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Russian geopolitical interests in Eastern Ukraine and scenarios of
future development

(Master's Thesis)

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Author's Declaration

Herewith I declare that I have written the Master's Thesis on my own and I have cited all sources.

Prague, 26 April 2019

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Author's Signature

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Introduction

The thesis will analyze Russia's short and long-term geopolitical interests on the territory of Eastern Ukraine and examine what sort of actions Russia is conducting in order to secure the aforementioned interests. The main goal is to confirm whether Russia's highly important goal is to keep Ukraine under its influence zone and that given the current Ukrainian course for democratization and westernization, Russia is also actively trying to destabilize the Ukrainian state with a long-term goal of Ukraine becoming a failed state that could be easily incorporated under the control of Moscow. In my view especially the currently ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine is an important factor for Russia since it destabilizes the Ukrainian economy, creates internal divisions in the country and effectively halts possible Ukrainian integration into Western organizations thus supporting Russia's long-term strategic interests.

In the theoretical part of the thesis there will be an analysis of the theories of realism, eurasianism and nationalism and how these theories can be used in the research on the Ukrainian crisis. Gaining power on the international arena and especially the willingness to use that power are the key elements the current Russian foreign policy is operating with. Russian military operation in Syria proved that Russia has no problems in using its armed forces if necessary, however, in case of the War in Eastern Ukraine Russia has not gone into an actual full-scale war over the Ukrainian territories since it has been seen as counterproductive to the actual goal at this time. I will also examine the theory of Zbigniew Brzezinski on the role of Ukraine for the geopolitical status of Russia and views of a Russian geopolitical thinker Aleksandr Dugin on the concept of eurasianism. Both Brzezinski and Dugin have been examining the role of Russia in the geopolitical balance of the Eurasian continent and the roles Russia could assume regionally based on its actions with other players, and especially Ukraine.

After a historical review I will go through the current situation around the crisis in Eastern Ukraine focusing mainly on the aspects that are connected to the Russian strategic interests in the region. In the scenario analysis section, I will examine different scenarios that I see could possibly take place in the future and estimate their likelihood and the level of Russian participation in each case from the historical and realist Russian foreign policy tradition perspective.

In this research I will be analyzing the likely Russian strategic interests regarding the conflict area on the territory of Eastern Ukraine. The research will be qualitative, going through several types of values the region potentially could benefit to the current Russian long-term geopolitical interests, also taking into account the historical meaning of the area to the former Russian Empire and its successor states.

In the last section of the thesis there will be a scenario analysis on several possible future development predictions and to determine which outcome would be the most likely to happen. With the help of realist perspective and concept of eurasianism I am planning to qualitatively analyze the historical and modern-day trend of the Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine and seek for constant patterns that would reveal the current Russian geopolitical interests in Eastern Ukraine and the distinctive qualities of the region and people living there that is making the region more interesting for Russia when compared with the other parts of Ukraine. With more clear view on the geopolitical interests it would be possible to look through different future scenarios of the state of relations between Russia and Ukraine and estimate the probabilities of each of the scenarios possibly happening in the future. I will be also using historical analysis when going through the probabilities of each scenario actually taking place by mirroring the current developments to their historical background and by that trying to reveal possible continuums in these chains of events.

Besides the historical perspective I will also be taking into account the current national identity questions regarding the people residing in the region, the recent shifts in the ways these people identify themselves and how these acknowledged shifts might be affecting the Russian strategic planning regarding their interests in the Donbass region on a general scale. Besides the different characteristics of the Eastern Ukraine region and their primary values for the Russian strategic interests the likelihood of a given estimate will also be based on the most probable reaction from the non-participants of the ongoing conflict, primarily the United States and the European Union.

1. Realism, Eurasianism, Scenario Analysis - Tools providing us the insight behind the headlines

1.1 Realistic approach

"To this war of every man against every man this also is consequent, that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition that there be no propriety, no dominion, no 'mine' and 'thine' distinct, but only that to be every man's that he can get, and for so long as he can keep it."

Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter XIII, 1651

By default, countries are in charge of their matters on their own. Each independent, internationally recognized and sovereign country has their national legislation which may be altered by the responsible body residing within the jurisdiction of the given country. As the countries are primarily responsible for their own matters, it is also of a high importance that they take care of their security against the possible threats from outside. Either with the means they are capable of maintaining by themselves or by negotiating a treaty with a foreign power or a joint security alliance that could assist in preventing the vulnerability against any threats from outside or in last case to help protect the country against an aggression.

Realism, in fact, could be viewed more as a school of thought rather than a single theory. Many theories that take their basis from realism have emerged during different times and they are in several cases rather different in the way they see states should be acting on the international arena in order to reach successful results. However, according to the realist core theory in general the states still are the main actors in international politics and the gaining of power is the main way for the states to secure their assets and be safe.

In terms of interstate relations and global security scholars of different branches of realism often argue on to what extent the pure power gain by the states actually benefits them. In a realist world each state is generally responsible for its own security. Therefore, all the other states are seen as potentially threatening. The increase of power can be seen profitable in case it makes the state safer from the outer threats from other states. If a state is gaining power compared to other states, it can be considered safer. This concept of safety is, however, rather relative. If we have two or more states all gaining power in the same amount during the same period of time the relative difference in power level between them does not change. This dilemma is also known as the security dilemma (Coyle, 2018, p.16).

The balance of power has been a key component in the formation of the Russian foreign policy since the times of the Russian Empire. First proper signs of this trend could be seen in the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire in southern direction with the incorporation of large areas in the Central-Asian region as new parts of the Empire throughout the whole 19th century. In the chain of events taking place up until the beginning of the 20th century, also widely known as the Great Game, the Russian Empire and the British Empire were contesting over the decisive control over the key areas in this region (Maitra, 2014, p.117). Although there was no direct military clash between the two powers these events proved for the first time that the Russian state is capable of long-term strategical planning in order to secure control over vast non-domestic territories and later on incorporate them, even under a threat to confront an equally capable power over these very areas. The key element in maintaining the critical status-quo was control over Afghanistan, a territory that in following times will repeatedly prove to be pivotal for the great powers to have control over. In the beginning of the 20th century the two empires agreed to delimit their sphere of influence by the Afghani border, having Afghanistan to stay under the British sphere of influence thus avoiding any further escalation between the two powers. The negotiations were tough, yet the Russians did agree to the deal proposed by the British purely based on the realist view over the situation. For the Brits the control over Afghanistan was an important matter since it was considered a borderland next to their highly strategically important Crown Rule of the British Raj (the current areas of India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh). Realizing the essence of the control over Afghani territories for the British the Russian Empire agreed to the deal. This was mostly motivated by the rise of Germany in Europe thus pinpointing the importance of Britain and Russia to agree on mutual issues, also having in mind the Entente alliance agreement negotiations that finally ended up in signing of the Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907.

From the times of confrontation with the British in Central Asia the Russian foreign policy has been driven by realist thoughts and the principles of the balance of power. The following Russian (Soviet) endeavors right before the eruption of the Second World War in Europe were also a direct result of following these principles. In order to secure its western borders, the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with the Nazi Germany, thus dividing Europe into spheres of influence in order to successfully invade Finland (Maitra, 2014, p.117). Although both the invasion and the pact later turned out to be unsuccessful for the Soviets, these events did prove that the Soviet Union, as much as it often claimed to act fully according to its ideological values, conducted its power policy in a way that would ideally secure maximum gain for the state despite the occasional controversies regarding its world peace agenda.

After the Second World War the Soviet Union engaged into a tiring and highly resource-consuming race with the United States over the different areas of influence, commonly known as the Cold War. While both superpowers were possessing huge nuclear weapon arsenals it was clear that two of them clashing in a direct conflict would result in truly unknown result for the whole mankind, maybe even a full destruction. Both the United States and the Soviet Union understood how the beneficial usage of hard power is in fact limited. This resulted in an indirect consensus in which the superpowers engaged in proxy wars outside of their own territories while avoiding a head-on direct combat contact in regard to each other.

After the Cold War de-facto ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union its new successor state, the Russian Federation, had to review its status on the international arena due to the new circumstances on the post-soviet area. The dissolution of the superpower and a sudden shift to the market economy severely damaged the capabilities of the new federation to conduct power politics not only on the global but also regional sphere. Right after the dissolution there was also a change in the perspective of the new Russian government on how the relations with the western institutions and countries should develop in the future. As the first president of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin said in 1992: “Russia has from time immemorial been with Europe, and we must enter the European institutions, the council of Europe and the common market, and we must also enter the political and economic unions...” (Maitra, 2014, p.118). This post-Cold War trend within the new Russian leadership could be described as an era of liberalism and openness and a major shift from the previous realist roots of the foreign policy making. Besides Yeltsin these ideas were also highly supported by his first term minister of foreign affairs Andrey Kozyrev.

The times of the liberation of the Russian foreign policy agenda however came to an end with Yevgeni Primakov replacing Kozyrev in 1996 and later becoming the Prime Minister of Russia in 1998. His course was indeed rather different from the one Kozyrev was advising. In one of his outcomes in January 1996 soon after the nomination Primakov stated that “Russia has been, and remains, a great power, and its policy toward the outside world should correspond to that status” and “Russia doesn’t have permanent enemies, but it does have permanent interests” (Maitra, 2014, p.118). After the sudden resignation of President Yeltsin on the New Year’s Eve on the 31st of December 1999 and the rise of the incumbent Prime Minister, former KGB spy and head of the federal intelligence service Vladimir Putin as an acting president the course of the Russian foreign policy was set to steadily evolve in a course far less liberal than the one Yeltsin had advocated.

Before his first presidential term, Vladimir Putin did serve as a Prime Minister for a few months before Yeltsin resigned from his duty. While being widely unknown to the general public at that time Putin soon made it clear that while he is being in charge of the state affairs Russia’s foreign policy framework would be redirected in a way to represent the country as a power that has solid interests, for the time being at least on a regional level. The case of the unsuccessful war against the rebellious breakaway republic of Chechnya, that at that time has become de-facto independent, was a huge shame for Putin personally. In Putin’s view it was necessary for Russia to end the conflict in a way that Chechnya would be ceded back under the federal control because a precedent case of a federal subject fighting its way successfully away to become independent for good would prove this sort of scenario theoretically possible for another federal subject. As Russia was and is a federation consisting of dozens of different kinds of republics, autonomies, regions and districts with a wide array of peoples of distinctive cultural, religious and historical backgrounds the Chechen scenario happening again in some other location would potentially cause unpredictable outcomes for the unity of the country and its future in general. As Putin’s policy was to restore Russia’s power it was necessary for him to retain the country’s integrity and end any sort of secessionist developments.

Although Putin was known from criticizing certain Soviet era foreign policy decisions and the ideological basis of the Soviet state, he also once stated that “the breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century”. Putin believed that as the Russian Federation is a direct heir of the Soviet Union and the preceding Russian Empire it should hold up to and maintain the power status inherited from the past. With that taken into account Putin’s realist view of the situation was that Russia should prioritize the state security issues and put the internal conflicts to the end with hard power politics if necessary.

The initiation of the Second Chechen War was one of the first major decisions Putin has made in the beginning of his presidency. It was meant to end the uncertainty around the future of the rebellious Chechen republic. After half a year of active battle phase and several years of federal forces fighting the insurgency units in rural areas the campaign ended in Russian victory and full control over Chechnya by the federal government. The hard solution was justified as a response to the constant terrorist attacks on the Russian soil allegedly made by the Chechen radicals. In terms of the effect of the hard solution to the foreign relations of Russia the time period was fortunate enough with the United States later starting their own War on Terror after the 9/11 attacks taking place in New York. While disregarding the previous condemning reactions from the western countries regarding the atrocities and huge casualties the Russian campaign in Chechnya resulted Putin was able to link the war on Chechen rebels to the global fight against jihadism and terrorism in general. Since that time the fight against global terrorism had become one of the key narratives of president Putin. Relatively effective solution of the Chechen campaign also served Putin good on the domestic arena by skyrocketing his approval ratings, but, most importantly, changing his image for the Russian people from being a rather unknown political figure into a president that is capable of actually solving the issues of a country he is running (Time, 2011).

While taking a glance into the recent Russian history through couple of examples it can be noted that the Russian foreign policy making and Russia's actions on the international arena have been traditionally based on a very realist view on how Russia should act in order to reach maximum gain as an end result. Furthermore, in recent times the Kremlin has even taken the adaptation of the realist theory one step further. Instead of only limiting to increasing its own power, Russia has actually been actively decreasing the power of some of its adjacent countries by different means. This results in the increase of the relative power difference without the need to concentrate that much on the actual increase of power domestically in Russia (Coyle, 2018, p.9).

Decreasing the power of some of its neighbors in order to maintain and increase a positive power difference is often claimed to be the reason Russia is benefitting from the frozen conflicts situated around its borders and is in fact supporting these stalemate situations to form and keeping them ongoing for a long period of time. Skillful and covert influencing of the sub-state actors is a common way to control the formation and further course of a given conflict from outside of the conflict, a tactic Russia has allegedly been using on various cases of frozen conflicts in its neighborhood. The influence making in the different conflicts has often been backed locally by appealing on the regional social and ethnical nuances. The appeal of the

Russian-favored side(s) in the conflict could have been boosted by similar ideological background, common ethnicity or both (Coyle, 2018, p.9).

1.2 Game theory

Mathematical theory commonly known as the Game Theory is among other implications commonly used in the research within different social sciences, especially when conducting research of certain cases in field of international relations and politics. The known establishing point of the modern field of research on the Game Theory can be seen taken place with the publication of the book “Theory of Games and Economic Behavior” in 1944 written by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. Game Theory was later heavily implicated in US nuclear deterrence strategy research by RAND Corporation (Research ANd Development) throughout the period of the Cold War time strategic weapons stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Different variations of the Game Theory have been used in different fields of research. The Game Theory is often used in the field of economics, especially in order to conduct research on the relations between different firms, industries and others. In international relations the same principle applies, only the players change to state-level actors and the competition is not only limited to financial gain as in the case of businesses competing.

In international relations analysis the Game Theory provides us with the means to analyze the possible outcomes caused by the actions of the actors involved. The simple 2-actor model of a Game Theory game which also known as the game of chicken shows us 4 possible scenarios potentially happening depending on the decision of each of the 2 actors. A numerical value of a gain or loss for both actors is depicted in every outcome, thus providing a tool for arithmetic comparison of the values. As a good example of a Game Theory implication in international relations analysis the following graph made by F.W.R. van Eck in his work on different approaches from a Game Theory perspective on the analysis of the Ukrainian Crisis.

Figure 1: Russia vs. West Game of Chicken on Ukraine Setup

		Russia	
		Defect	Cooperate
West	Defect	(Nuclear) War 1,1	Ukraine Stable and Able 4,2
	Cooperate	Annex Eastern Ukraine 2,4	Stalemate 3,3

F.W.R. van Eck, The Ukraine Crisis & Game Theory, 2016, p.28

Figure 1 presents Russia and the West as 2 counterparts, or players, in a typical and simple chicken game setup. The issue in question is the Ukrainian Crisis, more specifically the set of actions of the players regarding the rebel forces on the territory of Eastern Ukraine. This graph has the numerical gain values as the main game element. Given that both Russia and the West are rational players in a sense that they recognize their need to pursue the maximum gain and at the same time acknowledge that the other player is with high likelihood thinking the same way, the decision prior the action is a well estimated bet.

Certainly, this graph is not the only take on how to analyze the whole situation, in this case the Ukrainian Crisis. Depending on the result of the game played by this graph a new situation unveils which might require further actions from the players and in the Game Theory perspective that would mean a new game setting up. Depending on the given action alternatives the result of each stage creates a new path through which it is possible to simulate the outcome of the whole chain of the events. The progress of the whole game process becomes sequential with a constantly expanding varieties of outcomes on each of the game stages.

The Game Theory can be used to analyze different events within the Ukrainian Crisis with different sets of players involved. Besides the traditional placement of Russia and the West as the two players involved in the events, Ukraine could also be used as a participating player against Russia for example. This would however narrow the view on the variables of the real situation too much, given, for example, the actual capabilities of the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian army against their Russian counterparties.

The Ukrainian Crisis does influence state-level actors on a far larger than just the regional scale. Roots of the conflict are not connected to just a single case of local unrests escalating into establishment of the two foreign backed widely unrecognized states on the territory of Ukraine. The historical and current significance of Ukraine to Russia and its geopolitical ambitions makes the faith of Ukraine simultaneously important for the other great players on the international arena. This set of interconnected interests will become rather clear especially when in the next chapters I will be analyzing the views of the famous US state security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and a Russian geopolitical thinker Alexander Dugin and comparing these in many ways similar and yet so different opinions.

The Game Theory can be used as one of the means to assess the likelihood of different event scenarios happening in the future within the currently ongoing Ukrainian Crisis. Estimation of the choice variables is with this perspective however quite difficult since it contains a lot of applicable information and not always of a quantitative character. As for example the control over some territory might be justified and beneficial by certain physical assets that it provides. Cultivable territory, human capital, financial and infrastructural assets and natural resources might be easy to be counted together and given value to. The much harder task would be to somewhat precisely estimate the effects of the influence of different popular opinions and how the change effects the gain estimate in each of the action options.

1.3 Brzezinski's view on Ukraine

In his book “The Grand Chessboard” the now late state advisor of the United States and a great geopolitical thinker Zbigniew Brzezinski analyses the concept of the US hegemony on the global arena and how the whole territory of Eurasia is very highly appreciated by the US geopolitical and strategic interests. According to him it is true that currently for the first time in

mankind history a power that is not situated on the Eurasian continent is a dominant or “paramount” power on the world arena. This, however, does not lead to the situation where the significance of Eurasia could be considered significantly lower. Many European, especially Western European countries are vital allies of the US and can also represent some of the US interests in the region. Besides that, Brzezinski acknowledges the constant economical rise and political strengthening of the Asian region, obviously mostly having China and India firstly in mind.

Brzezinski names Eurasia as a chessboard on which a play for the global primacy is constantly played. As an example of a notorious, recent game that has been played on this area Brezinski mentions the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States and their allies. The division on the world map was clearer and more obvious as ever before. The Soviet Union, at least before the Sino-Soviet split, controlled by itself and with the assistance of its allies most of the Eurasian heartland (Figure 2). The United States was a direct dominant on the North American continent as well as on two of the world’s oceans, the Atlantic and Pacific, on the edges of which also most of the US allies were situated (Brzezinski, 2016, p.6).

Figure 2: The Sino-Soviet Bloc and Three Central Strategic Fronts



Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard, 2016, p.7

Although the central areas of the Eurasian continent were under control of the Sino-Soviet bloc they had just some control over the borderlands. Three main contact points or fronts emerged on the Eurasian continent where the influence areas of the two blocs collided: the eastern front (Korean War), the southern front (Soviet War in Afghanistan) and the western front where as a result of the rise of the Soviet backed socialist regimes in central and eastern parts of Europe a new barricade of division appeared (Brzezinski, 1997, p.6).

After the fall of the Soviet bloc the situation changed drastically around the whole set of the frontlines on the Eurasian continent. The fall was described by Brzezinski as a complex set of events originally set off by several factors undermining the integrity of the Soviet-led system. Firstly, the Soviets could not manage to keep the alliance fully united mostly due to the impossibility of Moscow to rule over the Chinese decisions and the aspiration of the communist China to independently have a last say over their own matters. Secondly, the allies around the Soviet bloc had significantly lower living standards compared with the ones within the US led western bloc. The economy of the capitalist world, especially the United States, was powerful and innovative enough to provide the society with all the necessary progress and development while simultaneously maintaining a rather strong military capability, a task that in terms of economical capabilities turned out to be very problematic for the Soviet Union and its allies. Finally, the divisions between the peoples in the Soviet Union itself became to be a more and more obvious fact that couldn't been left unnoted by the very peoples in question (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 8-9).

More than a half of the Soviet citizens were in fact not Russian and gradually it became obvious to them that the Russian dominated and Moscow-centred governance system of the Soviet Union did was not beneficial for their interests as nations and thus a change in the situation was needed. These differences affected the speed of the dissolution of the Soviet empire leaving behind newly independent states that were looking for their future course on the international arena. One of these states was Ukraine.

In "The Grand Chessboard" Brzezinski stated that Ukraine "is a geopolitical pivot". According to him Russia sees Ukraine as a vital area for its own status on the continent and that without Ukraine "...Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire." (Brzezinski, 2016, p.46). The hypothetical final loss of Ukraine from any potential Russian influence would however not necessarily threaten all kind of Russian chances in gaining an imperial status on the Eurasian continent but would undermine the advance on the European vector. By shifting its geopolitical interest point more to the east Russia would counter serious problems with China probably

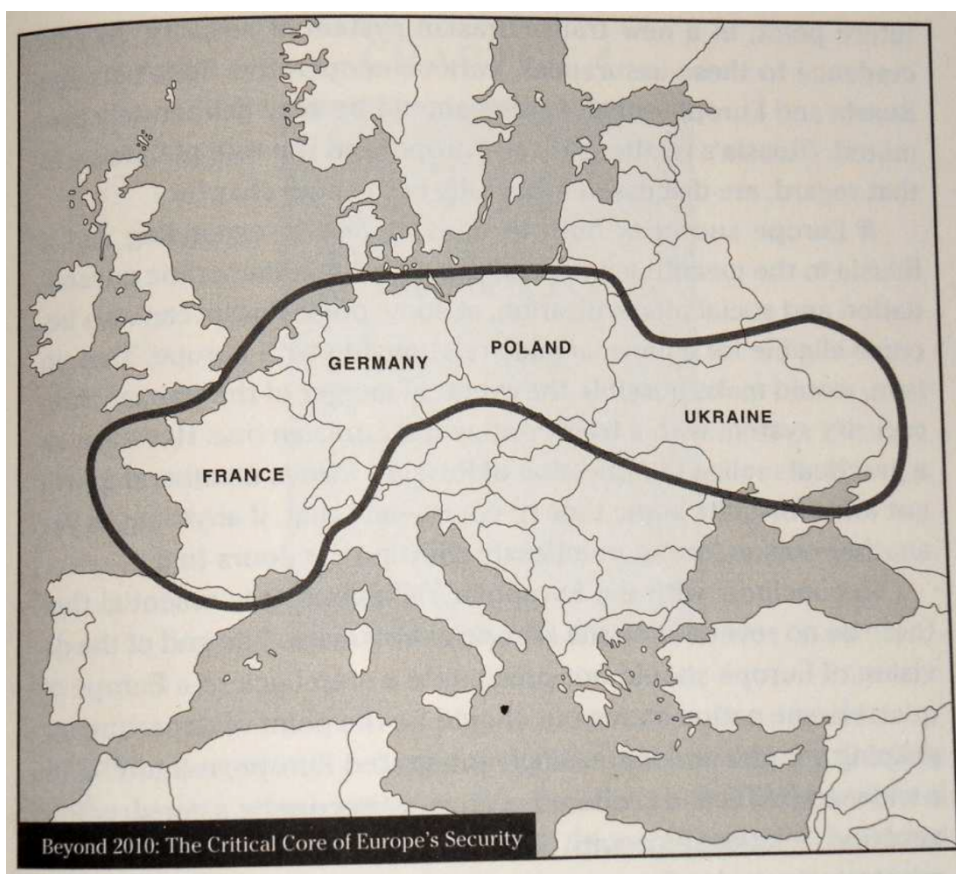
being highly against any increase of the growing Russian power near its borders and effectively stopping the Russian advance one way or another. Ukraine, with its comparably large territory on the European scale, population size of over 50 million and vast resources ending up under Moscow's control again would mark a radical shift in the power balance and influence zone situation especially in the Central and Eastern Europe (Brzezinski, 2016, p.46). By gaining more coastline on the Black Sea Russia would become a dominant player by its naval capabilities and assets regionally and a better access to the Mediterranean as well.

Following up after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the Commonwealth of Independent States was established. The founding documents (Bela Vezha accords) of this new post-soviet interstate economic and political cooperation union were in fact signed between the soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus even before the actual dissolution of the Soviet Union in the end of the year 1991 (Brzezinski, 2016, pp.92-93). The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States effectively predicted the final fall of the Soviet Union, moreover the new agreement between the three most powerful Soviet republics made the mere existence of the Soviet Union rather pointless from that moment on.

When for Ukraine and for the majority of the Ukrainian people the independence marked a new beginning as a self-governing state and a new freedom which granted possibilities for Ukraine to pursue own goals, for Russia the new situation was not as assertive. On one hand the Soviet Union of the late 1980s was clearly unable to maintain itself in its current state and changes were needed to be made by either reforming the whole Union or to some extent decentralizing the power of Moscow over the republics until certain limit. On the other hand, Moscow was, despite Boris Yeltsin's rather liberal views on the right of the republics to self-govern and Russia finally giving up its imperial ambitions, still keen on keeping hold on at least some extent of influence on the closest Slavic nation republics, Belarus and Ukraine in particular (Brzezinski, 2016, pp. 92 and 102). Several referendums took place in 1991 around the Soviet republics with a question asked being whether the republics should gain independence from the Union. The end results of these referendums were to some extent in contradiction with each other, especially depending on whether a given referendum was organized by the republic authorities or the central Soviet government. These differences in results were exceptionally visible in referendums that took place on the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. While not getting into the transparency of these referendums and the level of assertiveness on the phrasing of the referendum questions the division of opinions between the supporters of the Soviet government and the reforming Ukrainian government was clearly visible.

With the fall of the Soviet Union Moscow lost control over the Ukrainian territory. That fact, as mentioned before, Brzezinski considered pivotal not only for the Russian long-term geopolitical interests but also in terms of the balance of power on the European continent in general (Brzezinski, 2016, p.92). With the case of Ukraine gaining independence the cut-off of the major part of the Black Sea coastline was a huge setback for the Russian naval capabilities, for the Black Sea fleet especially, with the loss of the important port of Odessa, several large military-grade ship building docks and overall control over the large part of maritime territories on the Black Sea.¹

Figure 3: Beyond 2010: The Critical Core of Europe's Security



Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard, 2016, p. 85

Zbigniew Brzezinski considers Ukraine as a vital part of “The Critical Core of Europe’s Security” (Figure 3). The Cold War NATO backed alliance between many countries in Western

¹ To some extent the situation has now changed more in Russia’s favour given the recent annexation of Crimea, its surrounding waters and the city of Sevastopol hosting a major Russian navy fleet base

Europe has gradually expanded further east by incorporating several Central and Eastern European countries with the goal of them becoming the full members of NATO. By the time of Brzezinski's book "The Grand Chessboard" being published in 1997 it was already clear that Poland with some other post-soviet bloc would be joining NATO any time soon depending on the negotiation process' success. He accurately managed to predict the west-oriented aspiration of integration of Ukraine. In his "speculative cautiously realistic timetable" Brzezinski estimated that Ukraine would likely begin serious negotiations with both the European Union and NATO on possible accession into these organizations somewhere between the years 2005 and 2010. Given the well-known "Orange Revolution" that finally resulted in the election of a highly pro-western candidate Viktor Yushenko as the Ukrainian president in 2005 Brzezinski's prediction wasn't in fact that far off.

Following political unrests, constant corruption scandals and incapability of the new government to effectively persuade the majority of the Ukrainian people to have trust in the reforms advocated by the government however resulted in Yushenko not being re-elected on his second term. After the next elections the presidential office was given to Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian politician that did not continue the path of the former president but instead chose to cooperate more with Russia and to abandon the course of the European integration of Ukraine. Brzezinski also saw this sort of scenario possible by conditioning the possibility of Ukraine's successful European integration starting between 2005-2010 in following way:

"Somewhere between 2005 and 2010, Ukraine, especially if in the meantime the country has made significant progress in its domestic reforms and has succeeded in becoming more evidently identified as a Central European country, should become ready for serious negotiations with both the EU and NATO."

Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard, 2016, p.84

After Yanukovich became the president the full formation of the aforementioned "Critical Core" seemed to be postponed far into uncertain future. Following years however proved that Brzezinski's views on the nature of Ukraine and its significance regionally and globally were still righteous. Euromaidan protests, the 2004 Ukrainian Revolution, negative escalation in the bilateral relations with Russia, the Crisis in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as

well as developing and deepening relations with western powers and IGOs proved that Ukraine's future has not been written nor decided upon yet.

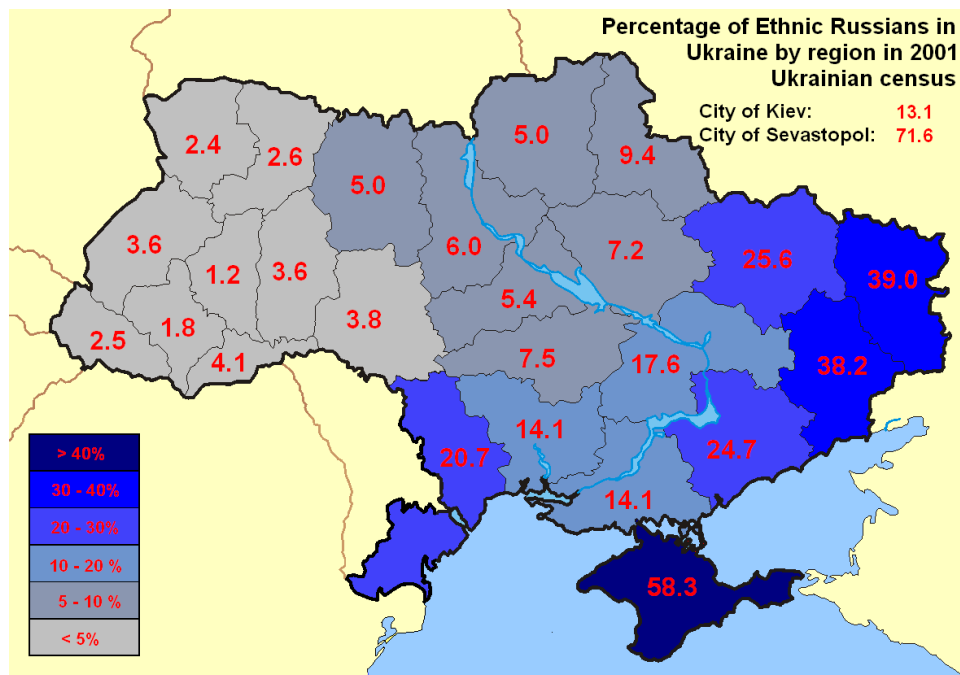
1.4 Nationalism and Russian Eurasianism

From the perspective of the questions of national identity Ukraine, as well as Russia, is a quite diverse case. The area of the modern-day Ukraine and its bordering territories have been a subject of large-scale people's movements throughout the known history. Many tribes, not only Slavic ones have travelled through, settled and influenced in the area. Even currently in rather majorly Slavic-inhabited Ukraine there are groups of people of non-Slavic origin living in different areas. These people are of different origins, they have come on these territories during different times and some of them can actually be considered to be more indigenous than the Ukrainians themselves, like for example the Crimean Tatars or the Crimean Greeks. Currently, however, more relevant and sadly troublesome are the questions arising around the national identity of the Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine, their common history, current relations, to what extent these people are able to deal with the ever-growing division within the country and whether there should be any kind of division at all.

The last official state-wide census in Ukraine took place in 2001. By its results it was determined that the whole population count of Ukraine stands at 48,457,100 people of which the Ukrainians make up 37,541,700 (77,8 % of total) and the Russians 8,334,100 (17,3 % of total). (Всеукраїнський перепис населення, 2001)² There are representatives of both peoples living on the whole territory of Ukraine. There are however some differences on how the population is dispersed regarding their announced nationality stated in the aforementioned census (Figure 4).

² The All Ukrainian Census of 2001 (In Ukrainian)

Figure 4: Percentage of Ethnic Russians in Ukraine



The All Ukrainian Census of 2001 infographics (Web Archive)

As it is seen on the map the Russian population is heavily situated in the Eastern parts of the country, an area colloquially referenced to as the Donbass region, areas north from the Black Sea coast and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea³. Ukrainians are living mostly in the central and western regions of Ukraine as well as in the capital city Kyiv. It is worth noting that in Kyiv the percentage share of the Russian population is a bit larger than in the surrounding regions on average. Throughout Ukrainian regions there is a similar tendency of the Russian minority being more concentrated in cities and regional centers whereas Ukrainians sometimes tend to make far bigger share on the countryside even in the regions with otherwise highest numbers of Russian inhabitants. The division between regions can also be observed through the differences in political preferences of the people. Regions highly populated by Russians tend to prefer politicians that are either of Russian origin or are advocating for the rights of the minorities and Russians in particular. Results of the parliamentary or presidential elections tend to thus differ when observed on the map comparing regions of different ethnic composition. If there is a popular candidate or candidates running that have been publicly to some extent pro-Russian, their popularity is visibly higher in the South-Eastern regions of the country and in the

³ Currently annexed and controlled by Russia

Crimean Autonomous Republic. If this regional division would be depicted on a map it would roughly follow the same lines that divide the Ukrainian citizens on their national identity.

The roots and causes for the areal division of the population of Ukraine are thriving all the way from the medieval time history of the region when many peoples, tribes and powers have fought over this territory and successively hosted their own people in here. These events will be covered more profoundly in the chapter on historical relations between Ukraine and Russia. Nowadays it is truly important to keep in mind the influence of the dynamics between the people describing themselves as either Russians or Ukrainians to the internal Ukrainian politics and the society of the country. In order to better understand the nature of the division within Ukraine it is necessary to take a look into the roots of the current situation and see how nationalist ideas were affecting the popular opinions within certain groups of people.

The modern-day Ukrainian nationalism mostly roots its main ideals from the works of the two main Ukrainian popular figures of the first half of the 20th century. They were the nationalistic writer Dmytro Dontsov that influenced mostly during the interwar period and served as an inspirational source for the creation of OUN⁴ and Stepan Bandera, Ukrainian nationalist politician and war-time leader of OUN (Sakwa, 2016, p.16). Dmytro Dontsov was prominent in promoting the idea of Ukraine as a united monist state – a model “... in which the state is a nationalizing one, drawing on the traditions of Ukrainism to fill the existing borders with a content sharply distinguished from Russia. It would be officially monolingual, unitary and culturally specific.” (Sakwa, 2016, pp. 14-15). Dontsov was clearly not happy with the situation after the fall of the Russian Empire when the shortly independent Ukrainian state between years 1917-1921 was soon falling apart and taken over by Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Bolshevik Red Army.

In the Soviet controlled areas, the Ukrainians were given some local autonomy in terms of some local institutions. These institutions were nevertheless controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that was effectively led from Moscow. Dontsov was clearly not happy with this new situation, especially as being once a supporter of socialist ideals. Instead he started to embrace radical Ukrainian nationalism that would completely exclude any sort of cooperation with Russia. In his views it was necessary to exclude foreign elements out

⁴ the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, established in Vienna 1929

of the Ukrainian society's everyday life, such as Russianism, Austrianism and Polonism. Instead, he saw a need to create a new concept of an ideal Ukrainian citizen, "a new man, who with hot faith and stone heart would destroy Ukraine's enemies" (Sakwa, 2016, p.15).

Stepan Bandera had somewhat similar views as Dontsov. According to Bandera the future Ukrainian state should be based exclusively on the Ukrainian nation and fight against those who are undermining this idea, especially the Poles, the Russians and the Jews, of which he saw the Jews as the worst enemy for the goal. With the beginning of the German advance towards east and following occupation on the Ukrainian territory in 1941 Bandera saw a chance to cooperate with the Germans in terms of fighting against certain people groups and nationalities that he saw threatening to his project of a Ukrainian nation state. During the war the cooperation with the Third Reich forces turned out to be sometimes problematic since Bandera's plans on the creation of the independent Ukrainian state was not in the plans of the Germans and was controversial in regards of their own Lebensraum project. Nevertheless, Bandera and his followers managed to organize two separate SS divisions under the command of the German army with the main task being the eradication of the unwanted people groups on the German occupied Ukrainian territory. As a direct result of these activities by 1945 over 130.000 people were killed, mostly in Eastern Galicia where there was a large Polish population by the time the Second World War started (Sakwa, 2016, p. 16-17).

As a leader of the regionally influential OUN movement Stepan Bandera had a large influence on the Ukrainian people living on the territory of current Western Ukraine. After the Soviet Union advanced and liberated Ukraine in the summer 1944 the OUN organization was reformed into a guerilla resistance movement that kept fighting the Soviets mostly in the rural mountainous regions of Carpathia until these regions were completely taken under the Soviet control in 1949. Stepan Bandera managed to escape in Germany and was later assassinated by the Soviet secret service KGB in 1959 in Munich (Sakwa, 2016, p. 16-17).

The memory of Stepan Bandera lives strong in modern day Ukraine due to his ideas about the independent Ukrainian state and his passion with which he tried to liberate the Ukrainian people from the never-ending influence of foreign powers that Ukrainians had to deal with for centuries before. After decommunization in Ukraine many streets and landmarks that used to carry a name somehow connected to the communist times were renamed after Bandera, high level state awards were dedicated to him and his deeds are often cited and praised on the official level on different occasions. Bandera's legacy however remains problematic. Even though being a number one iconization symbol of the Ukrainian independence struggle and a

national hero the actions that he was in charge of during wartime are creating huge controversies not only domestically but also on the international arena. Poland and Russia have been criticizing the Ukrainian government for the glorification of Bandera's deeds while not paying as much attention towards the atrocities his men are found guilty of during the wartime towards both the Russians and the Poles. Internally this fact is also a problem addressed by many Russian speakers in Ukraine and those who identify themselves as being Russians, as mentioned before these people make up 17,3 % of the whole population count based on the 2001 Ukrainian census. Thus, even though the Russian minority in Ukraine are in general pro-Ukrainian, some aspects like the current glorification of Bandera's heritage and deeds by the government and certain nationalistic groups tend to disintegrate the Ukrainian civil society in the times where for the sake of the future of Ukraine it would be more reasonable to search for unifying and less controversial common grounds instead. Keeping in mind Bandera's actions towards the non-Ukrainian minorities during wartime there is also a controversy when the Ukrainian government keeps accusing the Russian government for not acknowledging the famous Holodomor famine of 1932-1933 being a case of genocide conducted by the Soviet government in order to deliberately starve the Ukrainian people completely. Whether the famine actually was a made-made genocide planned by Stalin himself or just another proof of the ineffectiveness and huge mistakes made in the period of the Soviet mass agricultural collectivization Holodomor remains to be remembered as a common Ukrainian tragedy and is constantly used by some to prove the hostile stance of the Russians towards the Ukrainians in order to further advocate the views that see the Ukrainian nation being under constant threat from outside.

Today the policies of the main Ukrainian political parties can roughly be divided based on their views of the future of Ukraine in terms of how the rights of the Russian minority should be taken care of and to what extent the government should favor the opinions of the Ukrainian speaking Ukrainians on the national level. With the current conflict taking place on the territory of Eastern Ukraine the nationalists have been getting more support especially in the highly Ukrainian populated Western part of the country while some people on the East have gained pro-Russian sentiments, partly because of the Russian media coverage over the war and other kinds of Russian propaganda targeting the local population. The two main paradigms in the future of the Ukrainian state development are monist and pluralist (Sakwa, 2016, p.23).

Western, often highly nationalistically minded, Ukrainians tend to have the monist model closer to their views and are more in favor of the higher level of Ukrainization in the society (Sakwa, 2016, p.24). The Ukrainization could include having the national school system teaching fully in the Ukrainian language, fighting all the efforts that bring up the

possibility of federalization in Ukraine thus giving more self-governing rights to the Russian speaking Eastern regions of the country as well as, addressing to the Bandera's ideals, find a military solution to the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The supporters of the pluralist, or inclusive, path argue that it is righteous for all of the peoples living in Ukraine to be included into the main agendas of the government. According to the pluralists the diversity of the Ukrainian nation in terms of cultural and linguistic heterogeneity is in fact a contribution to the wealth of the whole nation and there should be no obstacles in enforcing the rights of the minorities through a legislative way. This doesn't necessarily mean that the pluralists would unanimously support any destabilizing changes on the constitutional level, as for example making Russian one of the official languages or supporting a change into the whole concept of Ukraine changing from being a unitary republic into a federation with more power given to the local governments since what the pluralists often name as their main goal is in fact stability and cross national constructive dialogue between different nationalities and people groups.

After the fall of the pro-Russian government in 2014, occupation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia and the breakup of the war in Eastern Ukraine the nationalistic and monist views of the future of Ukraine have been gaining more voice publicly at a cost of the peaceful transnational dialogue. As for the Ukrainian government, no matter who is the president or which parties hold the majority of the seats in Rada⁵, it is surely in their interest to keep Ukraine unified since any sort of further fragmentation within the civil society would almost certainly result in more fierce outcomes from the rather powerful Ukrainian nationalist groups on radical solutions when dealing with the issues with the Russian minority in Ukraine.

In Russia different nationalistic movements have been also active since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia had to deal with the same sort of problems regarding the national minorities as in Ukraine with the difference being that Russia is way more diverse and multicultural than Ukraine. Russia is a federation consisting of several regional and local governmental levels with several federative subjects functioning as autonomous entities with their own legislation, parliament and often a non-Russian population being a majority or a large minority in the particular subjects. The formation of the Russian Federation on the basis of the Russian Soviet Socialistic Republic after the fall of the Soviet Union was a logical outcome

⁵ The Ukrainian Parliament

since all of the Soviet republics gained their independence with the borders based on the internal borders between the subjects of the Soviet Union. Russia however was in the situation of having to manage with more of the different entities than any of the other former Soviet republics. As the Moscow's top interest was to keep the newly formed federation as united as possible there were several problematic points on how to create common ideals that all peoples within the federal subjects could relate to. Pro-independence movements in Chechnya and the following bloody war between the radical Chechnian rebels and the federal forces proved the possibility of the Russian Federation being vulnerable to this sort of regional independence struggles. A federal subject gaining independence through any kind of armed conflict would create a dangerous precedent for Moscow's point of view of such scenario being possible in other federal subjects as well, thus in future jeopardizing the integrity of the whole federation.

Keeping in mind the impossibility of creating a unitary Russian national state on the basis of the Russian Federation the only way the Russian government at the time could manage to keep all of the federal subjects under their control was to not only show the disastrous War in Chechnya as an unwanted worst case scenario, but to broadly include all the peoples of Russia, Slavic or non-Slavic, under a common national identity. As an example, instead of calling a citizen of Russia "Russkiy" it became more widespread to address the same person as "Rossiyanin". While the translation for both words remains exactly the same in English (a Russian), the difference in the Russian language is clear and it makes a distinction between whether we see the person being Russian ethnically or politically (Brzezinski, 2016, p.97).

The possible rise of nationalistic ideas or nationalistically driven parties was by the ruling elite seen as a threat to the internal integrity of the Russian Federation and for that reason many of the new radical nationalistic movements were effectively banned quite soon after their creation. Patriotism glorifying Russia in general was however acceptable when it was quoting the previous glory of the great predecessor states, like The Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, and their achievements that were relatable not only to the ethnic Russians but to all peoples that took part in them, as for example the victory in the Great Patriotic War⁶. Few political parties like LDPR and Rodina whose members are known for occasionally praising the supremacy of the ethnical Russians are however tolerated since they are generally pro-

⁶ Soviet and Russian term for the combination of the World War II battles between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945

Kremlin and are probably seen as a necessary safe vent for the nationalistic opinions of some people groups to come out in a controlled manner.

Russian Eurasianism, or in the case of modern Russia Russian Neo-Eurasianism, is an ideology that can be seen as a refined version of Russian nationalism adjusted to the current Russian geopolitical interests while, however, not being completely in line with them. Currently the main person behind the formation of the general Russian Neo-Eurasianist thought since the break-up of the Soviet Union is Alexander Dugin, a leading geopolitical independent thinker of the post-Communist Russia (Sakwa, 2016, p.280). Dugin argues that Russia should acknowledge its faith as a decisive player on the Eurasian continent due to its vast control over the region's heartland and the fact that its ability to conquer and hold up to these territories proves the uniqueness and the chosen nature of the Russia's peoples to achieve such grand objectives. In Dugin's main publication "Foundations of Geopolitics" he argues that in order for Russia to further exist it has to evolve into an Empire that would be not only a project for the ethnic Russian people but a potential homeland for all of the nations on the Eurasian soil. Dugin also points out that the Russian people have created a unique and superior culture the whole nature of which is not regular but rather universal and definitive (Rojek, 2015, p.105).

Allegedly some Russian army generals were quite fond of Dugin's thoughts and the "Foundations of Geopolitics" became an unofficial popular study book amongst many officials in the Russian armed forces. It has been proven that the Russian Prime Minister (1998-1999) Yevgeny Primakov put his influence to work in order to help Dugin publish his controversial book since Primakov was to some extent also a supporter of the restoration of Russian military and geopolitical might (Rojek, 2015, p.102).

Dugin was pleased to see Russia annex the Crimean Peninsula based on the "will of the people" since the event was very much in line of the way he saw Russia should be expanding its influence in creating the mighty Empire. As the protests in the Eastern Ukraine started later in 2014 Dugin expected the Russian army to exercise a similar effective operation as in the case of Crimea. To his disappointment this never happened and as the conflict in the Eastern Ukraine stalemated into a frozen one, he started his fierce critique against the Kremlin. Dugin has before used the term of the "fifth column" while describing the vague domestic Russian based opponents to his ideas but now he was attacking the Kremlin by calling the Russian political establishment "the sixth column" as they failed to incorporate Donbass region into Russia and by that destroying Dugin's view of their possibilities in the creation of the Empire he saw as the main goal of Russia to finally achieve (Sakwa, 2016, p.280).

Dugin has been alleged of being a sort of unanimous ideologist and policymaker of the Kremlin in terms of groundwork planning of the Russian geopolitical strategies. There is no doubt, that his ideas have influenced some Russian policymaker and military officials as well as his ideas have been influenced by the Soviet and the Russian army operations at the time when he was writing his book (Rojek, 2015, pp.102-103). The fact that the Russian military did not openly pursue further in the Eastern Ukraine the way they did in Crimea proves that the alleged Dugins high influence on Kremlins policymakers and strategists is highly exaggerated and that Vladimir Putin is ideologically not that much of a Russian imperial traditionalist as he is a pragmatic great power statist (Sakwa, 2016, p.280).

2. Historical overview over Eastern Ukraine

2.1 Historical ties of the region to Russia

The etymological explanation of the very name of Ukraine, a borderland, suggests that the areas of modern Ukraine have before been border territories for other states. The northern coast of the Black Sea has been populated by Greek and later also by Roman settlers. For both these were the most far away settlements in the north-eastern direction. Ukraine was later on also the furthest point of the western advance of the Golden Horde army while fighting with the Polish and Lithuanian troops. In the year 1783 the Russian empress Catherine the Great took over the control over the territory of Crimea from Turkic tribes, incorporated it into the Russian Empire and assigned her lover at the time Grigori Potemkin to be in charge of Crimea and Southern Ukraine. While taking into account the nutritious type of soil in the region and the strategically useful position of the newly incorporated territory Catherine also ordered that the new *chargé d'affaires* should develop it under the name of Novorossiia - The New Russia (Syrůček, 2015, pp.16-17). From this time on the region was to be controlled by Russia for more than two centuries.

Throughout the whole 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Ukraine remain under the control of the Russian Empire. It was under the direct rule of the Emperor without any separate status as for example the Kingdom of Poland or the Grand Duchy of Finland that were also parts of the Empire. Nevertheless, the Ukrainians managed to conserve their cultural traditions and their language. National romanticist poets of the time Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko wrote their works in Ukrainian and helped to preserve the national identity of the Ukrainian people as the official language in this part of the Empire was solely Russian (Sakwa, 2016, p.8). The Russification period in the whole Empire started in the beginning of the 20th century as a reaction to the arising self-awareness of the peoples around the Empire. Contra-reactive violent clashes between self-aware Ukrainians and the officials became a commodity. After the Russian Revolution the Russian Civil War broke and the fights between the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Anarchists and other participants were especially bloody on the territory of Ukraine, mostly due to higher population density than in the other parts of the former Empire. From 1917 even an independent Ukrainian state managed to exist for a few months, later captured by the Bolshevik army. One of the leaders of the state was Simon Petlyura who is nowadays valued as a hero in Ukraine while being considered as a traitor and the enemy of the people during Soviet times (Syrůček, 2015, pp. 54-55).

The Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic, together with the Donbass region, became one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union in 1922. In 1932-1933 due to the bad agriculture season and catastrophic attempt on collectivization of the whole agricultural industry millions of people died across the Soviet Union with the Ukrainian population taking the biggest hit of this tragedy, also known as Holodomor. The total death toll is to this date not clear, estimates vary between 5-10 million or even more. At the peak of the hunger around 25.000 Ukrainians were starving to death daily (Syrůček, 2015, pp.57-58). After the independence of Ukraine this tragedy was officially recognized as a genocide by Ukraine and several foreign countries. The government officials in Russia continue to disagree with the Ukrainians about the genocidal nature of the tragedy arguing that the famine was spread across the whole Soviet Union and thus there would be no reason to blame the Soviet government for the genocide attempt of the Ukrainians. The issue with Holodomor still remains as a painful debate point between historians and politicians of both countries.

With Ukraine gaining independence in 1991 a new border was drawn on the map between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. In fact, that border was not new considering that the administrative divisions between the Soviet republics did exist before, only that they did not matter much on a practical level since all the Soviet republics were still de-facto parts of one country. People of different ethnicity, cultural traditions and language were not puzzled whether they were living on the Ukrainian or the Russian side of the administrative line. Free trans-border traffic and free relocation of the people resulted in no hard division in terms of national identity too as everyone was a Soviet citizen anyways. Up until the formal administrative border between Ukraine and Russia turned into an international one.

2.2 Territorial and political changes during independent Ukraine

After the failed coup d'état attempted by the communist elite in Moscow in 1991 leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus assembled in Bialowieza to agree on mutual recognition of the independence from the Soviet Union and creation of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS). This marked the final stage of Ukraine gaining independence from the Soviet Union. The Russian president Boris Yeltsin was highly criticized afterwards by many Russian nationalists for his inability to push through the concept of the CIS being more unified and under direct Moscow control compared to the situation of Belarus and Ukraine gaining de-facto full independence and CIS being a weak organization with no real power whatsoever. The

painful moment for the Russian nationalists was the loss of Crimea to Ukraine, a territory that was ceded under jurisdiction of the Soviet Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. The peninsula hosted a large Russian naval base situated in a warm water port quite rare for Russia and was populated mostly by ethnic Russians and hence the nationalists had a clear point on why this territory should be administered by Russia (Sakwa, 2016, p. 68-69).

A treaty on relocating of the Soviet nuclear weapons from Ukraine to Russia was signed in 1992. Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership was signed 31st of May 1997. According to this treaty Russia acknowledged Crimea being an integral part of Ukraine and that the Russian Navy could use the naval base in Sevastopol based on a lease agreement that was subjected to renewal after 10 years. This agreement was unsurprisingly heavily debated in Russian parliament but finally ratified and enforced in the Russian State Duma in 1999 (Sakwa, 2016, pp. 69-70). The Russian-Ukrainian border demarcation treaty was signed in 2010 settling the land and maritime borders between the two countries.

The following case affecting the de-facto borders of Ukraine was the annexation of Crimea by the Russian special forces in February-March of 2014. These events were a direct response to the results of the pro-Western Euromaidan movement in Ukrainian capital city Kyiv where the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich had to resign and flee the masses of protesters to Russia with the help of the Russian special forces. Pro-Russian revolt started in many Crimean cities as the protestors were not happy with the events taking place in Kyiv and demanded more close ties between the region and Russia and a referendum on joining the Russian Federation as a new federal subject. On 26th of February armed men without any insignia occupied the Crimean parliament building which was followed by resignation of the existing Crimean government with a mandate from Kyiv and election of the new pro-Russian parliament under rather shady conditions and with complete disregard to not only the basic principles of parliamentary protocol but also the Ukrainian constitution legally binding also on the territory of Crimea at that time (Sakwa, 2016, p. 103). On 16th of March a referendum on the future of Crimea was set up by the new Crimean government. There was one vote with two options to vote on:

1) Are you in favor of the reunification of Crimea with Russia as part of the Russian Federation?

2) Are you in favor of restoring the 1992 constitution and the status of Crimea as part of Ukraine?

According to the voting committee the result of the referendum was 96,7% of the approved votes were in favor of the 1st option. The referendum was condemned world-wide as being undemocratic and completely orchestrated by the Russian authorities. There were no international observers invited to the polling sites, so all coverage of the event world-wide was limited to the press releases of the local government, Russian state-owned news companies and just a handful of independent reporters (Sakwa, 2016, p. 104). Interestingly enough, right after publishing the results the Crimean parliament declared the region as an independent state. This was done in order to formally smoothen the upcoming secession into the Russian Federation since from the point of the international law it is less controversial when a sovereign state, rather than just some breakaway region, would join a larger country. This weird phase of independence lasted for only a day. On March 18th Crimea formally became part of Russia in a pompous ceremony organized in the Kremlin. Among international sanctions targeting Russia and Crimea in particular the Crimean gambit also provoked local unrests on the territory of Eastern Ukraine with protestors demanding a similar right to leave rest of the Ukraine behind and join Russia.

Following protests in certain cities of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions escalated into the series of capturing local administration buildings, main TV and radio station buildings as well as Ukrainian army and local police warehouses in April 2014 (Sakwa, 2016, p. 104). The government buildings of the large cities of Donetsk, Luhansk and also Kharkiv were captured by the protestors.⁷ Local governments were rearranged by force and the new leaders announced the independence of the Donetsk Peoples Republic and the Luhansk Peoples Republic. Some pro-Ukrainian protests were also seen happening in both Luhansk and Donetsk, yet they were highly outnumbered if compared with the separatist protesters. With the weapons seized from the local police forces and military units the protestors were able to counter the Ukrainian special forces that had just announced the beginning of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) targeting the very people groups now already controlling large central areas in both Donetsk and Luhansk.

Russia trained and infiltrated some volunteers into the growing conflict, but it was only until August 2014 when the ‘voluntary’ Russian state of the art paratroopers took part in

⁷ The building in Kharkiv was soon liberated by Ukrainian special forces, unlike the other two cities.

fight against the Ukrainian forces (Sakwa, 2016, p. 155). By this time a couple of violent protests in the two big city centers have escalated into a full-scale military conflict with nationwide frontlines, hundreds of casualties on both sides and a multi-million civilian population suffering from the havoc around.

2.2 The War in Donbass

The protests in Donbass region slowly started to look like an armed conflict with more and more people and weapons getting involved on the side of the separatists. Smaller armed protests also took place in southern and central regions of the country in a port city of Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv but these events were effectively neutralized by the Ukrainian special forces. By the summer of 2014 the Donetsk and Luhansk rebels were controlling most of the territories in the cities as well as certain rural areas as well. At some point rebels from Donetsk and Luhansk were able to join their forces and coordinate the fights against the Ukrainian forces together. In June 2014 at least three Ukrainian army planes were shot down over the territories under the rebel control which proved their capabilities on fighting aerial targets as well as manpower and ground vehicles.⁸

⁸ From publication *For the 5 years anniversary of the beginning of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine* (ukr. *До 5-річчя від початку збройної агресії Російської Федерації проти України*) by Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in 2019

Figure 5: Areas under rebel control in August 2014



Source: BBC, 2015

Figure 6: Areas under rebel control in September 2014



Source: BBC, 2015

The frontline changed a lot during the conflict (Figure 5, Figure 6). Initially after gaining control over the territory between Donetsk and Luhansk rebels advanced further towards the towns of Artemivsk and Debaltseve penetrating deeper into the Donetsk region. At the same time fierce fights went on over the control of the Donetsk airport since it was located on a strategic location right by the city enabling the government forces to effectively use artillery from the airport against the rebels in Donetsk.

Alleged facts of the Russian support for the rebels remained unclear since the Russian government kept constantly denying any kind of participation in the conflict while addressing it as an internal conflict within Ukraine while at the same time calling for a peace solution and negotiating between the belligerents. The Russian agenda in case of the conflict was clear. As the battles have been getting bloodier and there was no foreseen way for the Ukrainian army to solve the ongoing conflict by military means the need for the peace solution was obvious. Escalation of the conflict to this point would require the Ukrainian government to start negotiating about the ways the conflict could be ended while minimizing the violence. A ceasefire agreement was reached with the help of the OSCE in September 2014 in Minsk where the representatives of Ukraine, Russia, Luhansk Peoples Republic (LPR) and Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) agreed on a ceasefire and retreatment of heavy artillery away from the contact line. This agreement was not respected neither by the Ukrainian side nor by the rebel republics as the fighting continued on a full scale in January 2015 after the capturing of the Donetsk airport by rebel forces.

Initial contact group was formed on the basis of leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France that started as a spontaneous meeting in Normandy on the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day allied forces landing in Normandy. Soon this set up seemed to work well on negotiating the solutions to the crisis and several meetings were held to solely discuss the Donbass War. Negotiations between these heads of states finally lead to the Minsk Summit 11th-12th of February 2015 where the ceasefire and disarmament agreement known as the Minsk II was agreed upon after extensive talks between the leaders. As Russia was claiming on not being a side of the conflict, they participated as a mediator between the rebel forces of DPR and LPR and Ukraine.

The Minsk II agreement has been referenced to as the main agreement regulating the possible conflict resolution after an actually stable ceasefire has been achieved. However,

to this date there is every day violence on the line of contact reported by the rebels, by the Ukrainian army as well as by the OSCE monitoring mission that has been reporting on site since the very beginning of the War in Donbass. Even the new Minsk II agreement is not fully working since people are still losing their lives in the conflict while the fighting sides are blaming each other for every incident happening whenever there are casualties resulting from it (Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 2019).

Russia has been alleged by Ukraine of supplying the rebel forces with weapons and ammunition as well as not interfering with the constant flow of Russian voluntary mercenaries crossing the border between the Russian Federation and the Ukrainian territories held by the rebel forces and then participating in the war on the rebels' side. The Russians have been also accused of delivering heavy armament for the use of the rebels according to several independent surveillance groups operating on the fact checking of the allegations in the War in Donbass (Kivimäki, 2017). Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied any Russian interference in the conflict several times in every press event he has been asked a question on this issue. However, as Putin once mentioned, the absence of any regular troops of the Russian army on the territory of Ukraine does not mean that "...we never said that there [in Ukraine] are no people [of ours], that are involved in the solving of certain questions, including the military ones." (Peremitin, 2015). Also, the Russian President has stated that the civilians going to fight in the War in Donbass from Russia are actually not mercenaries since they "...are not getting payed for it but are working on a voluntary basis instead." (Astapkovich, 2014).

3. Current state of affairs

3.1 Assets of possible Russian interests in the region

The Donbass region has been under the continuous Russian rule for more than two centuries. This time period started from the takeover of the region by the Russian Empress Catherine the Great in 1783 up until the Ukrainian independence in 1991. During this time period a lot has changed in the region, not only in terms of the technological development and increased wealth of the people in general but also in the way people identify themselves ethnically.

From the Russian perspective the economic interests in the Donbass region are currently problematic since due to both the Ukrainian sanctions on trade and commerce with Russia and the Russian contra sanctions it is virtually impossible to have trade relationships between the two countries which also affects the Russian trade in the Donbass region. Some agricultural products were remaining as an unsanctioned trade article until 2016. However, the trade in agricultural products was not a major point of interests neither for Russia nor Donbass since both Donbass and the Russian regions on the other side of the state border are quite self-reliant in their agricultural sector (TASS, 2019).

In the case of Donbass there are for sure other interests for Russia to pursue than just the benefits from good trade relations. As Brzezinski mentioned in his book “The Grand Chessboard” the loss of the control over the territory of Ukraine and its 52 million inhabitants was a huge setback and a geopolitically pivotal moment for the Russian strategic interests (Brzezinski, 2016, p. 92). Russia was no longer having the control over the extensive and strategically valuable European territory that once hosted a large percentage of the Soviet army potential, including some impressive amount of strategic and tactical nuclear assault weapon. Ukraine’s suspicious attitude towards the strengthening and unifying CIS into a more homogenic and Moscow-led organization in the 1990s made it possible for Ukraine to maintain its sovereignty from falling into Moscow’s zone of influence again (Brzezinski, 2016, p. 92).

As Russia has previously stated multiple times it sees NATO as a threatful organization and also sees the eastbound expansion of NATO close to the Russian borders as a threatful activity towards Russia’s own security concerns (Whyte, 2018). The steady course of Ukraine’s motion towards NATO and EU membership is thus fairly threatening for Russia. In order to keep Ukraine or any further bordering “close abroad” countries from joining any major

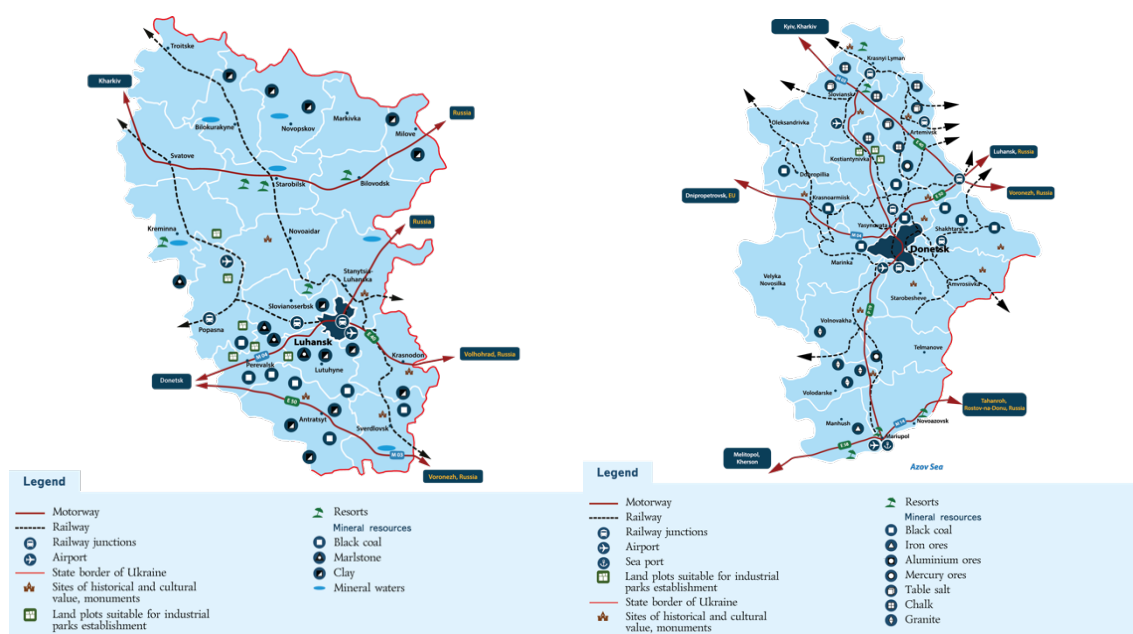
western political and defense institutions Russia is willing to act in a rather radical way in order to secure its interests. Extended support of the rebels in the Eastern Ukraine as well as the War in Georgia and the following occupation of the territories of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia could be seen as the events proving Russia's strategy of creating and maintaining an internal havoc in neighboring countries with policies contrary aligned to the Russia's preferences. The cause and effect relationship on these cases is however a tough one to be proved utterly.

Besides the strategic advantage resulting from the possible control of the Ukrainian territory by Russia there could be other clear benefits resulting from the prospect of these territories falling under Moscow's rule. As Brzezinski pointed out in "The Grand Chessboard", *"Most often, geopolitical pivots are determined by their geography, which in some cases gives them a special role either in denying access to important areas or in denying resources to a significant player."* (Brzezinski, 2016, p. 41). During the Soviet era a large amount of industrial production capacities were located in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic and especially in its Eastern areas in the Donbass region. The Donbass region was famous for its metallurgy industry and to this day there are a lot of factories functioning in that sphere. There were several reasons why this was the case. Firstly, the allocation of natural resources the production industry needed was favorable for the establishment of such industries since the costs of transportation were lower in this case. As seen on the map (Figure 7, Figure 8) there are plenty of iron ore, aluminum and mercury resources found around the city of Donetsk as well as black coal deposits both in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine.

The black coal is crucial not only for the energy source of the production capacities but as a general energy source for other uses as well, such as heating and production of electricity. Russia's potential control over the natural resources and energy resources of the Donbass region are not necessarily highly profitable for the needs of Russian domestic demand for such resources since Russia is currently more than self-reliant on both coal and metals in general. The Russian control, or at least the effective denial of Ukraine having the control, acts more as a leverage point for Russia creating a destabilizing situation for the Ukrainian economy as the Ukrainian industry is heavily dependent on the resources of the Eastern parts of the country (Sakwa, 2016, p. 172). As the forces of the DPR and LPR are currently controlling the major natural resources in the Donbass region and the production plants have been "nationalized" by the rebel governments the situation for Ukraine is problematic. Any official trade with the DPR or LPR is out of the question since this would undermine the effectiveness of the Ukrainian sanctions against the rebel authorities as well as discredit Ukraine on the international arena. The severeness of the situation in terms of Ukrainian dependency from the

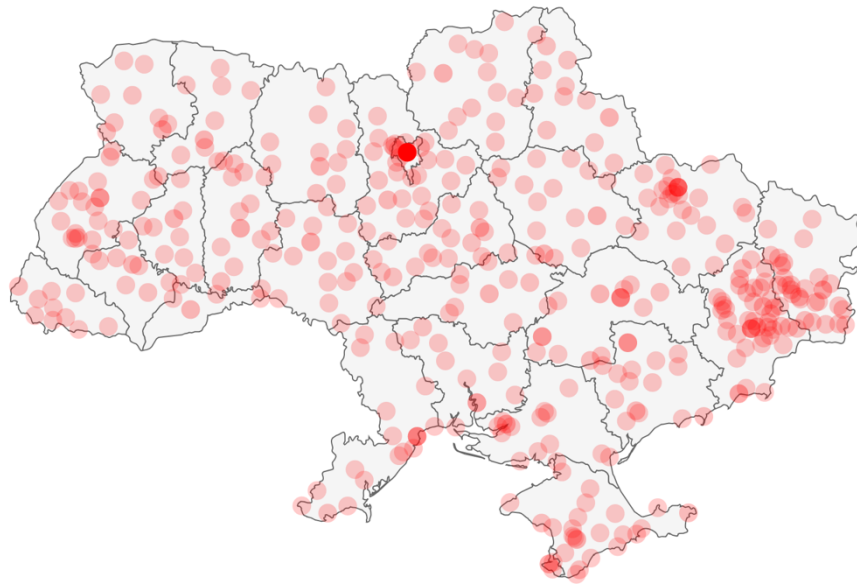
Donbass coal is nowadays seen from the increased import of foreign coal into Ukraine, a huge minus for the trade balance of the country, as well as reports of the “illegal” coal from Donbass being imported into Ukraine with shady intermediaries and other countries involved (Istrate, 2019).

Figure 7 and Figure 8: Infrastructure and Natural resources in Luhansk and Donetsk regions



Source: Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine

Figure 9: Relative population density in the Ukrainian regions



Source: World Population Review, 2019

Another asset worth noting is the human capital in the Ukrainian Eastern regions. As mentioned before the population in Luhansk and Donetsk regions is one of the most Russian speaking when compared with all the other Ukrainian regions. The mixed cultural identity of these people living on the borderlands between the two states is clearly an interest point for the Russian authorities. Besides the cultural aspects these regions stand out also as the rather densely populated ones in comparison with other Ukrainian regions (Figure 9). Encouraging the Russian speaking and likely minded people living in the Eastern regions of Ukraine to see Russia as an alternative to Ukraine can certainly be pointed out as one of the Russia's interests. With the war breaking out in Donbass hundreds of thousands have fled abroad, mostly to Russia due to the easiness of settlement and changes in the Russian legislation made in order to accommodate as much of the Eastern Ukrainians as possible (Kozlov, 2014). The population of Ukraine is in general highly educated and the recent refugee flow of the Ukrainian citizens to Russia should in theory contribute well to the needs of the Russian economy and the severe demographic situation with the aging population and low birth rates among the Russians citizens living in Russia.

3.2 Politics in DNR and LPR & relations with Russia

Unlike in the case with Crimea Russia has not used the protests of the pro-Russian people in the Donbass region as a tool to incorporate the territory into being a part of Russia on the official level. Instead, while openly supporting the rebel states of LPR and DPR by various humanitarian means, Russia has not questioned the Ukrainian sovereignty over these territories and is not recognizing these entities as separate states. The dilemma Russia is facing in the case of these Eastern Ukraine regions is more complex than the rather smooth annexation of Crimea. After the events in Crimea the Ukrainian army proved its will to defend the Ukrainian territory possible of which the whole War in Donbass was a clear proof of. Recognizing the DPR and LPR would require Russia to openly fight on their side against the Ukrainian army since the whole reasoning behind the recognition would be the sake of defending the Russian population against the so-called Ukrainian nationalists and aggressors. In fear of the further western sanctions, domestic and world-wide popular disapproval as well as the huge costs in terms of money and lost lives the last thing Russia would want is to end up in an open war with Ukraine over some territories that are not worth those costs. Instead, Russia has set up a way of dealing with LNR and DNR while not recognizing them formally while still exercising a policy somewhat benefitting all of the counterparties.

Since the formation of the so-called people's republics there have been signs of an internal struggle over the power both in LPR and DPR. It is hard to gather reliable information on any kind of governmental processes in both LPR and DPR since there are almost no international journalists or news agencies working at spot, much of the information can be gathered only based on leakages in social media or the coverage of the local or Russian news sources whose tendency towards a biased output should be kept in mind. The leaders and the main government ministers of both LNR and DNR have so far been the people who were the original masterminds and leading figures in the first anti-governmental protests that started in the streets of Donetsk and Luhansk in spring 2014. According to some investigative journalists the first leaders in DPR and LPR were approved or possibly even placed by Moscow in order to have loyal leadership in charge of these areas for possible future use in favor of Moscow's interests. The division and clashes within the DPR and LPR were therefore caused by the disobey of some influential rebel forces' war commanders towards the decisions coming from Moscow (Vikhrov, 2017).

Several high officials of the DPR and LPR governments have since 2014 died in unclear circumstances. The most notable case was the killing of DPR leader Alexander

Zakharchenko on 31st of August 2018. He and several of his close allies died in an explosion in a café in the center of Donetsk while they were dining there. Anything clear of this incident was only the fact that Zakharchenko himself was the main target of the attack. Immediately different theories arose on the ones responsible for this incident. The Donetsk separatists blamed the Ukrainian special forces while arresting several suspects only few days after the attack. Russia was also pointing the blame towards the Ukrainians. President Vladimir Putin even made a statement condemning the act, the first time he would be mentioning the name of Zakharchenko in public. The official Ukraine denied any connection with the explosion. It has been suggested that the killing of Zakharchenko was an event caused by the internal fights for the power within the DPR between different interest groups. It could also be possible that the Russian special forces were responsible for the attack since Zakharchenko was allegedly a problematic and stubborn person to deal with and his requests for lessening the rebel republics dependency from Moscow was not perceived quite well in the Kremlin (Miller, 2018).

In the LPR the situation has been similar as in the DPR with continuous fight for power causing problems not only within the self-proclaimed republic but also in terms of its relations to the fellow DPR and Russia. On the 21st and the 22nd of November in 2017 the unknown people with heavy armament occupied the central administrative building in Luhansk and kept hold of it while forcing the self-proclaimed LPR leader Igor Plotnitsky and his supporters to leave their posts. Some people were detained by the occupiers while Plotnitsky managed to flee the city and successively escape to Russia. Plotnitsky was a person favored by Russia, these events were another sign of certain groups within the rebels willing to act against the Russian preferences in order to gain more power for themselves. It is however still unclear who were the unknown armed people and where did they come from. Plotnitsky did have enemies for some time, in 2016 his car was bombed but managed to survive the incident with minor injuries. According to one theory the armed occupiers came from the neighboring DPR in order to get rid of Plotnitsky who was against the creation of the Novorossiia Federation, a state union between the DPR and LPR supported mostly by some DPR leaders as the stronger DPR would end up being a leading part of the possible union state (Zoria, 2017).

The support of Russia provided to the rebel republics has been a controversial issue since it is rather hard to estimate the true amount and quality of the help given. Besides the humanitarian aid transported from Russia to Luhansk and Donetsk with grand convoys and huge media coverage the Russians have been alleged of providing lethal weaponry to the rebels, including rocket launch systems, armored personnel carriers, tanks and anti-air missiles (Zoria, 2018). Many independent research groups have been investigating the matter of Russian

military assistance to the rebels. According to the investigation results of the Bellingcat group, that were mostly based on the analysis of the photos available on the social media, there is no doubt that Russia has been supplying the rebel forces with heavy armament. In one of the investigations it comes clear that the rebels are operating state-of-the-art modern T-90A battle tanks, so far used only by the Russian army (Kivimäki, 2017).

Bellingcat has also published a broad research on the MH17 plane crash over Donetsk with proofs suggesting that the plane was shot down over a rebel-controlled territory by a Russian anti-air missile system (Bellingcat, 2014).

The main concern for the Russians is to keep a low profile on anything that has a connection to the Russian military assistance to the Eastern Ukrainian rebels. The Russian officials have always denied any allegations of their army equipment participating in the battles of The War in Donbass, let alone that their anti-air missile had anything to do with the MH17 crash. Proving the opposite has however been a hard task even for the Russian experts. Since the MH17 disaster the Russians may have rethought on the reasons on further supplying the rebel forces with heavy weaponry, mostly due to the uncertainty of the final outcomes on the possible civilian casualties and the image of the Russian foreign policy in general.

3.3 The Minsk Agreement dispute

To this date the main document regulating the situation in the Donbass region is the Minsk II agreement signed in Minsk on 12th of February 2015 by Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany and the representatives of LPR and DNR. The implementation of the first chapters of the agreement was supposed to start on midnight 15th of February with the complete ceasefire all over the contact line and a successive retreat of the heavy artillery away from the contact line on both sides beginning on the 17th of February (Syrůček, 2015, p. 283). The agreement also stated the necessity of legally recognizing the special status of the rebel-controlled territories by Ukraine while granting them certain self-governing rights and the proclamation of amnesty for all the people involved in the military events. All foreign fighters and mercenaries were to be removed from the whole Ukrainian territory and the border between Ukraine and Russia, including the areas under rebel control, to be ceded to the Ukrainian army and OSCE observation units (Sakwa, 2016, pp. 176-177).

The main dispute in the implementation came up with the dilemma of the order of the enforcement of each agreement chapter. Ukraine, the rebels and Russia had serious disagreements on what the amount of self-governing rights the rebel-controlled areas of Donbass should receive, how the rebels should seize the border regions to the Ukrainian army and what the guarantees that the fighting does not start again while these steps are being implemented. Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko urged Russia to affect the rebels into a more constructive position on what they are willing to give up. Russian president Vladimir Putin reacted by saying that Russia is not a participant in this conflict and thus the Ukrainian officials should negotiate the implementation of the agreement directly with the rebel representatives (Sakwa, 2016, p. 176). The fighting has been continuing despite the ceasefire agreement and the little bits of trust that have been formed during the Minsk negotiations between the Ukrainian and the rebel counterparts have been slowly eradicated with the ongoing violence and constant casualties.

As the fighting has been continuing with rather insignificant changes in the contact line alignment the conflict seems to be becoming more frozen by its nature. Compared with the Donbass insurgency whose goals were not quite clear during any stage of the conflict, the Russian strategy seems to have formed with the developments in the conflict and the current state seems to be quite pleasant for the Russians (Sakwa, 2016, p.178). The current stall situation in implementing the Minsk agreement gives Russia an opportunity to halt Ukraine from closing towards a possible NATO membership. With the frozen conflict staying frozen for a long enough time Ukraine would lose its potential in joining the western institutions but instead it would become more possible for Ukraine to become a sort of buffer zone between the West and Russia, thus securing some of the Russian foreign policy goals. While Russia would be in favor of the instability within Ukraine it is actually reasonable for Russia to also support the Donbass region remaining as a part of Ukraine. Sakwa argues that “...Moscow repeatedly called on the leadership of the insurgency to respect the territorial integrity of the country. By keeping the Russophone regions within Ukraine, Moscow would be able to shape policies in not only foreign but also domestic policy. The strategy was to maintain the voice of the pluralists from within, rather than risk the disintegration of the Ukrainian state – although the latter outcome could not be dismissed.” (Sakwa, 2016, pp. 178-179).

4. What to expect? Possible outcomes of Russia's future activity to Ukraine

4.1 Ukraine as a borderland between the West and the East

Idea of Ukraine being “condemned” to remain as a borderland between the West and the East is not new. Even the name of Ukraine if literally translated from its old Slavic roots means “a borderland”, coming from the proto-Slavic root word “krai”, the edge. Before independence Ukraine and the Ukrainian people have been de-facto carrying this role for centuries. Border area between Poland and Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries, Ukrainians living under the rule of the Russian Empire, Kingdom of Poland, Austro-Hungarian Empire and later the Soviet Union, all regimes constantly implementing their own policies and agendas often at the cost of the Ukrainian identity that almost miraculously survived to these days and is currently living the period of revival and strengthening. The unity of the country and the Ukrainian people however remains at stake to this date.

The Minsk II agreement signed in 2015 was accepted by the Ukrainian negotiators at that time yet the implementation of its key points is still an issue debated by the parliament parties and government officials. While Kyiv acknowledges the importance of the agreement and the necessity of stopping the war within the means listed in the agreement the problem arises with the more precise interpretation of some rather vaguely agreed points. Granting the rebel-controlled areas with more self-governance, special legal status and tools to manage their own internal matters would not necessarily mean a beginning of the federalization process of the country, a scenario highly unacceptable by the Ukrainian authorities. The main fear of the Ukrainian government now is that any sort of a giveaway to a certain region, or the Russian speaking and Russia-minded minority in this case, could be a dangerous precedent the following outcomes of which might put the unity of the state under a risk. As the time passes with the Eastern Ukrainian regions managing their internal matters independently and developing closer relations with the Russian Federation the division within Ukraine could further deepen and the authority of Kyiv slowly eradicate, both mentally and practically. The Russian influence in the region would be rising since as mentioned before Russia has clear interests in this region and would highly likely not miss a chance to influence the Donbass politicians as well as the public opinion towards growing hate and disobedience against the Ukrainian central government. The Eastern Ukrainian regions would be losing their connection to other parts of Ukraine and

probably end up demanding more independence with a possibility of violence escalating again by the same scenarios that happened in 2014.

Further separation of the Eastern Ukrainian regions would not serve the ultimate goal of the Russian geopolitical strategy since these regions are currently acting as a lever of the Russian influence within Ukraine. The fact that the agreed points within the Minsk agreement ended up being so beneficial to the Eastern Ukrainian regions was mostly due to the Russian position in the negotiations which proves that Russia is capable of influencing the decision makes in Kyiv that are trying to reach a compromise while having the relatively highest stakes on the table. Russia is however willing to hold up to this influence and thus the more complete separation of the Eastern Ukrainian regions from the Kyiv authorities would successively mean that Russia would lose that lever and that the means to push on Ukraine with the use of non-violent means would become significantly weaker than they are today.

Further division of Ukraine could be a preferable option for the Russian strategical benefit only in case of a threat of possible opportunity for Ukraine being successful in turning the situation over and convincing the leaders and the population of the rebel held territories to stay part of the unified Ukraine and give up their hopes for any sort of special status. Recently elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy has stated that he plans to begin a “powerful information war” in the region while also ruling out the possibility of any special status to be given to Eastern Ukrainian regions (The Moscow Times, 2019). For Moscow the loss of control over the Eastern Ukraine would be a bad deal and thus Russia would likely use severe actions in order to obstruct this scenario ever happening.

4.2 Frozen conflict – benefits and losses for Russia’s interests

The scenario of a frozen conflict situation setting up in The War in Donbass is the path the current situation would lead to if no major changes appear in the course of the situation we have now. The violence taking place in the conflict is currently limited to the line of contact between the Ukrainian army units and the rebel forces. The war is constantly consuming enormous resources on both sides and given the current poor state of the Ukrainian economy the costs of the fighting are a huge setback in the state’s financial balance, a situation that by the interest of the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian taxpayers would be a preferable one to get rid of. With the fact of the rebels being able to fight back against the entire state army

and that they manage to effectively control certain areas directly hints that there is some serious financial and material assistance coming from the outside, in this case Russia. While keeping in mind the sheer sizes of the Russian and the Ukrainian military expenditures it is clear that keeping up a limited proxy war is much easier for the Russian economy than it is for Ukraine to fight against the well-trained rebels backed by a great military power.

Russia has some experience in managing the frozen conflicts it engages in close to its borders. In Transnistria there are currently Russian forces de-facto occupying a part of the Moldovan territory despite the protests expressed by the Moldovan authorities. Similar is the situation currently in Abkhazia and South-Ossetia where Russian forces are occupying and supporting the breakaway territories of Georgia and there Russia has even recognized these territories as independent states, an act widely condemned by the western countries. The primary goal of this sort of activity is probably an urge of Russia to maintain influence regionally in the countries close to its borders whenever there is a viable possibility to do so. Also, the existence of a frozen conflict blocks the possibility of the country that is dealing with such conflict to join for example the NATO alliance. It is well known that both Ukraine and Georgia have in recent years been making big efforts in order to join NATO as full members. One of the paragraphs of NATO enlargement principles in “Chapter 1 : Purposes and Principles of Enlargement” states that “States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.” (NATO, 2008).

Eastern enlargement of NATO is seen by Russia as a major security threat that should be stopped by all reasonable means possible. Keeping up a frozen conflict even with the chances of being discredited by the international community and possible introduction of further international sanctions is seen by Russia as a reasonable mean, at least in cases of Ukraine and Georgia. While the frozen conflict slowly eradicates economic and military resources of the country involved in the conflict this creates a possibility for further escalation of the Russian influence as the target state keeps getting weaker. The frozen conflicts involving Russia are not likely seen as a permanent state by Moscow but rather a necessary mean to achieve further goals in the long run.

4.3 Further fusion with Belarus and geographical encirclement of Ukraine by Russia

At the time of the signing of the Bela Vezha accords by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus in December 1991 the Soviet Union was falling apart and the new agreement was meant to legalize the way the three largest Soviet republics would continue as independent states within a newly formed Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Due to the differences in population count, military and economic power as well as the fact that Russia was in these accords recognized as the successor state of the Soviet Union it was obvious from the Russian point of view that the Commonwealth should at some point start functioning as a state union lead from Moscow. This interpretation was contested by the Belarussian and Ukrainian leadership and due to this disagreement, the ratification of the accords in the participating countries' parliaments took a rather long time. Fearing that the active membership in CIS would limit the sovereignty of the country Ukraine has always been reluctant to agree on common resolutions signed within the CIS format, especially in the 2000s when developing contacts with the western countries hinted that the whole membership in an organization like CIS might not be relevant for Ukraine at all. With the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the breakup of the War in Donbass it became absolutely unthinkable for the Ukrainians to further participate in the Commonwealth decision making. In 2018 Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko signed a decree cancelling the Ukrainian membership in the CIS.

Unlike Ukraine, Belarus kept much closer ties with Russia through CIS. In 1997 a treaty was signed between Belarus and Russia creating the Union of Belarus and Russia (the Union State), a supranational union of the two countries with plans on adopting common government structures, unified legislation, currency and even military. These kinds of integration processes have not been agreed upon to this date since the Belarusian government and the current Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko are concerned about the Belarusian sovereignty and a possible outcome of Belarus ending up eventually incorporated into Russia within the legal framework of the Union State. With the Ukrainian crisis happening and Lukashenko warming up the relations between Belarus and the Western countries Russia has become more active on pushing through further intergovernmental integration agreements while willing to trade on energy prices for Belarus, a topic that is crucial for the Belarusian industry highly dependent on the energy imports from Russia (Shraibman, 2019).

Russia already operates military bases on Belarusian territory and with the ongoing integration between the two countries it is likely that we will see more Russian military presence in Belarus in future years. For Ukraine the integration between Belarus and Russia is an unpleasant scenario for many reasons. In the case of new tensions arising between Russia and Ukraine Russia could potentially use Belarusian territory as one of the starting points of its military forces in order to conduct an invasion into Ukraine. According to a Ukrainian political expert Yevhen Dykyi since Russia already controls the Crimean Peninsula and is bordering Ukraine from the east Ukraine would be surrounded by Russia and in case of an invasion starting it would be very difficult for the Ukrainian army to simultaneously defend the Ukrainian territory from the north, east and south (Obozrevatel, 2019).

Conducting a large-scale military invasion into Ukraine would be devastating for the Russian foreign relations, especially with the western countries. The possible set-up leading to this sort of action by Russia would for example be the weakening of the Ukrainian state due to the prolonged frozen conflict in the Donbass region and overall poor economic state of the country. The direct invasion would also require years of Russian information warfare targeting the Kyiv authorities in Ukraine creating local support for the Russian invaders and dividing the nation. There would be a strong reaction from the western countries, however it is highly unlikely for them or for NATO to step up and fight over Ukrainian sovereignty post-factum.

The encirclement scenario seems to be forming up while the integration processes within the Union State are developing through Russia's pressure on Belarus. Using the new build ups by Russia in terms of possible invasion into Ukraine on a full scale does seem a bit far off from the today's point of view. It is however worth keeping in mind that only a decade ago it would have been unimaginable to consider Russia annexing Crimea from Ukraine and fueling up a war in the Donbass region within few years from that point. And today these unimaginable scenarios have become the reality.

4.4 Prospects for Russian information & hybrid warfare

The Russian practice on using media as an information and deception weapon in different military conflicts has proven its efficiency during the past two decades. During the wars in Chechnya the Chechnyan rebels were labeled solely as fighters supporting the creation of an Islamic caliphate on the territory of Chechnya while the original motives of the fighting

resistance was an aspiration of the majority of the Chechnyan people in gaining independence and an own sovereign country for the nation. With the US announcing the War on Terror in 2001 Russia gained more international support to its actions in Chechnya, a lot of which was due to the Russian dominance in the media coverage around the conflict and the ability of the Russians to have their narrative more visible in the world news. In 2008 in Georgia Russia was using the support of the Abkhazians and the South-Ossetians while “liberating” their areas from the Georgian alleged aggressors while in reality instead of the protection of the people Russia was clearly more after the general destabilization in the region with a goal of an effective halt to the Georgian path into becoming a member state of the NATO or the EU.

Usage of media has also been strong in the War in Donbass. The Russian news coverage over the pro-western Euromaidan protests in 2014, the coup in Kyiv and its possible effect on to the rights of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine was a triggering moment for the protests to break off in Luhansk and Donetsk. Later reports of the alleged atrocities of the Kyiv regime against the people of Donbass has caused voluntary mercenaries to join the Eastern Ukrainian rebel forces, not only from Russia but also some western countries (Wesolowsky, 2018).

The growing success of the Russian narrative regarding the coverage of the hybrid conflicts Russia is involved in can be explained by the expanding role of the social media as the main news source for many people. Social media is an easily used set of platforms that the users mostly use on the daily basis and that is mostly lacking any sort of information credibility control and mechanisms for fact checking, the instruments regulating most of the traditional media sources. Support for the Russian state narrative on the conflicts has not emerged only amongst just the Russian-minded people in different countries but also certain radical, anti-establishment and often far-right people groups that are more prone on using so called alternative media sources to get the daily information on different events happening around the world (Wesolowsky, 2018).

Russia has clearly developed its ways around the information and hybrid warfare and has been using the refined know-how during past few conflicts in the near proximity of its borders. Using the mass media for achieving its own goals in legitimating the Russian narrative on a world-wide scale is a clear asset worth noticing. As the information and news flows keep diversifying in the era of the modern technologies it becomes harder to track down the origins and reasoning behind every piece of information received. Russia has trained good on not only producing and spreading the wanted narrative but also to camouflage it in a way that makes it

hard to understand what was the original source for a given piece of information. The Russian disinformation has even been alleged to be the main cause of Hillary Clinton being discredited widely on the internet and social media platforms causing her and the US Democratic Party to lose the last presidential elections. The truth behind these allegations and the true capabilities of the organized Russian state-level disinformation taskforce remains as a question with no assertive answers.

5. Conclusion

From the historical perspective it is clear that Russia has always kept aligned with the realist view on the world affairs and is keen on holding to the same principles to this date. Russia respects power and is using its power, military if needed, to achieve its geopolitical goals while at the same time maintaining a pragmatic view on the cost-benefit ratio of the actions it plans to perform.

In case of Ukraine, and especially its Eastern Russian speaking regions, Russia sees it as the one of the “close abroad” regions, a subject to the high Russian geostrategic interests and as a current buffer zone with a crucial importance to the security of Russia against the threats Russia is facing from the abroad. Aligned with Russia for many centuries Ukraine is causing a certain level of distress for Russia due to its interest vector shifting from the friendly alliance with Russia towards the European democratic principles, western liberal values and the possible integration into the western institutions. In order to retain the control over Ukraine Russia is using radical yet carefully outweighed measures which are at the same time in line with the Russian overall geopolitical strategy but also causing harm for the reputation of Russia abroad as well as for the bilateral relations between Russia and Ukraine.

The fact of the War in Donbass going on underlines the importance of the Eastern Ukrainian regions to Russia. Russia is willing to pay a high price for its geopolitical goals that are connected to Ukraine and by this date there is no foreseeable option of Russia giving up these goals after all that has happened so far.

Russia is clearly determined with a goal of not letting Ukraine leave its sphere of influence that has been shrinking since the fall of the Soviet Union in both territory and strength. The possibility of Ukraine joining NATO or the EU would mean a huge loss for the Russian geopolitical strategy that requires the bordering regions of the post-Soviet territorial continuum to be as safe for the Russian security interests as possible. From the Russian perspective the Russian influence on Ukraine should remain strong and preferably be strengthened further by any necessary means.

The scenario of the ongoing state of the frozen conflict in Donbass is currently the most preferable option for Russia since at this moment any changes in the status quo situation would lead to the escalation of the current conflict results of which are hardly predictable at this moment. The international sanctions set against Russia due to the events in

Ukraine are to this day bearable and there is no evidence of more serious sanctions being set for now if the situation remains as is. In case of the frozen conflict remaining in its current form for a long time there is a chance for Russia to further deepen the divisions within the Ukrainian society and cause fragmentation between different political groups and within the civil society. The possible internal chaos followed by the collapsing economy and failing governance would be an opportunity for Russia to further seize the Ukrainian territories by military means while bearing rather reasonable costs due to the state of weakness of the Ukrainian military command. The ongoing project of the Union State with Belarus as well as the control over the Crimean Peninsula also support this scenario.

The Russian military operations have become swift by their nature. The occupation of Crimea was done in a matter of few days. While the Russian military performs their tasks effectively there are almost certainly months or even years of preparatory work and planning done on a high military command level. The control over the whole territory of Ukraine would be a logical end outcome of the Russian military intervention and support for the Eastern Ukrainian rebels serves the Russian geopolitical goals of Moscow ultimately regaining the decisive power status which was lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the most likely way of Russia acting according to its assumed strategy would be the support of the frozen conflict situation in Donbass in order to weaken the Ukrainian state and disperse the Ukrainian society with an expectation to use that weakness when regaining the complete control over the Ukrainian territory in the future.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Summary of the main terms figuring in the research

Appendices

Summary of the main terms figuring in the research

- **Donbass**

A region in the Eastern part of Ukraine. Originally meaning the basin area of the river Donets flowing through the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. Nowadays a more colloquial term for the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in general.

- **DPR and LPR**

The Donetsk Peoples' Republic and the Luhansk Peoples' Republic, the two self-proclaimed republics in the Donbass region currently fighting for their independence against the Ukrainian army

- **The War in Donbass**

An armed conflict currently ongoing in the Donbass region in which the DPR and LPR are fighting against the Ukrainian army.