How the War Began: Conflict Escalation in the Donbas

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Introduction

Modern information technology is a blessing and a curse for the study of armed conflict. On the one hand, the Internet gives researchers unprecedented access to information from conflict zones. On the other hand, the large volume of this information, and the prevalence of disinformation, can make it difficult for researchers to agree on the actual facts that underpin their work.

A prime example for this is the war in the Donbas. The academic debate about this conflict is split along the same dividing line as the wider political discourse. Some portray the war as a home-grown Ukrainian phenomenon – a civil war with a certain degree of Russian meddling. Others portray it as a Russian invasion in disguise. Each narrative has very different implications for policy making and further academic research, but neither is currently based on a transparent research methodology.

This conference paper is based on findings from the first year of my doctoral research. It argues that it is both necessary and possible to investigate the relative importance of domestic and foreign factors in the outbreak of violence in the Donbas in a more transparent and comprehensive way.

I will proceed in four steps. Firstly, I will outline the academic debate on the nature and causes of the Donbas conflict, its shortcomings, and its implications. Secondly, I will introduce process tracing through open source intelligence analysis as a methodology that can shed additional light on the issue in question. Thirdly, I will propose a structured escalation sequence of the conflict as a basis for investigating the relative impact of domestic and foreign factors. Fourthly, I will illustrate the application of my methodology by investigating a key critical juncture in this escalation sequence – the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk on 12-13 April 2014.

1. Popular Uprising or Covert Invasion? – The Academic Debate

The academic debate on the causes of the Donbas conflict is less polarized than the discourse in politics and media. Most scholars accept that there was some degree of Russian involvement. Most scholars also agree that what happened was not a straightforward invasion of one country by another, either. What let the conflict escalate and defined its characteristics was an interplay between domestic and foreign factors. However, when it comes to the relative importance of these factors, the academic debate shows a clear divide.

1.1. The Civil War Hypothesis

A first group of scholars claims that Russian involvement played a secondary role compared to domestic factors. Kudelia (2016, 5) writes that "although many blame Moscow for starting the war in the region, the key role was played by processes that took place within Ukraine." Katchanovski (2016, 483) argues that his analysis "points to the origins of this conflict as a civil war." Loshkariov and Sushentsov (2016, 85) claim that "three months of hostilities passed before Moscow decided to provide limited support to the rebels." Matsuzato (2017, 176) warns of viewing Donbas separatist leaders as "no more than Russia's subordinates." According to Matveeva (2016, 36), "Moscow's role was not the key variable." Davies (2016, 737) describes the war as a clash between the Kyiv authorities and "opposition" forces, over which Russia had no "broad and consistent degree of control." And Robinson (2016, 506) writes that "far from instigating the rebellion [...], Moscow has largely been reacting to events."

Proponents of the civil war hypothesis base their arguments on the following evidence:

- Opinion poll data suggesting that a significant part of the Donbas population backed separatist ideas (Kudelia 2016, 9–13; Katchanovski 2016, 484).
- Societal divisions in post-Soviet Ukraine (Loshkariov and Sushentsov 2016).
- Media reports claiming that most separatist fighters were Ukrainian citizens (Kudelia 2016, 19; Katchanovski 2016, 483).
- Interviews with experts and separatist representatives (Matsuzato 2017, 190–200; Matveeva 2016, 33–40).
- Statements by the Russian leadership (Davies 2016, 733–43; Robinson 2016, 509–12).

This evidence leaves a number of questions open. Firstly, the authors cited above do not pay sufficient attention to investigating processes which are able to link structural factors, such as public sentiment and societal divisions, to militarization and armed conflict. Separatist ideas are not sufficient to cause armed conflict by themselves. People also have to act upon them. Secondly, it is unclear whether the nationality of combatants is a valid criterion for the categorization of a conflict as a civil war. Combatants could be agents of a foreign state regardless of their citizenship. Finally, those proponents of the civil war hypothesis who rely on interviews and official statements do not pay enough attention to the possibility that their sources may be deliberately misleading.

1.2. The Intervention Hypothesis

A second group of scholars claims that local factors played a secondary role compared to intervention from Moscow. Wilson (2016, 647) describes Moscow as the key driving force behind the war – an "active player, trying different sparks until one caught light." He concludes that "the war that began in 2014 was not a civil war with foreign intervention but a process catalyzed and escalated by local elites and by Russia, with local foot-soldiers" (Wilson 2016, 649). Galeotti (2016, 285) says that "having essentially engineered a local insurrection [...], Moscow set up proxy regimes." The militias of these proxy regimes "were stiffened, supported, and sometimes supervised by elements from Russia." Furthermore, Galeotti (2016, 286) argues that Russia's military intelligence service played a crucial role in the escalation of violence in the

Donbas. Bowen (2019, 313–14) portrays the war in Donbas as a Russian "coercive diplomacy" operation with the aim to "negate any further Ukrainian drift toward the West." This operation involved "non-state actors [...] supported and directed by Moscow to give the appearance of a local rebellion," as well as "limited direct injections of Russian units and troops."

These scholars mainly base their arguments on the work of investigative journalists. However, a critical appraisal of the source material is not a central part of their work. Sources are cited as an affirmation of the narrative rather than being treated as the data creating this narrative in the first place. This approach is problematic because it lacks the transparency that is particularly crucial in politically charged cases. In the age of fake news, claims made by the media have to be critically assessed. If an author fails to discuss source reliability, their analysis inevitably becomes more susceptible to attacks from critics. Moreover, an explicit and transparent appraisal of the available evidence also forces a researcher to reflect more on the credibility of their sources and thereby lowers the risk of cherry picking and unconscious bias.

1.3. Why Does It Matter?

As Europe's most devastating armed conflict of the early 21st century, the outbreak of the Donbas war is an important research topic in its own right. However, the relative importance of domestic and foreign factors has implications far beyond the fields of area studies and contemporary history.

1.3.1. Quantitative Research on the Causes of War

Most peace and conflict studies scholars base their research on conflict datasets. This means that the correct coding of the Donbas conflict is an issue of data quality. Because the differentiation between civil war and interstate war is firmly established in the field, labelling the Donbas conflict as one or the other will predetermine which other wars it will be subsequently compared to.

Currently, the most comprehensive and influential armed conflict dataset, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), sides with proponents of the civil war hypothesis. It codes the war as a group of intrastate conflicts between the Ukrainian authorities and local rebel formations (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). Russia is labelled as a secondary conflict party, which would make its role in the Donbas equivalent to its involvement in Syria. This categorization is not compatible with the arguments made by proponents of the intervention hypothesis.

1.3.2. Ukraine's Internal Divisions

For qualitative comparative researchers, the question whether domestic or foreign factors were decisive for the onset of the Donbas conflict presents a fork at the very beginning of an assumed reversed causal chain. Depending on which answer is chosen, scholars who seek to understand the deeper roots of the conflict will be pointed along very different pathways. Primacy of domestic factors would suggest that such scholars should focus on sociological, political, and economic studies of Ukraine. This, in turn, would strengthen the case of those, who analyze Ukraine as a divided nation with potential similarities to other failed states which descended into violence because of their internal contradictions. Primacy of foreign intervention, on the contrary, would point scholars toward searching the conflict's deeper roots primarily in the

determinants of Russian foreign policy making. It would strengthen the case of those, who want to compare Ukraine to other nation states facing an existential external threat from neighboring countries.

1.3.3. Russian Foreign Policy Analysis

Primacy of domestic factors in the outbreak of the Donbas conflict would also strengthen the case of scholars like Tsygankov (2015), who portrays Russia as a rational, moderate actor pursuing a foreign policy guided by interests and values. This portrayal is compatible with limited support for a rebel movement to force conflict parties to the negotiating table. It is much less compatible with the targeted military destabilization of a neighboring country facing a domestic crisis. Primacy of foreign factors would be better suited to support a more aggressive interpretation of Russian foreign policy.

1.3.4. Policy Implications

Finally, the question of Russia's involvement in the Donbas also has important implications for the Minsk peace process and the prospects of conflict regulation. Primacy of domestic causes implies that solutions should be primarily domestic as well. Consequently, many proponents of the civil war hypothesis are supportive of Moscow's demand that Kyiv should negotiate directly with the leaders of the self-proclaimed separatist republics and reject calls for additional international pressure on Russia. Proponents of foreign factor primacy, on the other hand, are more likely to argue that it is the Kremlin who holds the key to conflict regulation and that diplomatic efforts have to focus primarily on Moscow.

2. Process Tracing

This paper proposes a new, forensic approach to process tracing to fill the gaps left by the current academic literature and provide a more transparent assessment of the causes of the Donbas conflict. Process tracing is a social science methodology which tries to open the black box between cause and effect. To describe what is inside this black box, process tracing relies heavily on the concept of "causal mechanisms." Despite the central role of this concept, there is no general consensus on what a causal mechanism actually is. Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, 51) list as many as nine different definitions, most of which are rather abstract and general. Beach and Pedersen (2013, 29–30) draw on some of these definitions to make the concept more concrete and precise. They define a causal mechanism as a set of entities that engage in activities which transmit causal force from a cause to an outcome. They argue that a causal mechanism can be compared to a machine with toothed wheels (the entities), the movement of which (their activities) transmits causal force through the machine. In the case of the Donbas conflict, these moving toothed wheels are the actors and actions that link domestic and foreign factors to the outbreak of violence in the Donbas.

2.1. Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) Analysis

Process tracing has already received significant attention in relation to state leaders' decision-making that facilitated or averted armed conflict. However, it has not been used extensively to analyze violence in warzones itself (Tannenwald 2015, 220–23). The main reason for this is the fact that process tracing usually relies on

comprehensive records of decision-making. Consequently, Lyall (2015) argues that the only way to carry out process tracing analysis of civil war are interviews collected in the conflict zone. However, this may prove difficult in practice, especially if a conflict is still ongoing.

An alternative data source in this context is open source intelligence (OSINT). It encompasses the vast amount of information that modern information technology has made available to the general public in the form of text, picture, and video material posted on news websites or on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube. It also includes the information available in public online databases, such as the flight tracking website Flightradar24, the Internet Archive project, or the annotated satellite imagery platform Wikimapia. OSINT analysis is the research technique that is used to identify, structure, and verify OSINT data. OSINT analysis has already been used by activists and journalists in the context Donbas conflict. However, it has not been used as a method of academic research so far.

OSINT analysis uses a variety of tools to make source discovery on the Internet more effective and to verify and cross check the evidence that is found. Examples are the reverse image search engines like TinEye, satellite imagery tools like GoogleEarth, or the photo and video verification toolkit InVID. A broader overview of available OSINT tools is provided by the Bellingcat (2019) "online investigation toolkit" database.

While tools are important, the main advantage of OSINT analysis is its evidence-centered epistemology. It always remains focused on the following five questions:

1. Which sources generally provide relevant and reliable data?
2. What are the primary sources of important data points?
3. How do different data points reinforce or contradict each other?
4. What facts can be deducted from the available data with a high degree of confidence?
5. What are the uncertainties and areas where evidence remains inconclusive?

OSINT analysis has two key limitations. First, there is the issue of gaps, when no data is openly available. Second, there is the issue of unconscious bias, when different analysts look at the same data and come to different conclusions. Neither of these issues can be eliminated completely. However, the use of van Evera's typology of tests can help mitigate both issues by making the evaluation of the available evidence more transparent.

2.2. Van Evera's Typology of Tests

Van Evera (1997, 31–32) groups evidence into four categories:

1. Evidence which can disprove but not prove a hypothesis. Van Evera argues that evidence of this kind represents a "hoop test" because the evidence represents a hoop that the hypothesis has to "jump through" in order to "remain viable."
2. Evidence which can prove a hypothesis but not disprove it through its absence. Van Evera calls this a "smoking gun test," because "a smoking gun seen in a suspect's hand moments after a shooting is quite conclusive proof of guilt, but a suspect not seen with a smoking gun is not proven innocent."

3. Evidence which can both prove and disprove a hypothesis. Van Evera calls this a "doubly-decisive test." This evidence presents the hypothesis with a hoop test and a smoking-gun test at once.
4. Evidence which can "weight in the total balance" but is not decisive either way. Van Evera calls this a "straw-in-the-wind test."

Van Evera's typology cannot, of course, create evidence in the absence of data. Neither can it prevent disagreements among scholars about the kind of test that a certain piece of evidence represents. However, the application of this typology forces researchers to be clear about the evidence they use to back up or disprove a hypothesis and also to spell out the weight that they assign to different pieces of evidence. Moreover, van Evera's typology acts as a link between OSINT analysis and process tracing, because important process tracing theorists mention it as an integral component of the methodology's empirical toolkit (Bennett 2009, 5–6; Bennett and Checkel 2015, 17; Mahoney 2015, 207–12).

3. Conflict Escalation in the Donbas

3.1. Escalation Theory

When investigating the Donbas conflict, it makes sense to limit process tracing efforts to the time after 22 February 2014. The question of domestic and foreign factors is only relevant in the light of the sudden regime change that occurred in Kyiv on this day. In its absence, neither a local uprising nor an intervention could have taken place in any way comparable to the actual course of events. This causal sequence from 22 February onward is best conceptualized as a process of conflict escalation.

Escalation was a prominent topic of strategic studies research during the Cold War. Kahn (1965, 39–40), for example, suggests that possible scenarios of an armed conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union can be conceptualized through an "escalation ladder" consisting of 44 steps, starting from the exchange of diplomatic notes and ending with the indiscriminate use of all available nuclear firepower. While Kahn only defines escalation in terms of this ladder example, Smoke (1977, 35) develops a more general definition of escalation as "an action that crosses a saliency which defines the current limits of a war."[1]

3.2. A Donbas Conflict Media Dataset

On the basis of Kahn's and Smoke's work, I created a draft escalation ladder for the Donbas conflict based on the manual review of a small dataset containing 6,430 media reports from the Ukrainian news website *Ukrainska Pravda* and the Russian state news agency *TASS*. These two sources represent the points of view of a high-profile Ukrainian news outlet with pro-Western views as well as the Russian state. I gathered the dataset using Python programming language code, which downloaded all articles containing Donbas-related search terms that were published on the two websites between 22 February and the First Minsk Agreement on 5 September 2014.

[1] While this definition is useful, the term "saliency" is not very intuitive. I will therefore use the term threshold to describe the war-restraining limits that are crossed by escalatory steps.

To improve the draft ladder, I created keywords relating to each step and searched for these keywords in an extended dataset containing 58,003 media reports. In addition to the initial small dataset, it includes all reports published on the local Donbas news websites *Novosti Donbassa, Ostrov*, *Novorosinform.org,* and *Novorossia.su,* and on the Donbas sections of the Ukrainian newspaper websites *Vesti* and *Segodnya. Novosti Donbassa* and *Ostrov* support a united, pro-European Ukraine. *Novorosinform.org* and *Novorossia.su* represent the separatist point of view. Because these two websites only started working properly in late May 2014, I also included *Vesti* and *Segodnya*. These two sources cover the earliest stages of unrest in the region while being linked to oligarchs who were accused of covertly supporting separatist sentiment in the Donbas.

3.3. A Donbas Conflict Escalation Graph

I used the extended news reports dataset and the subsets obtained by keyword searches to turn the initial escalation ladder into a more complex escalation graph (Figure 1). This graph shows key events relating to each escalation threshold in different parts of the Donbas over time. It shows that the developments in the region are more accurately reflected in two dimensions, with the level of escalation on the y-axis and the passage of time on the x-axis.

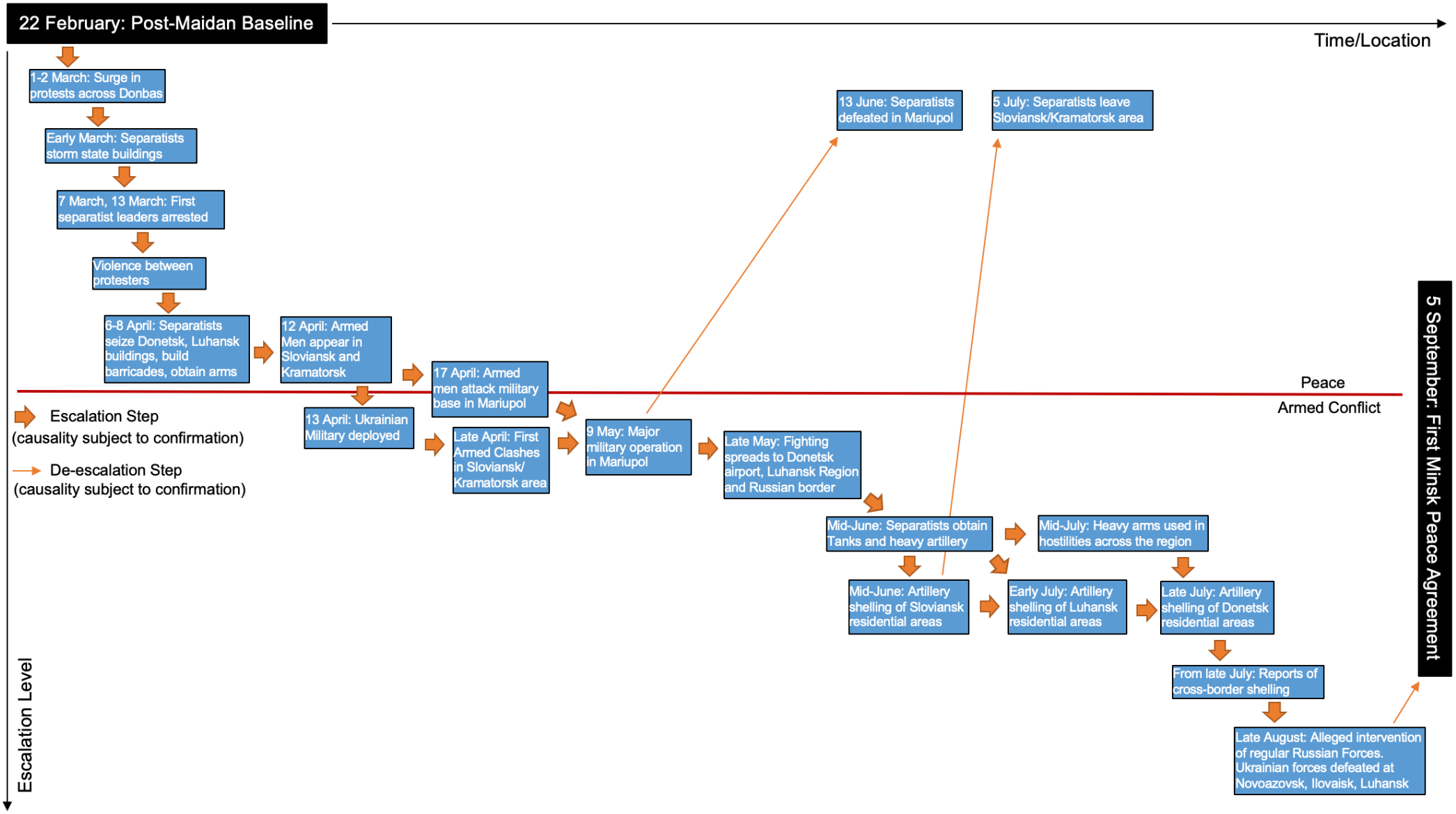
While the escalation graph provides a structure for further analysis of the conflict, it cannot solve controversies regarding the actors and actions involved in each event. Neither does it address questions of causality. It cannot be assumed that the graph is a causal sequence in which one step causes the next.

3.4. The Concept of Critical Junctures

A helpful concept to analyze conflict escalation in terms of actors and causality is the historical institutionalist idea of critical junctures. Collier and Munck (2017, 2) define a critical juncture as "a major episode of institutional innovation" which leaves an "enduring legacy." Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 348) add that a critical juncture is short compared to its legacy and that, during a critical juncture, the choices of actors have a higher impact than during the legacy period.

Three of these four criteria apply to all escalation steps. Firstly, an escalation step constitutes a major episode of innovation in an armed conflict, because it involves a major change to the implicit rules that restrain violence. Secondly, choices that cross a threshold which defines the current limits of a war are always more impactful than choices that stay within these limits. Thirdly, an act of escalation in war can only leave an enduring legacy if this legacy is long compared to the act itself.

Figure 1. Donbas Conflict Escalation Sequence



Leaving an enduring legacy, however, is the key criterion from the definition of critical junctures that is not part of the definition of escalation. In the absence of causal links to subsequent steps, an escalation step could be followed by de-escalation or superseded by further steps without leaving an enduring legacy. Because the legacy requirement brings causation into the equation, it provides added value for the study of escalation.

In the context of this paper, the enduring legacy has to be a legacy of armed conflict. It can be a legacy of violence, such as hostilities that continue for a long period of time or damage that takes a long time to repair. Alternatively or simultaneously, it can be a legacy of further escalation – a situation that makes additional critical junctures possible, which then leave a legacy of violence. Consequently, the enduring legacy criterion is closely linked to causality in terms of necessary conditions. Actors' choices can only leave a legacy on the further course of events if this course of events would not have been the same without their impact.

3.5. Critical Junctures in the Donbas

In Figure 1, the divide between peace and armed conflict is marked as a red horizontal line and follows the definition of the UCDP, which defines the start date of an armed conflict as the day of the first battle-related death (Themnér 2018, 10). In the case of the Donbas, this is the death of a Ukrainian Security Service officer in a separatist ambush near Sloviansk in the morning of 13 April 2014 (Turchynov 2014b). It makes sense to start the identification of critical junctures near this red line.

Between 6 and 17 April 2014, armed men appeared in three different areas of the Donbas. Because the legacy of these incidents varied, it is appropriate to divide them into three separate critical junctures. In two of these cases, armed clashes immediately followed, so the crossing of this escalation threshold can be included in the same critical juncture. Once fighting got underway, its spread across the region, its increasing intensity, and its alleged expansion beyond international borders can be grouped into another three critical junctures.

3.5.1. Juncture 1: Donetsk and Luhansk, Early April

On 6 April, separatist activists stormed the building of the Regional State Administration in Donetsk and the regional headquarters of the Security Service of Ukraine in Luhansk. Unlike in previous instances of building seizures in the Donbas, the activists did not vacate the buildings again but started building barricades around them (Ostrov 2014d; YouTube 2014p). More importantly, they armed themselves with automatic rifles (62.ua 2014; Novosti Donbassa 2014a; YouTube 2014q). This was the first appearance of military-grade equipment in the Donbas. Kyiv responded with threats of "antiterrorist measures" (Turchynov 2014a) but did not take any action.

Although it took almost another two months until military combat reached Donetsk and Luhansk, the armed occupation of state buildings in early April created the first militarized separatist footholds in the two cities. Without these footholds, the Ukrainian security forces could have taken control of the regional centers without the risk of armed resistance and civilian casualties. Hence, the initial militarization of separatism in Donetsk and Luhansk was a necessary precondition for the later spread of armed conflict to the two cities, even though the first fighting took place elsewhere.

3.5.2. Juncture 2: Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, Mid-Late April

On 12 April, armed men seized police stations in the towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (YouTube 2014r; 2014t). The following morning, a group of these men attacked Security Service of Ukraine operatives just outside Sloviansk. One person died and several were injured. On the same day, interim President Turchynov announced the launch of an "antiterrorist operation" with the involvement of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Hromadske TV 2014b; LifeNews 2014b; 2014a; Turchynov 2014b). Regular armed clashes in the area commenced in late April.

It is not certain that the outbreak and further escalation of fighting in other areas would not have been possible in the absence of the events around Sloviansk. However, these events left a lasting legacy of armed conflict in their own right. For over two months after the outbreak of armed conflict – until the separatists' withdrawal from Sloviansk on 5 July – the most intense fighting took place in this region. Even if the whole armed conflict had been limited to this episode, it would have left a legacy of violence that was unprecedented in Ukraine since World War II.

3.5.3. Juncture 3: Mariupol – Where Separatism Failed

After Sloviansk, the southern port city of Mariupol was the first place in the Donbas where tensions crossed the armed conflict threshold (Novosti Donbassa 2014b; Vesti 2014b; 2014c). However, the level of violence and separatist control never reached the level observed in other areas of the Donbas and the Kyiv authorities consolidated their control over the city as early as mid-June (Novorosinform.org 2014; Liga.Novosti 2014). Nevertheless, the fighting that occurred left a legacy of armed conflict in this city. Moreover, analyzing the escalation of violence in Mariupol may indicate why armed separatism was less successful there than elsewhere in the Donbas.

3.5.4. Juncture 4: The Fighting Spreads, Late May

From 19 May onwards, hostilities rapidly spread to several other locations, such as Volnovakha (Ostrov 2014e), Karlivka (Novosti Donbassa 2014e), the Russian-Ukrainian border (Novosti Donbassa 2014d; 2014c), Donetsk airport (TASS 2014a), the north of Luhansk Region (Seleznev 2014; Tymchuk 2014), and even parts of Luhansk city (Novosti Donbassa 2014f; TASS 2014b). This sudden increase in the theater of war paved the way for continuing hostilities in these new hotbeds. Potentially, each incident of fighting spreading to a new location could be defined as a separate critical juncture. However, to avoid fragmentation of the analysis, it makes sense to group these incidents together. If appropriate, the resulting critical juncture can later be subdivided.

3.5.5. Juncture 5: Tanks and Heavy Artillery, June-July

The Ukrainian Armed Forces first used airstrikes during armed clashes at Donetsk Airport on 26 May (Segodnya 2014a). The use of heavy artillery was first reported near Sloviansk on 29 May (Ostrov 2014f) and the combat deployment of Ukrainian tanks in this region was confirmed on 6 June (Segodnya 2014b). In mid-June, first reports of tanks and artillery under separatist control appeared (YouTube 2014w; Segodnya 2014c). Soon the use of tanks and heavy artillery on both sides became a common occurrence across the battlefield. Heavy arms left a particularly devastating legacy, because they were responsible for most of the damage and loss of life in the Donbas during the course of the armed conflict. Again, each instance of heavy arms use in a

new location could be defined as a new critical juncture. However, like in the previous case, it makes sense to group all incidents of heavy arms use initially into one juncture, which can later be subdivided.

3.5.6. Juncture 6: Intervention of Regular Russian Forces, Late August

The Ukrainian Armed Forces first voiced allegations of cross-border shelling from Russian territory in mid-July (Segodnya 2014d). They continued to report similar incidents throughout August. When hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers lost their lives while trying to leave an encirclement near the town of Ilovaisk on 29 August and Ukrainian forces lost control of the areas east of Mariupol and south of Luhansk, Kyiv claimed that a major Russian invasion force was responsible for this sudden defeat (Ostrov 2014g). Moscow denies any such intervention, but, if there was convincing evidence to the contrary, this would suggest Russian involvement in a final and crucial critical juncture in the initial, formative stage of the conflict. The sudden defeat of the Ukrainian forces led to the First Minsk Agreement, which was signed on 5 September and resulted in some degree of de-escalation. It limited the conflict to armed clashes along a contact line that has not seen major alterations, with the exception of the Battle of Debaltseve in early 2015. However, the events of late August also prevented Ukrainian forces from regaining control over the whole of the Donbas. Hence these events were a necessary condition for the continuation of the armed conflict over the years that followed.

3.6. The Role of Pre-Conflict Events

Figure 1 also features escalation steps between the starting point of the escalation sequence and the beginning of armed conflict. These pre-conflict events are included because they could qualify as critical junctures by featuring choices that were necessary conditions for further escalation. A closer look at the relevant events, however, suggests that this is not the case.

3.6.1. Violence Among Protesters

There is no plausible causal connection between the violence against pro-European activists at protests in mid-March (Ostrov 2014c) and the appearance of armed groups. Violence among protesters could have caused further escalation either if protesters had obtained arms as a result or if it had resulted in the security forces using violence to stop further protests from taking place. Neither was the case in the Donbas. The first arms appeared not at protest events but in occupied buildings and at no point did the security forces use violence against protesters.

3.6.2. The Arrest of Separatist Leaders

Arresting protest leaders could cause further escalation of a conflict either by radicalizing an initially moderate protest movement or by strengthening a protest movement because new people join it to demand freedom for those arrested. Neither was the case in the Donbas. Calls for a complete power transfer to the local level and referenda on independence or joining Russia were aimed at conflict escalation from the very beginning. Neither did the arrests galvanize further public support. Separatist protest rallies in late March were similar in size if not smaller than in the beginning of the month (YouTube 2014i; 2014j; 2014k; 2014l).

3.6.3. The Occupation of State Buildings

Initial incidents of protesters storming state buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk in early March were periodical and temporary (Vesti 2014a; YouTube 2014f; 2014h; 2014g). In all cases, the activists vacated the occupied buildings after a few hours or days. None of these attempts had a lasting impact, apart from media attention, the arrest of some separatist leaders, and some damage to property. Moreover, there were no reports of building seizures in Donetsk and Luhansk between 16 March and 6 April. This suggests that the people who stormed buildings on 6 April, built barricades, and obtained arms basically had to start from scratch.

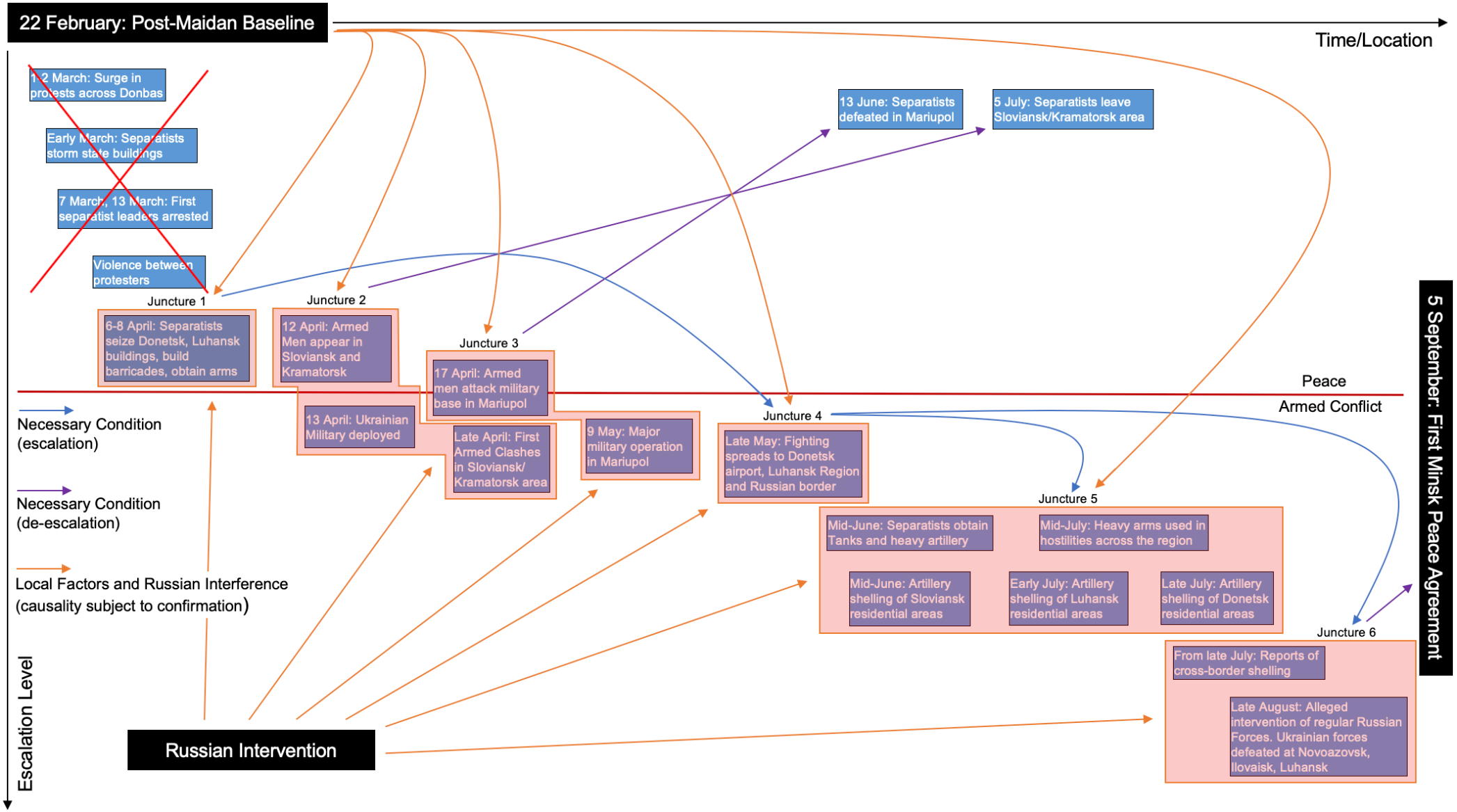
3.6.4. Mass Protests Against Kyiv Authorities

On the weekend of 1-2 March 2014, large protest rallies against the new Kyiv authorities took place in a number of cities across the Donbas. The largest rallies were reported from Donetsk and Luhansk with 10,000 people in each city (Ostrov 2014a; 2014b). Video footage of these events is accessible through a simple YouTube search. Gaging the number of attendees from the videos is difficult, but the footage suggests that up to 10,000 protesters in the two regional centers is a generous maximum estimate (YouTube 2014c; 2014e; 2014b; 2014d). However, it is difficult to argue that even such moderate crowd sizes were a necessary condition for the further escalation of the conflict. By April, the protest movement had lost rather than gained momentum. Footage of the 6 April events in Donetsk and Luhansk suggests that the crowd of protesters present during the occupation of the buildings did not exceed 1,000 people (YouTube 2014m; 2014n; 2014o). Gatherings of this size were well within the baseline of protest activity observed in the immediate aftermath of the ouster of President Yanukovych.

3.7. Visualizing Critical Junctures

The conclusions of the discussion above are illustrated in Figure 2. In the language of van Evera's tests, they can be summarized as follows: There is smoking gun evidence that the choices that led to six event clusters from early April onwards left a lasting legacy of violence or further conflict escalation. The events leading up to early April, however, failed the necessity hoop tests required of a critical juncture.

Figure 2. Donbas Conflict Critical Junctures



4. The Occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk

The occupation of police stations in the towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk led to the deployment of the Ukrainian military and the first armed clashes of the conflict. These events therefore represent a critical juncture of particular significance. For this reason, I will use them as an illustrative case study to investigate the relative importance of local and foreign factors in relation to this particular episode of conflict escalation.

The head of the armed group that occupied the buildings on 12 April and ambushed the Ukrainian operatives on the following day was Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov), a Russian citizen and resident of Moscow. Girkin made his first public appearance in a 26 April interview, in which he said that his group had gathered in Crimea and that two thirds of it consisted of Ukrainian citizens (Girkin, Kots, and Steshin 2014). In a later interview (Girkin and Shargunov 2014), he said that his group comprised a total of 52 men but only named one other person – Arsen Pavlov (nom-de-guerre Motorola), a Russian citizen who later became a prominent separatist militia leader in Donetsk.

Four other members of the group have been identified or given information about their background. Girkin's deputy Serhiy Zdryliuk (nom-de-guerre Abver) has appeared in public, after which a Ukrainian newspaper interviewed his mother and former neighbors. They said that Zdryliuk was from Ukraine's Vinnytsia Region but had lived in Crimea for many years (Zdryliuk and Murakhovska 2014). Another close associate of Girkin, Yevgeniy Skripnik, appears on a video taken in Sloviansk on 12 April (YouTube 2014r). On his social media page, Skripnik (2019) says that he served in the Russian military for most of the 1990s. Moreover, Skripnik (2014) said in an interview that he was involved in the occupation of Crimea and that he has known Girkin since their involvement in the Transnistrian conflict in 1992. A third unnamed militia member was interviewed at a checkpoint in Sloviansk. He said that he was from Crimea and had participated in the seizure of buildings there (YouTube 2014v). A fourth militiaman, who appears on footage of the same checkpoint (YouTube 2014u), was later identified as Aleksandr Mozhayev (nom-de-guerre Babay). He confirmed in an interview that he was a Russian citizen and that he had also participated in the occupation of Crimea (Mozhayev and Shuster 2014).

Girkin himself never disputed his Russian citizenship and also confirmed his involvement in the Crimean takeover. This is in line with the available evidence. A Ukrainian TV camera team visited the Moscow apartment block where Girkin's family lived and spoke to his neighbors (TSN 2014). Russian nationalist journalist Sergey Shargunov said that he had met Girkin when he visited Crimea in late February 2014 and got the impression that Girkin was an authority figure among the paramilitary groups which supported the Russian takeover (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). Girkin also appears in a video showing the arrest of a Ukrainian businessman in Simferopol, Crimea, on 4 March 2014 (Hromadske TV 2014a).

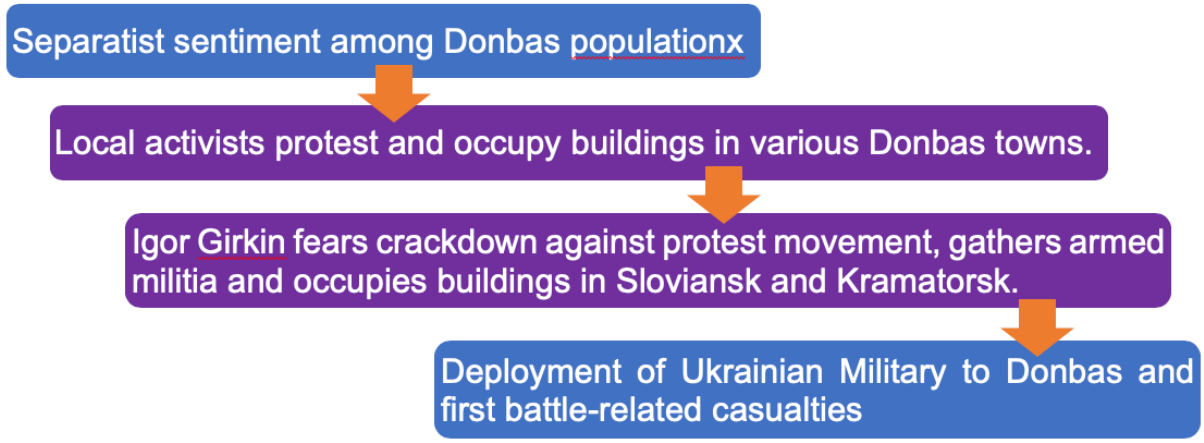
4.1. The Militia as an Organ of the Russian State

The question how to include this Russian and Crimean background of the militia into a causal sequence leads to the key disagreement between proponents of the civil war hypothesis and proponents of the intervention hypothesis.

Representatives of the former group do not deny that Igor Girkin and some of his militiamen were Russian. However, they portray them as mavericks, who did not have the support of the Russian authorities. They went to the Donbas on their own initiative hoping that Russia would repeat the Crimean scenario after they took the lead. This hope did not materialize, but the Kyiv authorities overreacted and sent the military to the Donbas (Katchanovski 2016, 480; Kudelia 2016, 14–16; Robinson 2016, 511). According to this hypothesis, the absence of Russian state intervention means that the overall escalation dynamic remains largely internal to Ukraine.

H1: Igor Girkin and his group were agents of the Donbas separatist movement and their actions part of a domestic escalation dynamic.

Figure 3. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk: Civil War Hypothesis Sequence



Representatives of the latter group portray Girkin as an agent of the Russian state (Mitrokhin 2014, 167–70; Wilson 2016, 648).

H2: Igor Girkin and his group were agents of the Russian state and their actions introduced a new level of Kremlin intervention to the Donbas conflict.

Figure 4. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk: Intervention Hypothesis Sequence

The available open source evidence supports H2. It passes two "smoking-gun tests." The alternative sequence presented in Figure 3, on the other hand, fails a hoop test (van Evera 1997, 31–32).

The first piece of evidence is a series of recordings which the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU 2014) published on 14 April 2014. According to the SBU, the recordings were phone conversations of militiamen intercepted the previous day. In one of the recordings, a person addressed as "Strelok" is told that "Aleksandr from Russia" is calling. Strelok then reports to Aleksandr that his group "repelled the first attack." In a subsequent recording, Strelok reports to a person who he addresses as "Konstantin Valeriyevich" about the same attack. He says that his group fired at three cars with Ukrainian security operatives. In response, Konstantin Valeriyevich asks if Strelok has "briefed Aksenov." After Strelok says that he has not been able to get hold of Aksenov, Konstantin Valeriyevich tells him to keep trying but also mentions that Aksenov "will land here tonight" and that he "will meet with him tomorrow."

The voices in the recording are highly likely to belong to Igor Girkin (nom-de-guerre Strelok), Aleksandr Boroday, and Konstantin Valeriyevich Malofeyev. Boroday is a Russian PR agent, who later became head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. Malofeyev is a Russian oligarch and campaigner for conservative Russian Orthodox values. Aksenov is the surname of Crimea's Prime Minister Sergey Aksenov, who was installed during the Russian takeover of the peninsula.

The recordings are likely to be authentic conversations between these three people for a number of reasons:

1. Although Boroday and Malofeyev denied collaborating with Girkin in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, they admitted that the three of them knew each other and that they had worked together in the past (Boroday and Opalev 2014). Malofeyev even admitted that Girkin travelled with him to Kyiv as recently as January 2014 (Malofeyev, Sergina, and Kozlov 2014).
2. Aric Toler (2019), lead researcher at the Bellingcat open source investigation group, used the GetContact app to check the number, which, according to the SBU, belonged to the person introducing himself as Aleksandr. The GetContact app allows people to check phone numbers against other users' contact lists in exchange for sharing their own contact list. At least one person using GetContact had added the number under the name Aleksandr Boroday.
3. Girkin's description of the armed clash near Sloviansk matches footage from the scene that was shown by Russian TV channel LifeNews (2014b), which shows three damaged cars.
4. Given that Girkin was involved in the Russian takeover of Crimea, it seems plausible that he maintained close contact with Sergey Aksenov, whom he helped to seize power.
5. Aksenov was participating in an event in Crimea in the morning of 13 April (KrymInform 2014). On 14 April, he met Vladimir Putin in Moscow (Putin and Aksenov 2014). This is in line with Malofeyev's description of Aksenov's travel plans, assuming that Malofeyev was in Moscow at the time of the conversation.
6. The SBU published its recordings on 14 April, but it was not until later that it started mentioning Girkin, Boroday, and Malofeyev by name. The recording is presented without any contextual information in a way which suggests that the SBU was not aware of who was speaking at the time the audio was published.

7. Fabricating a recording with plausible voice imitations and the observed degree of detail within a day and presenting it in a way that suggests cluelessness about who is speaking does not seem realistic, especially given that the SBU was facing a crisis situation at the time.

For these reasons, the recordings are smoking-gun evidence, which strongly corroborates H2. In the context of the close ties and interdependencies between oligarchs and political elite in Russia's political system, it appears highly unlikely that someone of Konstantin Malofeyev's standing would be involved in the formation of an armed militia without the Kremlin's knowledge and approval. Moreover, according to Russian law, Sergey Aksenov was heading a Russian Federation Subject. This means that a Russian state official was directly involved in the Sloviansk operation.

Another passed smoking-gun test is the mere fact that Girkin's group formed in Crimea and included several people who were involved in Russia's takeover of the peninsula. It is virtually certain that the militias who supported Russia's military operation in Crimea were under close scrutiny by the Russian security services. It is highly unlikely that such a militia was able to travel to the Donbas without the knowledge and approval of the Russian authorities, especially if it had access to military-grade weaponry. In the case of Girkin's group, it is highly likely that weaponry was carried across the border. Video footage of the group's arrival in Sloviansk in the morning of 12 April shows that its members were already carrying automatic rifles when they first entered the town's police station (YouTube 2014s). Moreover, in a 2017 debate with Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalnyy, Girkin admitted that he had obtained the weapons for the Sloviansk operation in Crimea (Girkin, Navalnyy, and Zygar 2017).

Finally, the absence of any actions by the Russian authorities to restrict or sanction the activities of Girkin, Boroday, and Malofeyev is a failed hoop-test for the hypothesis that they acted independently of the Russian state. If Girkin's armed militia and its backers were mavericks, who acted without the knowledge and the support of the Russian authorities, it could be expected that the Russian state would have taken actions to either stop their activities or punish them. None of this was the case. In the years that followed, Girkin, Boroday, and Malofeyev lived in Moscow without ever facing an investigation by Russian law-enforcement authorities.

4.2. The Role of Locals

Another question that has to be addressed is the role of local residents supporting the intervention. Protests against the new Kyiv authorities took place in Sloviansk as early as 23 February (YouTube 2014a). Video footage from Sloviansk from 12 April does not only show cheering local bystanders but also a group of people in civilian clothing, who help the armed men guard the occupied police station (YouTube 2014r). It is unlikely that these people were part of Girkin's group, which came from Russia well-equipped. Girkin claimed that "about 300 activists were ready and waiting when we arrived" (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). This number may be exaggerated, but it is clear that there was a group of local separatists, who were ready to actively support Girkin. Vyacheslav Ponomarev, who became Sloviansk's "People's Mayor" during Girkin's occupation, was a local resident. On 30 March, Ponomarev (2014) gave an interview as the leader of a local "self-defense group," which, according to him, was helping the

police to protect the town from Maidan activists. This evidence makes it likely that local activists played a role in the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.
H3: Russia's intervention in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk depended on support from local separatist activists.

However, other smoking gun evidence suggests that Girkin and his group were in charge of the occupation and that local activists were their subordinates. The seizure of the Kramatorsk police station, where Girkin's men pushed aside local activists while shooting in the air, clearly illustrates this (YouTube 2014t). The recordings intercepted by the SBU (2014) also indicate that Girkin was in charge of the operation and local activists were under the command of his group. Morever, after a period of cooperation, "People's Mayor" Ponomarev was arrested on Girkin's orders (TASS 2014c)

Even in a hypothetical scenario, in which local people had behaved entirely neutral towards Girkin's group, the Ukrainian authorities would have almost certainly responded with force. In such a scenario, it may have been easier for Ukrainian forces to end the occupation, but, nevertheless, battle-related casualties would have been likely. There is no evidence, however, that Sloviansk's "self-defense forces" would have been able and willing to organize an armed occupation of buildings on their own if Girkin's group had not come to Ukraine. Moreover, it is doubtful that the Ukrainian authorities would have responded to an occupation by locals in the same way.

Sorting causal factors according to the principle of abnormalism (Roberts 1996, 96–99) also points to Girkin's intervention as the primary condition for the subsequent escalation of the conflict. In the context of the political situation in eastern Ukraine in April 2014, it is not surprising that there were some activists in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, who were willing to support a Russian intervention. The arrival of a group of heavily armed men from Russia is a far more extraordinary event than the fact that a group of locals was willing to jump on this group's interventionist bandwagon.

4.3. A Causal Hierarchy

These considerations suggest that the following extended synthesis of H2 and H3 is most closely in line with the available evidence.

H4: The occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk by Igor Girkin's group was a Russian intervention supported by local separatists, which caused the first battle related casualties of the conflict and turned the area into the first hotbed of military clashes.

Although it was a combination of domestic and foreign factors that brought about the relevant events, it is clear that the Russian state's actions are more significant causes than domestic Ukrainian dynamics. A complete account of the causal dynamics at play should emphasize the fact that the intervention was supported by local factors, while stressing the secondary nature of these factors. A reductionist account aiming to single out the most significant factor should focus on the intervention sequence.

Figure 5. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk: Final Causal Sequence According to Available Evidence

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that current research on the causes of the war in the Donbas is divided into two groups. One sees the war as a local uprising with some degree of Russian support. The other sees the war as a Russian intervention with some degree of local support. These two hypotheses have implications that go beyond field of area studies. Each of them has a different effect on the coding of the war in datasets, on the characterization of Ukrainian state stability and Russian foreign policy in comparative research, and on policy proposals for conflict resolution. At the same time, neither of them currently rests on stable methodological foundations.

I have argued that an analysis of the war's escalation sequence based on process tracing through OSINT analysis can lead to a more transparent assessment of the two hypotheses in the light of the available evidence. I suggested that this escalation sequence should begin with the occupation of buildings by armed militias in early April 2014 and end with the First Minsk Agreement on 5 September. I divided this escalation sequence into six critical junctures that require closer scrutiny in terms of the relative influence of domestic and foreign factors.

I then illustrated the feasibility of my proposed methodology by analysing one particularly important juncture – the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. I argued that the available evidence clearly suggests that Russian intervention played a primary role compared to domestic factors in this particular instance. Investigating the remaining critical junctures and aggregating the findings in order to come a conclusion regarding the conflict's escalation sequence as a whole is what I am aiming to do for the remainder of my PhD project.

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