented rebel groups with low barriers-to-entry and weak social ties.

The power in DNR and LNR went to accidental, expendable, and obedient rulers under strict Russian control, who were more capable of using the vacuum of power. All idealistic veterans of the domestic secessionist movement had been removed from or marginalized on the political scene in rebel-controlled territories since 2015. The most famous ideologues, either of Novorossiya project (Pavel Gubarev) or Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic (Andrei Purgin), went into fierce opposition to the rebel administration entirely dependent on Moscow. These so-called People's Councils in Donetsk and Luhansk are rubber-stamp institutions controlled by the local top rebels controlled by Moscow.

The principal views the leaders of both people's republics as expendable. Moscow may drop them at any time and their role is very circumscribed. Denis Pushilin, the DNR leader, had little political experience but is seen as an unquestioning implementer of Russian policy. While publicly sticking to the line that principal's political and military influence over the entities is minimal, DNR leaders privately admitted to the International Crisis Group their total dependence on Moscow (International Crisis Group 2016). The *Vostok* commander Aleksandr

Khodakovskiy came close to admitting this publicly. The DNR leadership, he said, is constantly trying to balance the desires of the population and of "the top political powers", by which he meant Russia (International Crisis Group 2016).

7. 1) Low Costs and Visibility

7. 1. 1) Gradual Loss of Deniability

I argue that the principal lost deniability in several stages after the initial hesitant and reluctant efforts in March-May 2014. The first stage of losing deniability commenced in June-July 2014 when the principal started to set off the rebels' military failures, fragmentation, and rising capabilities of the Ukrainian forces. The second stage came shortly after with the principal's direct military inroad to Donbas in August 2014. Third stage in 2015-2016 is marked with the principal's complete takeover of the rebel administration and rebel armed forces. The last stage started with Russia's full-scale invasion to Ukraine in February 2022, which is, however, beyond the scope of this work.

The principal hesitated for a long time with supplying heavy weapons to the rebels beyond those seized from the Ukrainian army. At the beginning, the principal seemingly did not know whom it could trust, because it was hard to be sure which of the no-name warlords apart from Girkin were reliable, could handle complex weaponry and were not outright bandits. It eventually identified a number of commanders such as Mozgovoi and Bezler who appeared more coherent and they were brought to Moscow for "consultations," but the task was not an easy one. From what is possible to conclude, *voentorg* (literally "the military supply store," a euphemism for the Russian deliveries of heavy weapons and ammunition) started working in earnest since July 2014 (Matveeva 2018, 150-151).

As the fighting escalated and the Ukrainian government recovered from its original disarray, the scale of operations and weaponry deployed. At the same time, Russian involvement grew and became harder to hide. The separatists were increasingly armed with heavy weapons, including tanks, which came from Russia and in some cases originated in Crimea (D'Anieri 2019: 241-242). By mid-June 2014 it had become clear that what had started as a separatist insurgency fomented by men armed with pistols, rifles and grenades, had evolved into a military operation whose participants had received military training and were equipped with heavy weapons (Wynnyckyj 2019). The saturation of the occupied areas with Russian military equipment has led to the situation where, by some indicators (e.g. the numbers of tanks or artillery systems), the military formations of the DPR and the LPR surpass such NATO countries as France or Germany. Rebels disposed by tanks T-64 and T-72 modifications, multiple launch rocket system BM-21 “Grad,” 2S1 “Gvozdika” self-propelled howitzers, 9K35 “Strela-10” surface-to-air missile systems, BMP-1 and BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, MT-LB multipurpose armored vehicles, D-30 122mm towed howitzers, “Msta-B” 152mm howitzers and systems of heavy weaponry (Maiorova 2017).

Before the downing of MH-17, the Kremlin had argued with some degree of credibility that the heavy artillery, tanks, and “Grad” rocket systems used by “separatist” forces in their battles against the Ukrainian Army had been captured in battle, or taken from local stockpiles left over from the Soviet era (not imported from Russia), and that the men operating this equipment were local disgruntled residents of the Donbas and/or Russian volunteers operating without direct orders from the Kremlin. Until July 17, evidence of direct participation by Russian forces had been limited —except for shelling across the border (Wynnyckyj 2019).

However, the firing of a hi-tech BUK surface-to-air missile was obviously not the work of local insurgent coal miners. Successful operation of a weapon of this type required significant training, and the weapon itself was not readily available in the conflict zone. For western leaders, the downing of MH17 represented the first turning point in the conflict in the Donbas. This war could no longer be considered an internal conflict over differing visions of Ukraine’s development: this was a war between two sovereign states in which the aggressor had sought to fight through proxies but was increasingly becoming directly involved albeit still in a limited way (Wynnyckyj 2019).

In August 2014, a new approach had been adopted, and Russian regular contingents were being deployed. Although principal continued to deny its role, and terrorist and other non-military attacks were being launched inside the rest of Ukraine regularly, it resorted to direct military inroads into the Ukrainian territory because methods and forces, i.e., fragmented rebel proxies, effective in creating chaos were ineffective in harnessing it (Galeotti 2019a, 82). Failed deniability is, unlike the principal’s costs, not the subject of the thorough discussion as there is a lot of evidence proving the fact of the principal’s delegation and limited direct military invasion in 2014-2022 (Sutyagin 2015, International Crisis Group 2016; Yashin and Shorina 2015).

7. 1. 2) Gradual Rise of Costs

7. 1. 2. 1) Economic Costs

The principal clearly did not plan to sustain the Donbas economically for many years, but rather to use it for own purposes and then return it to Ukraine as a Trojan horse (see literature below). After the annexation of Crimea, the United States, EU, and other countries have imposed sanctions on individuals close to Putin. But the more serious financial sanctions came after the MH-17 crash in July 2014 in Donbas. The new sanctions imposed by the US and Europe, sharply restricted access for Russian state banks to Western capital markets, a major source of foreign lending (Stent 2019, 203).

Under the sanctions, EU and US firms were barred from providing financing for more than thirty days to the country's key state-owned banks. This has severely limited the banks' ability to finance major projects. Russia's energy sector was also targeted because the sanctions affected investment in future exploration for the oil and gas industry. Sanctions prohibited access to certain energy technologies and participation in deep-water Arctic oil shale development, ending Rosneft's collaboration in the Arctic with ExxonMobil (Stent 2019, 203).

The sanctions were aggravating an already difficult situation. The prospect was one of squeezed living standards as the country faced a declining currency, recession, and high inflation, especially on foodstuffs (Freedman 2019, 116). The military aggression occurred against the backdrop of a relatively stable economic situation. In subsequent years, Russia's economic situation has worsened substantively due to a cumulative effect of a decline in oil prices and the imposition of economic sanctions, which led to a decline in foreign investment, capital flight, and decreasing real incomes (Snegovaya 2020).

The delegation of the rebellion to Russia's proxies in Donbas has cost Moscow dearly in terms of international credibility, economic sanctions, and the need to secretly bankroll two pseudo-states (Galeotti 2019b). Alongside the direct costs of the military campaign, Russia has paid indirect costs for its involvement in the protracted conflict in Donbas, including economic sanctions imposed by the EU, United States, and other countries (with total losses estimated at $30 billion) and economic support for war-destroyed and de-industrialized Donbas.

In 2015-2021, Russia had spent an estimated $2-3 billion in the Donbas on non-military expenditures alone to subsidize the region's budget, pension and welfare payments. Annual military expenditures in Donbas are estimated at around $3 billion (Pashkov 2017; Hornish 2019). Thus, supposedly low-cost and deniable Russian involvement in the Donbas rebellion cost this country billions in USD without any tangible results in the form of preferred outcomes.

Neither the resulting profits from Russian semi-colonial control of economic resources in the non-controlled territories can recoup an estimated $2-3 billion of annual spending (Milakovsky 2019).

Khodakovskiy said in the interview that Russian material support is 70 per cent of the DNR budget, “and I am not talking here about aid in weaponry or manpower. That theme is totally taboo.” Many observers and officials believe at least 90 per cent is a more realistic figure, with local taxes making up the rest (International Crisis Group 2016). Despite the impressive numbers on the industry outputs, due to the outdated technologies in use, primarily in mining, Donbas was the recipient of often non-transparent government subsidies even prior to the rebellion (Moshes and Rácz 2014).

Industrial production in rebel territories had collapsed, and provisions had to be found to sustain people through the winter. In this respect, the new territories controlled by Russia joined those that had been seized from Moldova and Georgia as economic failures (Freedman 2019, 118). Economic ties have been severed between Donbass and Ukraine proper, the infrastructure has been seriously damaged, and large parts of the population – naturally the more agile, younger strata – have left the region. Integrating the Donbass economy into the Russian market en masse is hardly an option, mainly because the reconstruction and modernization costs would need to be covered first, and also because Russia does not need the coal produced in the Donbas mines (Moshes and Rácz 2014).

According to Thomas de Waal, the Russian government had ceased to pretend that it was not the region’s sponsor by 2018. After meeting Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov in October 2018, the de facto head of the DNR Denis Pushilin was quoted as saying in Moscow that he had received “guarantees of support from Russia in everything concerning security and raising the standard of living of citizens” (De Waal 2018). Managing the rebel territories from the economic perspective entails a serious burden for Russia. First and foremost, the remaining local population needs food, housing, heating, education, and social and medical services (Moshes and Rácz 2014).

In the long run, depending on the outcomes of the ongoing Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the rebel-controlled territories are likely to become even less self-sufficient and more dependent on external welfare as the productivity of coal mines and steel plants declines and the outflow of working-age residents intensifies. Alongside these growing costs, Moscow has the much larger losses associated with Western sanctions to consider (Milakovsky 2019).

7. 1. 2. 2) Political Costs

According to Salehyan, foreign sanctions and international condemnation are political consequences of the direct war, which is about to be avoided by the deniable delegation, as well as the potential intervention of the target state's allies or opposition by domestic audiences averse to casualties (Salehyan 2010). On a similar note, Hening Tamm added that as aggression by the states has come to be seen as unacceptable, the cover of civil war makes it easier for principals to avoid international sanctions (Tamm 2016b, 157).

Russia's delegated rebellion in Eastern Ukraine has severely damaged Russia's international reputation and its relations with the West (Moshes and Rácz 2014). Rebel proxies in Donbas have frequently been undisciplined, creating reputational costs for the principal, something most starkly visible with the shooting down of Malaysian airliner MH17 over the Donbas (Galeotti 2019c, 82).

In Sergei Medvedev's opinion, Russia called up by the annexation of Crimea and seizure of territories in Eastern Ukraine the ghosts of confrontation so zealously that, as a result, it was put under sanctions, which are having a negative effect on the economy and the standard of living. According to him:

> "Russia's geopolitical specialists scared us so wonderfully with fairytales about NATO expanding into Ukraine that, as a result of their paranoid politics, they turned Ukraine into a hostile country and obtained a decision by NATO to widen its military presence and set up permanent bases in the Baltic states. And Putin took offence against West over such a long period and so demonstratively that the West eventually answered him in kind, turning Russia into a pariah state" (Medvedev 2020, 227-228).

After the annexation of Crimea and before the delegation of the rebellion, Russia was expelled from the G8, whose annual summit was to be held in the summer of 2014 in the newly rebuilt Sochi. Two days after the annexation, the USA ratcheted up the sanctions, followed by the EU. Sanctions targeted those closest to Putin, intending to change his behavior by inflicting punishment on the friends who had amassed their fortune during his presidency, such as Arkadiy and Boris Rotenberg, Vladimir Yakunin, Yuri Kovalchuk, Gennadiy Timchenko and others. The Americans and Europeans hoped that the diplomatic isolation facing Russia and the intensifying sanctions were, at last, altering Putin's choices, forcing him and other officials into more and more improbable denials of Russian involvement (Lee Myers 2016, 413-415).

7. 2) Testing the Evidence

The testing should point out whether the collected empirical evidence are unique and certain in the meaning that empirical predictions do not overlap with any other theory and are unequivocal (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 101).

7. 2. 1) Uniqueness

Taking complete control over political, military, and economic affairs of the rebel territories of so-called “people’s republics” through the high cost and visible patronage has not been the principal’s preferred outcome. Empirical observations of the self-defeated patronage in the Donbas demonstrated that the evidence I provided is unique and cannot overlap with any other theory that would somehow invalidate the causal chains I presented in this work.

7. 2. 1. 1) Delegation to Rebel Proxies in Eastern Ukraine as a Success Story

First, the alternative theory could object that the principal was satisfied with the takeover over the rebellion through forced merger disregarding the higher costs and unplausible deniability. Therefore, nothing is self-defeating in this regard - the incumbent lost control over part of its country, which allowed the principal to use the conflict for pressure on Ukraine as a useful bargaining chip to prevent it from joining NATO and the EU.

According to this potential alternative theory, the delegation would be a success for the principal as it got what it wanted – pressure point on the incumbent it can turn up or down. However, the extant literature confirms that the outcome in the form of the high-cost and visible principal’s patronage is in no way taken as a success or preferred outcome. Russia’s patronage over rebel militias in Donbas as a means of coercive bargaining between states clearly failed.

Åtlund demonstrates that the preferred outcome for Russia was the federalization of Ukraine, the weakening of the post-Maidan regime, and increased Russian leverage. The acceptable outcome was peace settlement on Russia’s terms, decentralization, and “special status” for DNR and LNR, but such outcomes were not reached (Åtlund 2020).

Kyiv lost control over a part of its territory, but Ukrainian sovereignty and political independence were not compromised entirely and irreparably. The Kremlin did not prevent

Ukraine from pursuing Western integration. Instead, Ukraine anchored a Western geopolitical orientation in its constitution, signed significant agreements with the EU, and cooperate with NATO in many practical ways (Potočňák and Mareš 2022).

Lawrence Freedman claims that having rebels occupy a chunk of territory undoubtedly created a serious problem for Ukraine, but the amount held was not enough to advance Russia's objectives. At about seven per cent of Ukraine's total, it was too small to make much sense as a stand-alone entity, incoherent economically and politically. At the same time, it was also large enough (about the size of Belgium) to require a substantial subsidy to avoid internal disarray (Freedman 2019, 118). Rácz and Moshes claim that the rebel territories accommodate important industrial facilities but do not possess such a crucial position vis-à-vis the other regions in Ukraine, while the population constitutes only about 4-5 per cent of Ukraine's population (Moshes and Racz 2014).

In Freedman's opinion, one approach might have been to cash in the gains, as had been done with Crimea, and annex the enclaves in Donetsk and Luhansk, but this would result in continuing tension with Ukraine and preclude any sort of negotiated settlement. It would also mean continuing indefinitely with high levels of military mobilization and economic separation from the West, policing a 400-kilometer border. Meanwhile, Ukraine would be bound to work even more closely with Europe. Russia had regained the upper hand in the fighting, but its underlying position was not that strong (Freedman 2019, 118).

Kofman and his co-authors claim that the delegation's drawbacks of seemingly low cost and deniable delegation were in effectiveness and predictability. Russia succeeded in destabilizing Ukraine, but the process was fitful and challenging to control. There were two lessons for the principal to be learned: First, starting a rebellion in a politically and militarily weak neighboring state is not difficult, and second, such a rebellion does not necessarily translate into national-level concessions. The outcome Russia sought—the federalization of Ukraine—was well beyond the scope of the resources it devoted to the insurgency (Kofman et al. 2017).

Mareš and Potočňák point out that Russia's desired fate for Donbas was neither annexation nor frozen conflict but the Trojan Horse – give Donbas back to Ukraine on its own terms that would keep this territory under Russia's control as the leverage against Ukraine despite the nominal Ukrainian jurisdiction. For the return of Donbas, Russia demanded that Ukraine adopt broad constitutional reforms, anchor an "eternal" neutrality clause to the new constitution, and grant DNR and LNR special status and extraordinary powers, including the right to sign separate "interstate" agreements. However, Russia failed to "smuggle" its Trojan

Horse back into a new, constitutionally decentralized Ukraine and compel Kyiv to accept Donbas representatives as their equal peers (Potočňák and Mareš 2022).

To Matveeva, the emergence of the "people's republics" was never the principal's goal but an interim step towards transition, in which they got stuck. Putin stated at the Valdai Forum in October 2021 that he did not see a solution to the Ukraine problem: "This is a dead end. I do not understand at all how one can get out of it." With hindsight, this seemed to say that the previous approach led nowhere, and a pivot was to come (Matveeva 2022, 412, 418). Surkov's vision was to reformat Ukraine into a pro-Russian entity, using the Donbas as a springboard. His agenda was "not to return Donbas to Ukraine, but to return Ukraine to Donbas. Only that could be considered a true success." Such efforts did not lead to any tangible success. In 2020, Dmitriy Kozak took over Surkov's duties, but the transition was a difference in style than in substance, as they were both there to implement Putin's will (Matveeva 2022, 426).

Matsuzato argues that the best scenario for Putin in 2014 was to take only Crimea but leave Donbas in Ukraine. The reason for such a conclusion was the calculation that if Russia took both Crimea and Donbas, the electoral demography of Ukraine would change drastically, and "pro-Russian" presidential candidates would never win in Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine would be ready to become a NATO member. Having built puppet states in remote Donbas, Russia would face NATO missile bases in Kharkiv or Sumy, much closer to Moscow than Donbas (Matsuzato 2022, 52).

7. 2. 1. 2) Delegation as a Principal's Master Plan or Low-Cost Improvisation?

I argue that if the frozen conflict and chaos were the principal's preference as a leverage over Ukraine, why would it even bother with the forced merger? In that case, the forced merger would not make any sense. The forced merger *per se* means that the principal has been interested in the rebels' de-fragmentation, or centralization, to make them more efficient foreign policy tools. However, it failed. Further events in February 2022 lead us to conclude that Putin was not satisfied with the outcome of the delegated rebellion as leverage over Ukraine.

The principal's role in the forced merger is evident by the dependence of the rebel elites on the principal and the incapability of Plotnitskiy or Zakharchenko to organize such processes independently without Moscow. Professionals assassinated the unruly rebel commanders, either from the Wagner group or Russian special forces (Spetsnaz). Besides, expelling some rebel commanders and Russian volunteers back to Russia would be impossible without the Russian officials' consent and the Russian state institutions' assistance.

The alternative theory of plausible deniability of the Russian delegation is relatively easy to shake off as there is consensus among the scholars, diplomats, experts and politicians, except those who follow Russian official narratives, that the Russian delegation to the rebels in Donbas has been visible, at least from August 2014. The question of costs is, however, a bit more complicated. What is too costly for the principal, and what is not? What is the "good price" for a delegation regarding "value for money" and eventual final political and economic profit?

Arguably, the delegation will probably not run smoothly if it is not planned thoroughly in advance. Russia's delegation in Donbas seemed to be an improvised effort, which met (probably unexpected) resistance from the outset and resulted in a sequence of adaptations. These led to a vertical escalation of the conflict, which, by all appearances, Russia wished to avoid, as it would result in a conventional war and necessitate its direct participation. Even the early phases did not involve the concentrated use of Russia's intelligence and military assets. Russia sought to use an economy of force effort, leveraging private networks, business interests, and useful operatives (Kofman et al. 2017).

The strategy behind Russia's evolving approach focused on minimizing political and geopolitical costs. Russia could have started with conventional war, a quick invasion, and victory over Ukraine's military in 2014, but that would have been exercising force far in excess of that required for its objective of destabilizing Ukraine. A military invasion of the Donbas would have profound ramifications for Russia's relationship with the West and an unpredictable domestic reception among Russians. However, the principal mounted a conventional invasion after trying lower-cost options. Russia wanted the Donbas as leverage to gain control over Ukraine's strategic orientation, not to sever it, and sought to pay the lowest price possible to accomplish this (Kofman et al. 2017).

I argue that the high costs can be measured by the overhead costs that would not be part of the delegation scenario once the rebellion runs easily. By the overhead costs, I mean international sanctions due to the delegation that Russia apparently wanted to avoid, costs of direct military attacks to avoid the fragmented rebels' defeat and the forced merger itself that brought the rebellion under complete control by the principal. In Mikhail Zygar's opinion, Putin did not believe in Western economic sanctions if he decided to take Crimea. The strongest reaction he reportedly expected from Western countries was a boycott of the G8 summit in Sochi (quoted in Bukkvoll 2016).

7. 2. 1. 3) Unique Role of the Local Elites in the Delegation

The problem was that the principal's improvised plan failed from the very beginning. The initial plan reportedly consisted of the delegation to the local political elites, which were supposed to publicly announce the incumbent's illegitimacy and proclaim autonomy (Platonova 2021). The crucial role of the local elites is the typical scenario for delegated rebellions because local elites usually have a high level of legitimacy as the representatives of the given community, and the principal has someone with authority to delegate to. Secessionist local elites often become commanders of the rebel groups and lead the rebels into fighting with the central government. In other cases of the Russian-delegated rebellions, such as in Abkhazia and Transnistria, the local state institutions under the secessionist leaders' control prepared for armed confrontation. War was just another stage of their bargaining with the center, Tbilisi or Kishinev (Kaufman 1996; Tkach 1999).

In many delegated rebellions, local elites lead rebels in a confrontation with the government (Kaufman 1996; King 1997; Jesse and Williams 2010, 34-35). Stuart Kaufman works with the concept of elite conspiracy as elite-led violence provoked by leaders of a subordinate group. Those subordinate-group leaders create rival governments aimed at seceding from or taking over the state. They use chauvinist propaganda to increase hostility, pursue extremist goals that provoke hostility from the other side and create a security dilemma (Kaufman 1996, 117-118). The literature on local secessionist elites holds them responsible for "ethnic entrepreneurship" to hold or acquire power (Armakolas 2011, 232; Fearon and Laitin 2000, 853). However, it has no validity in the case of the Donbas (See more in Laryš & Souleimanov 2022).

Local elites in Donbas, with a relatively high level of legitimacy and social embeddedness, refused to take the step of direct armed confrontation with the Ukrainian state and get to the head of the rebellion. They were neither prepared for war against Kyiv nor large-scale political violence as both would endanger their political and economic interests. Instead, they wanted to preserve their political power and economic assets inside the existing Ukrainian state after bargaining with the incumbent. The local elites in Donbas, with large support from the masses and leading the uprising as the legitimate local political actors, would greatly reduce political and economic costs and drop out of the game.

Neither local elites became a vanguard of the rebellion, nor the popular masses enthusiastically joined the uprising against the "fascist junta." The principal found himself faced with the task of working with an endless number of rag-tag rebel militias that had to be supported if anything was to happen as a tool against the incumbent. Thus, this delegation to unorganized and fragmented rebels without any legitimacy and embeddedness in the society was plan B, activated and improvised after the initial plan of delegation to locals with authority failed. However, fragmented rebels proved to be an ineffective tool for the principal.

7. 2. 1. 4) The Delegation as Reasonably Expensive Device

There is probably no easy answer to whether the delegation was too costly or not. The principal supposedly did not expect such prolonged and politically impotent conflict, which was costly per se. The delegation was rather political than economic failure because sanctions against Russia were still rather limited, at least until February 2022, compared to other pariah states, such as Iran or North Korea. Some sanctions were also not caused exclusively by the visible delegation of the war in Donbas but by the annexation of Crimea, which preceded the delegation in Eastern Ukraine.

On the other hand, the gradual adoption of the new sanctions significantly restricted Russia's foreign policy and trade capabilities even before February 2022. Russia's room for maneuver has been severely restricted, and it has suffered political and reputational damage without reaching any tangible political dividends and benefits from the delegation of the war in Donbas (Medvedev 2020).

The failure to use delegation as an effective political device against the Ukrainian state led Putin to his, so far, most destructible solution: to invade Ukraine with a conventional army, bomb its cities and civilian infrastructure to force Ukraine to capitulate in order to keep the country within the Russian sphere of influence. The delegation to rebels in Donbas proved to be an insufficient step that allowed Ukraine to be more prepared against the full-scale Russian invasion in the years that followed rebellion's outbreak.

It is possible that if Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 when the Ukrainian state was weakened and its army corrupt, underfunded and in disarray, it would probably reach its political and military goals relatively easily. One might say that Russia's ineffective delegation, which did not lead to the principal's preferred outcomes, gave Ukraine eight precious years to get prepared for a full military invasion.

When it comes to the costs, military and non-military expenditures to keep Donbas under the principal's control cost about $5-6 billion annually in 2015-2021, not counting the expenditures related to limited military invasions, artillery shelling from the Russian territory or military maneuvers and exercises related to the Donbas rebellion. It makes $35-40 billion only for expenditures directly linked to the Donbas. Economic losses from the sanctions against Russia adopted as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the rebellion's delegation to Donbas are estimated to be another $30 billion (Pashkov 2017; Hornish 2019). It makes at least $65-70 billion in total without counting the expenditures for military engagement in 2014-2015. Hefty price for the rebellion, which failed to materialize the principal's preferred outcomes and was planned as a low-cost and deniable operation that would last several months at maximum.

Moreover, if we consider the 2022 large-scale invasion a consequence of the delegation's failure in 2014-2022 and include the cost of these military operations in these calculations, we will come to completely different figures. Russian economist Vladislav Inozemtsev assumed that the military expenses for the war are expected to reach seven trillion rubles (around $123 billion) by the end of 2022, or five per cent of GDP. This invasion and sanction adopted by western countries will probably incapacitate whole industrial sectors in Russia, such as automobile production, which was in May 2022 thirty times less than in May 2021. Since February 2022, Russia got half of its vast currency reserves arrested, its international air traffic disrupted, and several crucial industries immobilized. Furthermore, many enterprises might stop their operations all over the country (Inozemtsev 2022).

7. 2. 2) Certainty

Certainty in the evidence testing means providing evidence that hypothesized causal sequence holds to confirm that cause A led to outcome B in the theorized way. The main task here is to avoid equifinality, i.e., more than one causal chain leading to the effect under investigation. In the first step, I provided evidence that the principal's delegation to the imperfectly controlled nascent rebel proxies with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry led to incessant rebel fragmentation, which is proved by the simple table of rebel militias active in Donetsk and Luhansk oblast in the Appendix. Non-existent relevant secessionist movements or widely shared secessionist sentiments among the population prior to the war explained why the incipient rebels had no hierarchy and respected leaders from the community. As the actor with strong social ties and embeddedness, the local elites refused to organize rebel militias and join the rebel cause openly.

The fragmentation prevented the principal from the tighter control over the rebels because there was no hierarchy, and the "official" rebel governments controlled only a small part of the overall territory ruled by the autonomous commanders in 2014-2015, who did not recognize such “governments”. The imperfect principal’s control, lack of rebel movement’s hierarchy, the passivity of the local political elites and law enforcement, and the indecisiveness of the incumbent were driving factors for the low barrier to entry, which, in turn, caused the incessant process of the rebel fragmentation (see Fjelde and Nilsson 2018). No other key factor that would contribute to the low barriers to entry, or on the contrary, would impede it, was found neither by the author nor by the extant literature.

On the rare occasion of consent, Ukrainian sources, scholars, and even Russian and rebel sources confirm that the fragmentation of the rebel movement was the crucial reason of why the rebels faced imminent military defeat. The gradual asymmetry of the fighting capabilities on the battlefront was caused in the first place by the increasing coherence of the incumbent and the lack of it on the rebel side. An alternative explanation that such unbalance was explicitly caused by the better military equipment and experience of the Ukrainian army does not hold because the Ukrainian army was in such terrible shape that the soldiers had not just the military experience, but often they lacked even the basic equipment.

Ukrainian soldiers had heavy weapons, but the principal supplied rebels with weapon systems from Russia, including anti-aircraft systems. Many rebel fighters had military experiences, especially Afghanistan war veterans and Russian volunteers who fought in Chechnya and other conflicts. Also, despite territorial advances in June and July 2014, the Ukrainian military masked significant problems, such as compromised secrecy of operations, a limited number of combat-ready units, inadequate supplies, poor training, and low morale of many mobilized soldiers (Melnyk 2022, 130). Ukrainian voluntary battalions had better morale and motivation to fight than regular units but usually had no access to heavy weapons, such as tanks or artillery.

Military incapability of the rebel militias and the principal’s imperfect control over them became a liability, resulting in imminent military defeat. Therefore, the principal decided to commence a forced merger supplemented by other measures. However, even the outcome of the self-defeating patronage - strict control over centralized rebel proxies reached by the high costs, visibility and, implicitly, the necessity to sustain the rebel territories economically and militarily – does not necessarily lead to the preferred foreign policy outcome of the principal. However, I must stress that the principal’s foreign policy outcome related to the rebellion’s delegation and the outcome of the rebel movement’s patronage itself are two different things.

My concept of self-defeating patronage is related strictly to the outcome of the patronage - complete takeover of the rebel proxies, which is self-defeating because it is high cost and visible, which contradicts the alleged benefits of the rebellion’s delegation. The equifinal combination of other causes may lead to a failure of the foreign policy outcome, as was the case with the Ukraine rebellion. However, foreign policy outcomes are beyond the scope of this work because more causes, which lead to the outcome, are employed in the causal chain, such as the policy of the international community and other global actors or the incumbent's government policy vis-à-vis the principal.

More precisely, in my work, I deal with the outcome of the foreign policy tool, not with the outcome of the foreign policy itself, because in this case, the empirical evidence I collected would not pass the test on certainty due to equifinality – it would pass only "the smoking gun" test with high uniqueness but low certainty. When it comes to self-defeating patronage as the inherent contradiction to the basic principles of the delegation – low-cost and deniability – it would pass the doubly decisive test. It is the most demanding test, both necessary and sufficient to confirm my tentative theoretical concept (Centre for Development Impact 2015). In my dissertation, I provided the evidence and more context-specific arguments that historians and experts have offered to rule out the possibility that this kind of patronage provided by the principal as a foreign policy tool was not self-defeating (see Bennett and Checkel 2015, 18).

Conclusion

This dissertation introduced the concepts of self-defeating patronage and decentralized delegation chains. The theoretical concept of self-defeating patronage demonstrates the inherent contradictions in the delegated rebellion theory - the delegation to fragmented rebels with weak social ties and low barriers-to-entry runs against the logic of the delegation as a low-cost and deniable foreign policy device. The problem of rebels' weak social ties in Donbas was explained by exploiting Staniland's social-institutional theory of the pre-war social networks. It illustrates the importance of pre-war social ties and understanding of why the fragmented pro-Russian organizations were not the driving forces in the breakout of rebellion in the regions with relatively high pro-Russian sympathies.

Ukrainian Donbas, the industrial core of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, has never had a history of popular or influential pro-Russian secessionist movements. No militants have been active in this region since the moment Ukraine became independent in 1991. The small and marginal secessionist movements were kept alive by local elites, which needed them for political provocations and bargaining with the political center during crises and events, endangering their grip on power. The most critical situation for the local patrons turned up with the Orange Revolution in 2004 when their political patron Viktor Yanukovych lost the presidential election after mass protests in Kyiv. Local elites in Donetsk and Luhansk responded by establishing patronage over the newly formed anti-Ukrainian marginal movements calling for autonomy and secession from Ukraine.

The public popularity of Donbas secessionists was close to zero. The public was not even aware of such small groups, and those who were aware considered them political fringe. The political life in the region had been strictly under the control of the Party of Regions. The secessionist movements could probably have dozens of members in both provinces and were not ready for large-scale protests or escalating the situation after widespread protests unseated Yanukovych for the second time in February 2014. Regarding their ideological roots, the anti-Ukrainian activists used the old Soviet anti-Ukrainian stamps in the new environment of independent Ukraine. "Fascist" labeling was the favorite even though many pro-Russian figures emerged from the neo-fascist or extreme nationalist milieu.

Prior to 2014, the pro-Russian secessionist movements had nothing to offer to the local population. People in Donetsk and Luhansk were generally uninterested in Russian imperial and nationalist projects. The majority of the pro-Russian electorate in eastern and southern Ukraine supported non-secessionist mainstream parliamentary parties that pragmatically instrumentalized pro-Russian narratives. Locals were interested in resolving their grim material situation instead of ideological concepts detached from the reality and far from everyday people's concerns. That is why many people supported Russia, but not the local pro-Russian secessionist movements on the fringes of society. The pro-Russian leaders were uncharismatic, incompetent, and inexperienced, often willing to raise their social status through their engagement in local politics and get funds from local elites. The dependence on the local elites' patronage was another reason for secessionists' weak social ties as they could be perceived as stooges and pawns without agency, authenticity, and credibility.

Therefore, there were insufficient social conditions for rebellion to occur without external support. The principal started the delegation in April 2014 reluctantly. The passivity of the local elites and law enforcement, the incumbent's indecisiveness, and Russia's deterrence against Ukraine were significant factors which contributed to the low barriers to entry designed partly by the principal as the way how to overcome the collective action problem despite the initial principal's belief that local people will rise up against the "fascist junta". Low barriers to entry did not cause the rebels' fighting capacity built-up. On the contrary, it produced endless rebel fragmentation.

The local elites did not favor a secessionist rebellion as they used popular discontent only to attain concessions from the central government. However, it was the engagement of an external principal which "hijacked" the rebellion that effectively sidelined the local elites. The elites turned out not to be ready for large-scale political violence, which was never a part of their strategy. The attitude of the local elites and regular defections of law enforcement officers lowered the risks and costs of participation in the rebellion.

The situation had been extremely chaotic in the early stage of the rebellion. Various rebel militias controlled various cities. Infighting was frequent, while coordination and cooperation between the rebel militias were almost non-existent. Main rebel commanders in both oblasts, such as Girkin, Bezler, Khodakovskiy, Zakharchenko, Plotnitskiy, Mozgovoi, Dremov, Bednov and others, did not respect the authority of one another, while most of them did not recognize the proto-state organs in Donetsk and Luhansk, which tried to centralize the rebel movement under their control.

Keeping the barriers-to-entry low in order to overcome the collective actions problem and imperfect control over the increasing number of rebel militias revealed weak points of such patronage. Instigating chaos and impunity for the rebels was probably the only feasible way to instigate a rebellion, but it appeared to be only a short-term solution that had to be redressed through a forced merger because fragmentation affected the rebels' fighting capacities and increased asymmetry in the conflict with the incumbent. It affected rebels' fighting capacities to such an extent that the principal had to directly attack the government forces to avoid military defeat, turning upside down the whole sense of the delegated rebellion as a low-cost and deniable foreign policy device.

To advance Russian strategic goals, the principal had to make decisive steps to deter the incumbent from defeating the rebel proxies when the Ukrainian army and voluntary battalions were closing in on Donetsk and Luhansk in August 2014. Fragmented rebels were incapable to stand up against the increasing military capacity of the incumbent, even despite receiving support and supplies from the principal.

Forming the centralized rebel movement through forced merger and other measures of rebels' patronage was necessary, but they contradicted the rationale behind the delegated rebellion – low costs and high deniability. Besides, even the forced merger and other measures, such as joint military operations as a solution to the agency slacks caused by imperfect control and fragmentation, do not necessarily lead to the principal's preferred outcome.

Despite the principal's military inroads, the rebels' territorial losses from the summer of 2014 have never been recovered until the large-scale Russian military invasion (at the time of writing, the Russian Army still did not seize Sloviansk and Kramatorsk). The Russian military had to remain present to a limited extent as a deterrence force against Ukrainian government forces in rebel-held territories from 2014-2022.

Russia seeded the revolutionary chaos to keep the barriers-to-entry low, but later it had to clean up the mess caused by the fragmentation. Otherwise, the rebellion would fail, and the principal would probably lose the last remaining leverage over the incumbent. If that chaos in rebel territories advanced the principal's strategic goals, the forced merger would not make any sense. The forced merger *per se* means that the principal has been interested in the de-fragmentation of the rebel movement.

The forced merger resulted in the accomplishing of the tight control over the centralized rebels, shortening the delegation chains by leaving out the para-state intermediaries, but increased overhead costs compared to delegation to the centralized rebellions, with highly motivated and committed fighters firmly embedded in and across local societies. Those overhead costs are linked to emergency measures taken to enhance the cohesion of the fragmented rebel movement. As typical in delegated rebellions, rebels received increased resources but lost their autonomy to the principal (see Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014, 638).

My work demonstrated that the delegated rebellion is not always the best option, even if it seems to be so. The attempt to develop a low-cost and deniable strategy is not always the winning strategy, and the cheapest does not always mean the best. The fragmented and loosely controlled rebels proved to be, in the key moments in the spring and summer of 2014, ineffective device for the instrumental effort of the principal to hinder Ukraine from drifting towards the West by rebellion's delegation and influence Ukrainian politics more generally (Matveeva 2022; Galeotti 2015). Fragmented rebels in Donbas turned out to be an improper tool for reaching the principal's political goals against the target state. The patronage has been burdened with enormous political and economic costs, such as sanctions, military expenses, and subsidizing the disrupted economy of the "people's republics."

The high political costs and failures were often caused by the principal's miscalculation and overestimation of the situation expecting that the local community was ripe for a popular uprising. My dissertation goes against the trends of the rebel-centric literature that usually deals with the rebel groups, while the principal is discussed only in terms of the agency slacks, caused by the imperfect information the principal has about the rebels, preferences on coherence or fragmentation but not the ways how the principal delegates.

Milos Popovic claims that the sponsor government (principal) and its secret services form the delegation chain by delegating violence to a rebel outfit, while the secret services primarily cooperate with the rebel leadership (Popovic 2015a). However, as I demonstrated in my work, the situation is more complex when it comes to the delegation and delegation chains' length and centralization. The theory of the delegated rebellion is incomplete without an understanding of how the principal delegates. It misses out a crucial part of the delegation process affecting the shape and outcome of the rebellions.

Such things as (de)centralization and quality of the delegation chains, corruption, miscalculations, overestimation or underestimation of the target state and its allies' strength and resolution affect the outcome of the delegation. Russia's delegation chains in Donbas had been clearly decentralized – Presidential Administration, FSB and Armed Forces plus para-state actors, whom they outsourced some delegation tasks, such as solving the collective action problems. The para-state actors, such as nationalist entrepreneurs, pro-Kremlin nationalist organizations, or para-state military companies (Wagner Group), or Cossack structures, were used to enhance low-cost and plausible deniability. There was a tangible contrast between the political and military aspects when Putin's aide, Vladislav Surkov, and Presidential Administration controlled the political processes while the secret services and military controlled the situation on the battlefields. Several delegation chains worked parallelly, supplemented each other or competed with one another.

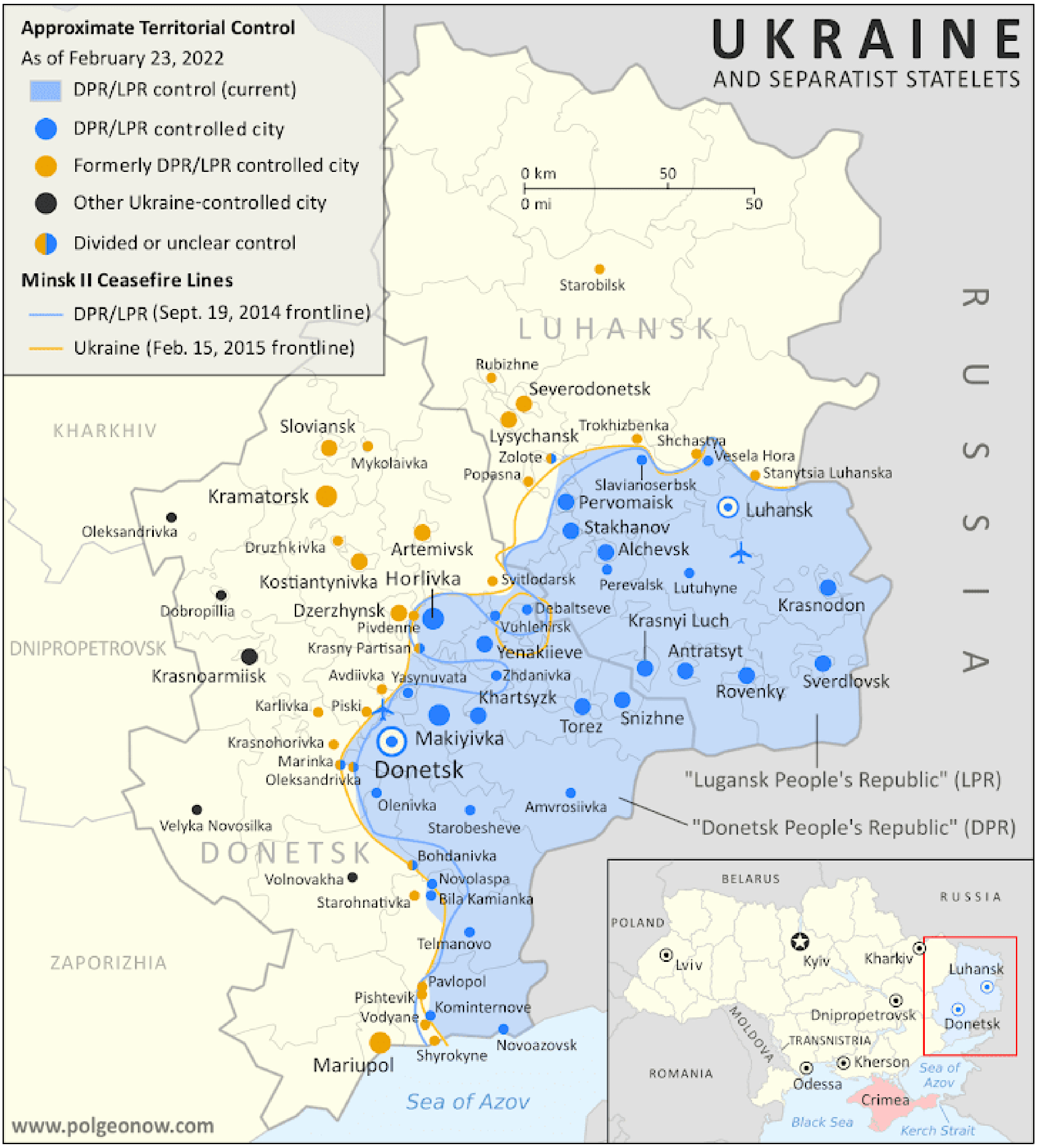
The quality and (in)competence of the delegation chains, such as FSB, arguably played an essential role before the rebellion had even started and is rooted in the political system of the principal. Deliberate misinterpretations in order to make superiors happy as a way how to rise on the career ladder, clientelism, and nepotism instead of competence and professionalism conduced to the miscalculated decisions on the rebellion's delegation expecting the quick and resolute solution of the problem with the target state attempting to leave the principal's sphere of influence. I demonstrated that the improvisation and apparent lack of plan reinforced the adverse outcomes of the delegation and the whole plan to use rebels as a means of coercive bargaining with Ukraine.

The way the principal delegated the rebellion suggests that Russia was engaged in an ad hoc effort using available proxies rather than a professional covert operation. At the heart of this approach were flexibility, opportunism, and an economy of resources, which came at the price of cohesion, and control and eventually would result in problems for Moscow. The attempts at indirect warfare in Ukraine were ill-conceived or poorly executed—possibly both. If the purpose was to avoid escalation to a conventional war, the operation had already failed in August 2014 (see Kofman et al. 2017). The revealing of the "black-boxed" delegation chains has arguably a considerable potential for future research, which could, in perspective, close one of the gaps in the existing literature on rebellion's delegation.

Appendix

Maps

Map 1: Rebel Territorial Control and Frontlines in September 2014 and February 2015


Approximate Territorial Control
As of February 23, 2022
DPR/LPR control (current)
DPR/LPR controlled city
Formerly DPR/LPR controlled city
Other Ukraine-controlled city
Divided or unclear control
Minsk II Ceasefire Lines
DPR/LPR (Sept. 19, 2014 frontline)
Ukraine (Feb. 15, 2015 frontline)
UKRAINE
AND SEPARATIST STATELETS
0 km 50
0 mi 50
RUSSIA
LUHANSK
DONETSK
KHARKHIV
DNIPROPETROVSK
ZAPORIZHIA
Starobilsk
Rubizhne
Severodonetsk
Lysychansk
Trokhizbenka
Shchastya
Vesela Hora
Stanytsia Luhanska
Zolote
Popasna
Slavianoserbsk
Pervomaisk
Luhansk
Stakhanov
Alchevsk
Sloviansk
Mykolaivka
Kramatorsk
Oleksandrivka
Druzhkivka
Artemivsk
Kostiantynivka
Horlivka
Svitlodarsk
Perevalsk
Lutuhyne
Krasnodon
Dobropillia
Dzerzhynsk
Pivdenne
Debaltseve
Vuhlehirsk
Krasnyi Luch
Krasny Partisan
Yenakiieve
Antratsyt
DNIPROPETROVSK
Krasnoarmiisk
Avdiivka
Yasynuvata
Zhdanivka
Rovenky
Sverdlovsk
Karlivka
Piski
Khartsyzk
Torez
Snizhne
Krasnohorivka
Makiyivka
Marinka
Oleksandrivka
Donetsk
"Lugansk People's Republic" (LPR)
Olenivka
Amvrosiivka
"Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR)
Velyka Novosilka
Starobesheve
Bohdanivka
Volnovakha
Novolaspa
Bila Kamianka
Starohnativka
Telmanovo
Pavlopol
Pishtevik
Kominternove
Vodyane
Novoazovsk
Shyrokyne
Mariupol
Sea of Azov
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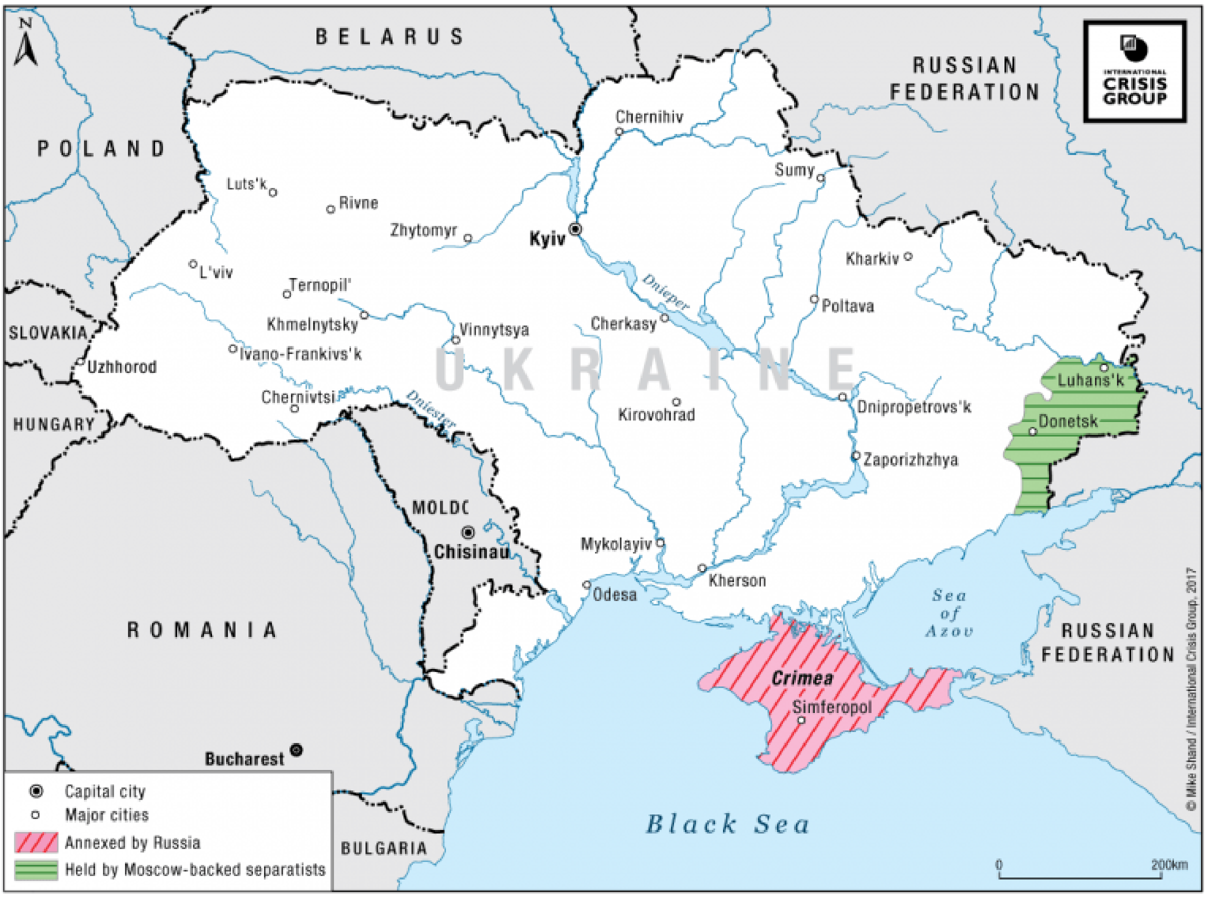
RUSSIA
POLAND
Lviv
Kyiv
Kharkiv
Luhansk
Donetsk
MOLDOVA
Dnipropetrovsk
TRANSNISTRIA
ROMANIA
Kherson
Odessa
Sea of Azov
Crimea
Black Sea
Kerch Strait

(Source: Political Geography Now 2022).
Note: This map uses the old names of the cities used before the adoption of the decommunization laws, such as Dzerzhynsk (now Toretsk), Artemivsk (now Bakhmut), Stakhanov (now Kadiivka), Krasny Luch (now Chystyakove), Sverdlovsk (now Dovzhansk), Krasnoarmiisk (now Pokrovsk).

Map 2: Map of Ukraine and rebel-held territories


N
BELARUS
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP
POLAND
Chernihiv
Sumy
Luts'k
Rivne
Zhytomyr
Kyiv
Kharkiv
L'viv
Ternopil'
Dnieper
Poltava
SLOVAKIA
Khmelnytsky
Vinnytsya
Cherkasy
Ivano-Frankivs'k
UKRAINE
Luhans'k
Uzhhorod
Donetsk
Chernivtsi
Dniester
Kirovohrad
Dnipropetrovs'k
HUNGARY
Zaporizhzhya
MOLDC
Chisinau
Mykolayiv
Kherson
Odesa
Sea of Azov
ROMANIA
RUSSIAN FEDERATION
Crimea
Simferopol
Bucharest
Capital city
Major cities
Annexed by Russia
Held by Moscow-backed separatists
BULGARIA
Black Sea
0
200km
© Mike Shand / International Crisis Group, 2017

(Source: International Crisis Group 2016)

Tables:

Table 1: Chronology of the Delegated Rebellion in Eastern Ukraine

21 November 2013	Following the announcement that Ukraine was suspending discussions over the EU Association Agreement (AA), a few thousand protesters gathered on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), the main site of protests going back to 1990.
24 November 2013	An estimated 100,000 people turned out to protest.
30 November 2013	The Interior Ministry’s elite Berkut forces attacked using batons and stun grenades, arresting several protesters. This attack began the escalation that turned an issue-specific protest into a contest over the future of the Yanukovych regime, ultimately leading Yanukovych to flee the country three months later.
16 January 2014	The pro-Yanukovych majority in the parliament pushed through a series of so-called “dictatorship laws” outlawing particular protest tactics and curtailing the activities of foreign NGOs, which provoked wide-spread anger and reenergized the protests.
19 January 2014	Thousands of protesters, outraged by the “dictatorship laws,” confronted security forces protecting government buildings. The ensuing violence further radicalized the protests.

18 February 2014	At least eighteen people dead in Kyiv. The brutal violence caused both sides to harden their positions. In several western Ukrainian cities, people occupied regional administration buildings, attacked police stations, and seized weapons.
20 February 2014	After protesters broke through a police line in Kyiv downtown, the police opened fire, both from on the ground and from sniper positions. By day's end, another roughly seventy protesters had been killed and over five hundred wounded. The violence of February 20 demolished the government's legitimacy in the eyes of many in Ukraine, and increased people's resolve that Yanukovych had to resign.
21 February 2014	The Yanukovych government was collapsing, leaving a vacuum. Yanukovych left Kyiv. Late that night, Yanukovych left Kyiv for Kharkiv, and for a time it was not clear exactly where he was. Victory of Euromaidan.
27 February 2014	Heavily armed men seized the buildings of the Crimean parliament and Council of Ministers and raised Russian flags. A new government was sworn in with Russian stooge Sergei Aksyonov in the head, and a referendum on unity with Russia announced. A bill was introduced into the Russian State Duma to facilitate accession of new territories to the Russian Federation (removing a previous stipulation that required the agreement of the country from which territory was seceding).
28 February 2014	Soldiers in unmarked uniforms, later widely known as "little green men" or "polite people," seized the airports in Simferopol and Sevastopol.
1 March 2014	Pro-Russian rallies in Eastern Ukrainian cities (Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk) calling for federalization, autonomy for Donbas, and even for secession from Ukraine. Russia's upper house of parliament (Council of the Federation) approved President Putin's request for Russian forces to be used in Ukraine "until the normalization of the political situation in the country."
16 March 2014	Fake and hastily arranged referendum in Crimea with alleged with almost 97 percent in favor of annexation by Russia. The implausible numbers and the rushed process, with elements of coercion, were easy to mock and underscored the illegality of the annexation. Crimean "referendum" takes place with no access to independent observers, under the threat of armed "green men" and militia in the streets and polling locations, who intimidate pro-Ukrainian groups, including Crimean Tatars.
6 April 2014	Seizure of the state administration buildings in Donetsk, Luhansk (and Kharkiv) by pro-Russian militants. The regional SBU headquarters in both oblast centers (Donetsk and Luhansk) were raided. Significant stores of automatic weapons were seized by separatist militants.
12 April 2014	Arrival of Igor Girkin and his group to Sloviansk, the beginning of the armed confrontation with incumbent government in Kyiv
13 April 2014	The Ukrainian government declared an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) in the eastern part of the country.
14 April 2014	Rebel militias led by Girkin and Igor Bezler had taken control of government buildings in other cities, such as Kramatorsk, Yenakieve, Horlivka etc.
15 April 2014	Interim President of Ukraine Oleksandr Turchynov launched a military counter-offensive operation, called the "Anti-Terrorist Operation."
2 May 2014	Fans of Odessa football club Chornomorets and Kharkiv club Metalist march after the match For United Ukraine under the protection of the local police. Pro-Russian separatists attack the fans. In the ensuing battle, pro-Russian separatists retreat to the Trade Unions house, which is lit on fire, resulting in 42 deaths.
11 May 2014	Illegal referendum in so-called LNR and DNR (both "people's republics" are only parts of their respective provinces).
12 May 2014	The secessionists declared the independence of DNR and LNR. It kicked off a more militarized phase of the conflict, as the focus spread from occupying specific buildings to securing the entire territory of Donetsk and Luhansk. This led to a series of attacks by separatist forces on facilities of the Ukrainian state.
25 May 2014	Presidential elections in Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko becomes the new president of Ukraine.
26 May 2014	Fights for Donetsk Airport started after Vostok Battalion rebel fighters captured the main terminal.
June-July 2014	Escalation of the fights, Russian arms supplies, including heavy weaponry of Soviet provenience, such as T-64 battle tanks, modifications of T-72 tanks, "Gvozdika" self-propelled howitzers, BMP-1 and BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles and others.
Early July 2014	Girkin's forces retreat from Slovyansk and Kramatorsk to Donetsk.

17 July 2014	Russian Buk surface-to-air missile shot down Malaysian Airlines flight 17 en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. By spurring widespread outrage, the downing of MH17 dramatically changed the course of the broader conflict between Russia and the West. As a result, more people advocated sanctions against Russia, and fewer spoke openly against them. A week after the disaster, yet another new round of sanctions was announced.
Second half of July 2014	Ukrainian Army and Volunteer Battalions recapture Ukrainian cities (Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka, Kostyantynivka, Severodonetsk, Lysychansk).
Mid-August 2014	Direct invasion of the Russian Armed Forces to Eastern Ukraine.
Second half of August 2014	Battle of Ilovaisk – The Russian Army encircled a large group of Ukrainian forces. An attempt to relieve them was repulsed by Russian forces. Ukrainian troops were surrounded and on August 29 they surrendered. As many as three hundred soldiers were killed, including some who were attacked as they evacuated. Then Luhansk airport, which had been used as a base for Ukrainian forces shelling rebel positions, was destroyed.
5 September 2014	Signature of the Minsk Protocol – under the auspices of the OSCE, Ukraine, Russia, DNR and LNR agreed to ceasefire. The signing of the Minsk agreement was a result, rather than a cause, of the slowdown in the fighting that both sides sought after the battle of Ilovaisk.
January-February 2015	Battle of Debaltseve - The area comprised a government-controlled salient, largely surrounded by rebel-held territory, as well as the symbolically important Donetsk International Airport. It was significant as a junction of roads and railroads, and hence was important for the lines of communications of both sides. As in Ilovaisk the previous summer, the result was a disaster for Ukrainian forces, many of whom were killed or captured, despite the ceasefire.
February 2015	Minsk-2 - The fighting around Debaltseve demonstrated that the Minsk Protocol of 2014 was a shambles. Despite that failure, the parties put the same process into effect in February 2015. As in the case of Minsk-1, Minsk-2 served the immediate needs of the various parties but established a road map for the future which could not actually be followed. Russia and the rebels had little interest in the withdrawal of Russian forces or in reestablishing Ukraine's control over the border. Each side expected that the commitments it favored were nonnegotiable, while seeking to avoid the commitments that it found unacceptable. The result was an agreement that could not be implemented, but also could not be abandoned.

(Sources: D'Anieri 2019; Freedman 2019; Wynnyckyj 2019; Kofman et al. 2017).

Table 2: Major rebel militias in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (>100 fighters)

Rebel group	**Commander**	**Date of founding**	**Base**
Slovyansk Brigade	Igor Girkin ("Strelkov"), RF	April 2014	Slovyansk/Donetsk
Vostok	Aleksandr Khodakovskii ("Skif")	April 2014	Donetsk/Makiivka
Oplot	Aleksandr Zakharchenko	April 2014	Donetsk
Russian Orthodox Army	Mikhail Verin or Dmitrii Boitsov, RF	April 2014	Donetsk
Bezler's group	Igor Bezler ("Bes")	April 2014	Horlivka
Zarya	Igor Plotnitskiy	May 2014	Luhansk
People's Militia/Ghost	Alexei Mozgovoi	May 2014	Lysychansk/Alchevsk
Stakhanov's Cossack Self-Defense / M. Platov's First Cossack Regiment	Pavel Dremov	May 2014	Severodonetsk/Stakhanov

Stas Sinelnikov’s First Cossack Hundred	Aleksandr Gaidei (“Rim”)	May 2014	Sverdlovsk
Rapid Task Force “Batman”	Aleksandr Bednov (“Batman”)	May 2014	Luhansk
Leshiy/SMERSH LNR	Alexei Pavlov (“Leshii”)	May 2014	Luhansk
Kalmius	Valentin Motuzenko (“Ataman Ivanych”)	June 2014	Donetsk
International Brigade *Pyatnashka*	Archa Avidzba	June 2014	Donetsk
Sparta (splinter from Slovyansk Brigade)	Arsen Pavlov (“Motorola”), RF	July 2014	Donetsk
Somali (splinter from Slovyansk Brigade)	Mikhail Tolstykh (“Givi”)	September 2014	Horlivka
Berkut	Igor Sokolov, RF	October 2014	Horlivka

Table 3: Minor Rebel Militias (<100 fighters)

Rebel group	**Commander**	**Date of founding**	**Base**
n/a	Andrei Skoryi	May 2014	Lysychansk
Vostok-13	Vyacheslav Yakovenko (“Kerch”)	May 2014	Lysychansk
n/a	Sergey Pak	May 2014	Severodonetsk
n/a	Andrei Gontarev	May 2014	Bakhmut
n/a	Sergei Iochkov (“Veles”)	May 2014	Bakhmut
Aleksandr Nevskii Battalion	Dmitriy Soldatov	May 2014	Alchevsk
Olkhon	Maksim Tkhorzhevskii (“Olkhon”), RF	n/a	
Kerch	Vadim Pogodin (“Kerch”)	May 2014	Donetsk
Varyag	Aleksandr Matyushin	May 2014	Donetsk
Don	Pavel Orlov	n/a	Luhansk oblast
Ryazan	Eduard Gilazov (“Ryazan”), RF	n/a	Donetsk
Step	Aleksandr Mamoshin (“Samurai”), RF	June 2014	Snizhne
KGB	?	June-July 2014	Luhansk
n/a	Igor Shevelev (“Che Guevara”), RF	Summer 2014	Lutuhyno
Vityaz	Dmitriy Eliseev (“Mujahed”)		Krasnodon
Odessa	Alexey Fominov (“Foma”)	July 2014	Krasnodon
Rus	Viktor Veremeenko	n/a	Krasnodon
Troya	Vladimir Novikov (“Belyi”)/Vladimir Novikov (“Alabai”)	July-August 2014	Ozeryanovka
Avgust	Aleksandr Kostin (“Avgust”)	August 2014	n/a
Rapid Response Task Force of Cossack Union of the Don Host (KSOVD)	Yurii Safonenko (“Batya”)	October 2014	Donetsk
Brianka-USSR	Dmitriy Pindurin (“Lyutyi”)	n/a	Brianka
Smert’ (Chechen	Ruslan Azizov (“Stinger”)	November 2014	Donetsk oblast

battalion)			
Lavina	Ostap Chernyi	n/a	Horlivka
Khan (splintered from Vostok)	“Khan” (later Yegor Gorshkov)	February 2015	Donetsk
Knights of Donbas	Yurii Afonin	n/a	Horlivka
Che Guevara’s group	Aleksandr Filippov (“Che Guevara”)	n/a	Holmivskii/Horlivka
Rusich (splinter from GBR Batman)	Aleksei Milchakov	June 2014	Luhansk

Table 4: Fate of the Autonomous and Semi-Autonomous Rebel Commanders in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts

Commander	**Outcome**
Igor Girkin (“Strelkov”), RF	Recalled back to Russia in August 2014.
Aleksandr Khodakovskii (“Skif”)	Stayed in DNR in opposition, participates in the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.
Aleksandr Zakharchenko	DNR head, killed in a blast in August 2018.
Valeriy Bolotov	Stayed in Russia from summer 2014, died in Moscow in January 2017 under suspicious circumstances (officially from heart attack).
Mikhail Verin or Dmitrii Boitsov, RF	Their rebel militia merged with *Oplot.*
Igor Bezler (“Bes”)	Forced to go to occupied Crimea in late October 2014.
Igor Plotnitskiy	LNR head, forced to go to Russia in 2017.
Alexei Mozgovoi	Killed in May 2015.
Pavel Dremov	Killed in December 2015.
Aleksandr Bednov (“Batman”)	Killed in January 2015.
Valentin Motuzenko (“Ataman Ivanych”)	His rebel militia merged with DNR Army Corps.
Alexei Pavlov (“Leshii”)	Merged with LNR armed forces, he died in October 2020 from Covid-19.
Mikhail Tolstykh (“Givi”)	Killed in February 2017 with a Shmel’ flamethrower in his office.
Arsen Pavlov (“Motorola”), RF	Killed in October 2016 when an improvised explosive device went off in the elevator of the house where he lived.
Igor Sokolov, RF	n/a
Aleksandr Gaidei (“Rim”)	Fled to Russia in 2015
Arkha Avidzba	Left for Abkhazia, arrested for his political and criminal activities in Sukhumi.
Oleg Mamiev (Avizdba’s successor in Pyatnashka)	Killed by the Ukrainian Army in 2018.
Aleksandr Konkin (“Foton”)	Detained and forced to go to Russia in June 2015
Sergei Kosogorov (“Kosogor”)	Detained by LNR-loyal forces in February 2015 and jailed.
Roman Voznyak (“Tsygan”)	Former Berkut officer was killed in. March 2015 in Donetsk by unknown assassins.
Oleg Orchikov (“Vargan”)	Arrested in November 2014 and sentenced to life in 2017.
Yurii Safonenko (“Batya”)	Sentenced to prison
Maksim Tkhorzhevskii (“Olkhon”), RF	Fled to Russia
Vadim Pogodin (“Kerch”)	Lives and works in Crimea.
Aleksandr Mamoshin (“Samurai”), RF	Fled to Russia
Igor Shevelev (“Che Guevara”)	Fled to Russia
Aleksandr Kostin (“Avgust”)	Sentenced to 14 years in 2018 and died in prison two years later.
Troya and its commanders	Rebel militia disarmed, fighters imprisoned, one of the commanders fled

	to Russia.
Yurii Safonenko (“Batya”)	Sentenced to prison with several other members of the rebel militia.
Maksim Tkhorzhevskiy (“Olkhon”)	Survived an assassination attempt in December 2015 and returned to Russia.
Alexey Fominov (“Foma”)	Arrested and jailed for six months, Odessa rebel militia disarmed.
Ruslan Azizov (“Stinger”)	Killed near Rubizhne in April 2022.
Aleksandr Filippov (“Che Guevara”)	Probably killed.

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Interviews (2018-2021)

Interview 1: Political analyst and the Head of NGO Ukrainian People's Council of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast (UNRDL), Kyiv, 2018 and 2019.

Interview 2: Ex-member of the Donetsk Republic and Ukrainian voluntary battalion veteran, Online Call, 2018.

Interview 3: Ukrainian voluntary battalion veteran, Shakhtar Donetsk football fan and pro-Ukrainian activist, Kyiv, 2019.

Interview 4: Journalist and popular blogger from Donetsk, Kyiv, 2019.

Interview 5: Editor-in-chief of pro-Ukrainian newspaper and organizer of pro-Ukrainian meetings in Donetsk in 2014, Kyiv, 2019.

Interview 6: Commander of voluntary company Donetsk and former police officer, Kyiv, 2019.

Interview 7: Former police officer and voluntary fighter in Donetsk company, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 8: Journalist from Luhansk, Online Call, June 2019.

Interview 9: Journalist in Novoye vremya from Donetsk, Kyiv, 2018.

Interview 10: Political activist from Kostiantynivka, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 11: Volunteer and civic activist in Kramatorsk, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 12: Political activist from Makiivka, close to the *Svoboda* party, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 13: Head of communications at business structures in Donetsk before the war, then journalist and activist in Mariupol's public sector, editor of the “Free Donbass” news feed on Facebook, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 14: Editor-in-chief of local online newspapers related to Donetsk oblast, Kyiv, 2019.

Interview 15: Civic activist and the head of local initiatives in Toretsk, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 16: Journalist and blogger from Yenakieve, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 17: Former official in the Yenakieve City Executive Committee, who escaped from the rebel detention facility, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 18: Civil society activist from Bakhmut, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 19: Civic and political activist in Druzhkivka, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 20: Blogger and political activist from Sverdlovsk, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 21 – Political scientist from university in Mariupol, political activist and soldier in Ukrainian Army, Online Call, 2020.

Interview 22: Russian volunteer from the Far East, who fought in the Ukrainian voluntary battalions, Kyiv, 2018.

Interview 23: Lawyer and civic activist in Lysychansk, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 24: Political activist and commentator from Luhansk, Kyiv, 2018.

Interview 25: Journalist living in rebel-held territories, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 26: Russian volunteer from St. Petersburg, MMA fighter and instructor, who fought in the Ukrainian voluntary battalions, Prague, 2019.

Interview 27: Former entrepreneur, independent trade union and volunteer fighter from Sverdlovsk, Kyiv, Online 2019, Face-to-face in Kyiv, 2020.

Interview 28: Political activist from Mariupol, Online Call, 2019.

Interview 29 - Former advisor to the Donetsk head of regional administration in 2014, Online Call, 2020.