GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WAR IN THE DONBAS (12 APRIL 2014-24 FEBRUARY 2022)

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ABSTRACT

GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WAR IN THE DONBAS (12 APRIL 2014-
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After the success of the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014, the Donbas region was embroiled in an armed conflict between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukraine's central government. In this regional war, pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas received covert and overt support from the Russian Federation, including political and military assistance. The West, on the other hand, took sides with Ukraine in this country's subtle dispute with Russia, despite simultaneously urging Kyiv to implement political decentralisation within the country. The Russian-Western confrontation in eastern Ukraine was widely interpreted in the academic literature in the light of what has been referred to as the "new Cold War". The eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Western unilateralism in global politics, and the Western democracy promotion in the former Soviet space were primarily emphasised in explaining the international factors that led to the eruption of an armed conflict in the Donbas. This thesis, despite acknowledging the eventual influence of these developments on the Russian behaviour, draws attention to a crucial aspect overlooked by the popular viewpoint in making sense of this particular conflict and the Russia-Ukraine crisis: Russia's identity issues with the West and Ukraine. Built upon the theoretical

framework of critical geopolitics, this thesis seeks to manifest the impact of Russia's "identity crisis" within the context of the war in the Donbas by analysing the official statements of Russian and Ukrainian leaders from 2014 to 2022.

Keywords: War in the Donbas, Russia-West Confrontation, Neo-Realism, Critical Geopolitics, National Identity

ÖZ

DONBAS SAVAŞININ JEOPOLİTİK ANALİZİ (12 NİSAN 2014-24 ŞUBAT
2022)

AKÇİN, Rümeysa
Yüksek Lisans, Avrasya Çalışmaları Bölümü
Tez Yöneticisi: Prof. Dr. Ayşegül AYDINGÜN

Ocak 2024, 131 sayfa

AvroMeydan Devrimi'nin 2014'te başarılı olmasının ardından Donbas bölgesi, Rusya yanlısı ayrılıkçı gruplarla Ukrayna hükümeti arasında silahlı bir çatışmaya tanıklık etti. Bu bölgesel savaşta, Donbas'taki Rusya yanlısı ayrılıkçılar, siyasi ve askeri yardım da dâhil olmak üzere, Rusya Federasyonu'ndan gizli ve açık destek aldı. Öte yandan, Batı, Kıyiv'i ülke içindeki siyasi otoritenin yerelleştirilmesi yönünde teşvik etse de, Rusya ile olan bu zımni anlaşmazlıkta Ukrayna'nın yanında yer aldı. Rusya ve Batı'nın Doğu Ukrayna'da karşı karşıya gelmesi, akademik çalışmalarda yaygın olarak "yeni Soğuk Savaş" olarak adlandırılan süreç ışığında yorumlandı. Donbas'ta silahlı bir çatışmanın ortaya çıkmasına yol açan uluslararası faktörler açıklanırken özellikle Avrupa Birliği (AB) ve Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü'nün (NATO) doğuya doğru genişlemesi, küresel siyasette Batı'nın tek taraflı eylemleri ve eski Sovyet ülkelerinde Batı demokrasisinin özendirilmesi üzerinde duruldu. Bu tez, bu gelişmelerin Rusya'nın davranışı üzerindeki nihai etkisini kabul etmesine rağmen, bu çatışmayı ve Rusya-Ukrayna krizini anlamlandırmada popüler bakış açısının gözden kaçırdığı önemli bir hususa dikkat çekmektedir: Rusya'nın Batı ve Ukrayna ile olan kimlik sorunları. Eleştirel jeopolitiğin teorik çerçevesi üzerine inşa edilen bu tez, Rus ve Ukraynalı liderlerin 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar olan

resmî açıklamalarını analiz ederek Rusya'nın "kimlik krizinin" etkisini Donbas'taki savaş bağlamında ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Donbaş Savaşı, Rusya-Batı Çatışması, Neorealizm, Eleştirel Jeopolitik, Ulusal Kimlik

To Müslüm Akçin (1929-2017)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introducing the Study

The main purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the underlying reasons for the war in the Donbas (12 April 2014–24 February 2022), which, according to Amy Mackinnon (2023), can be potentially referred to as a "prologue" to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. By doing so, it seeks to go beyond the established narratives in the academic literature with regard to the war in the Donbas and the wider Russia-Ukraine crisis[1]. The eruption of an armed conflict between pro-Russian separatists backed by the Russian Federation and the Ukrainian government in the eastern territories of this country ensued following the success of the Euromaidan Revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, which took place between 21 November 2013 and 22 February 2014. The Maidan protest movement, led by pro-Western demonstrators in the country's capital, toppled President Viktor Yanukovych, who had held this position since 25 February 2010. The West[2] gave its support to the Ukrainian government in its fight with "terrorists"[3] in the east, while Russia voiced its sympathies with Donbasite separatists, albeit without openly acknowledging its military incursion until the full-fledged invasion of 2022 (Jensen, 2017, p.3; Masters, 2023). The implicit confrontation between Russia and the West in the Donbas region brought along the interpretation of this war within the framework of their revived geopolitical rivalry in the post-Cold War era.

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[1] The phrase "Russia-Ukraine crisis" is deliberately employed in this thesis to denote the international crisis in Ukraine that has been ongoing since 2014, as the commonly used term "Ukraine crisis" (e.g. Allison, 2016; Chengyi, 2017; Hunter, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2014; Sauer, 2017; Trenin, 2014) fails to recognise the substantial role of Russia.

[2] "The West" stands for an arguably monolithic Euro-Atlantic bloc within the scope of this thesis and generally revolves around the EU, NATO, and the USA.

[3] The separatists in the Donbas region were officially classified as terrorists by the Ukrainian government.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis has been the subject of much scholarly debate ever since its nascence in 2014, with a prevailing argument asserting that the eastward expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Western unilateralism in the international sphere, and the West's promotion of democracy in the former Soviet space were the root causes behind this ongoing turbulent period in international politics (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2014; Trenin, 2014; Kanet, 2015; Chengyi, 2017; Dibb, 2022). This crisis has unfolded in three major stages: Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (20 February–26 March 2014), the war in the Donbas, and finally the Russia-Ukraine War (24 February 2022–to date[4]). The Russian military incursion in the war in the Donbas, as one chapter of the grand Russia-Ukraine crisis, was interpreted in the light of these arguments. According to this viewpoint, it was an explicit manifestation of the Kremlin's determination to establish a buffer zone in eastern Ukraine, governed by its local sympathisers, and thereby prevent the EU and NATO from encroaching upon Russia's westmost land border (Dannenberg et al., 2014, p. 5). However, this argument fails to take into account a crucial aspect, which is the fact that Russia was sharing direct land borders with both of these organisations through Estonia and Latvia for a decade prior to the advent of the Russia-Ukraine crisis (Demko, 2022).[5] Although both of these nations, like Ukraine, were once part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and had a sizeable population of ethnic Russians and Russophones within their state borders, their accession to these organisations did not result in any overt or covert military intervention from Russia (Demko, 2022).

On this basis, this thesis, in line with the arguments presented by Kari Roberts (2017) and Atilla Demko (2022), argues that the war in the Donbas, as well as the Russia-Ukraine crisis, cannot be fully understood through a solely hard geopolitical perspective. While acknowledging the validity of realist and neo-realist geopolitical arguments, this thesis asserts that the outbreak of a violent armed conflict in the Donbas region was primarily driven by the identity issue that existed between Russia and the West in the post-Cold War era, which subsequently spilt over the relationship

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[4] The Russia-Ukraine War was continuing at the time of writing this thesis.

[5] The scope of this analysis is confined to the Russian Federation's mainland territory, excluding its exclave in the Baltic region, the Kaliningrad *oblast*.

between Russia and Ukraine after the Euromaidan Revolution. Based on this argument, this thesis draws its theoretical background from critical geopolitics, a political theory that considers geopolitics as a subjective phenomenon inherently related to identity formation (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2009; Kuus, 2017, pp. 5-8), as the upcoming section shall further clarify.

Up until today, the innate "identity crisis" of Russia has been a subject of extensive scholarly analysis. Nevertheless, this popular subject was addressed in two separate branches in academia: firstly, in relation to this country's interaction with the Western world (e.g. Duncan, 2005; Tsygankov, 2008; Kanet, 2015; Roberts, 2017; Sauer, 2017), and secondly, in the context of its relations with Ukraine (e.g. Kuzio, 2005; Delwaide, 2014; Kuzio, 2016; Demko, 2022; Mankoff, 2022). Except for Kuzio (2005), Duncan (2005), and Tsygankov (2008), the rest of the publications cited above explored the identity issues of Russia within the context of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. However, neither of the aforementioned academic works discussed the "identity crisis" of Russia in a dual-layered approach and on a theoretical basis. This thesis claims to fill this academic niche. In line with this purpose, even though the Ukrainian layer held greater significance in the context of this thesis, the identity issues of Russia were initially examined within the framework of Russian-Western relations. It was due to the fact that this aspect predated Russia's identity issues with Ukraine, which were largely dormant until the Euromaidan Revolution.

The Donbas is an unofficial portmanteau term used to denote the territory of the Donetsk coal basin, consisting of parts of eastern Ukraine, specifically Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*s[6], as well as certain sections of southern Russia, Rostov *oblast* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a). According to Ararat L. Osipian and Alexander L. Osipian (2006, p. 497), one major error in the academic literature concerning the Donbas is the improper application of this term to the entire territory of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*s. The demarcation lines of the Donbas region are precisely defined as encompassing the central region of Donetsk, the southern region of Luhansk, and the western area of Rostov. The precise identification of borders holds paramount

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[6] *Oblast* is a term that refers to an administrative and territorial division used in the Russian Empire and later in the Soviet Union. It simply means "province" in English. It continues to be used in some of the former republics of the Soviet Union, including Ukraine.

significance, given the distinctive characteristics that distinguish this particular region from the rest of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Rostov (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 497).

In the post-Soviet era, the Ukrainian society was characterised by conflicting opinions with regard to national identity (ethnic *versus* civic), language (Ukrainian *versus* Russian), history (Kyiv's *versus* Moscow's narrative), and foreign policy preferences (integration with Western political organisations *versus* closer cooperation with Russia) (Lakomy, 2016, pp. 287-291). Although this societal division occasionally assumed a regional character, the peculiar social structure of Ukraine was more sophisticated than the overly simplified portrayal built around the dichotomy of a Ukrainian-dominated west and centre *versus* a Russian-dominated south and east (Härtel, 2016). Rather, these conflictual identifications coexisted and were infiltrated into every inch of the Ukrainian soil, albeit unevenly. The Donbas fell into the latter category with an ethnically diverse and predominantly Russian-speaking population that commonly embraced Moscow's historical narrative and endorsed a pro-Russian foreign policy.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, there was an indistinct demand for political decentralisation among the local population of the Donbas. The autonomy demands were occasionally manifested in concrete actions, with the most notable one taking place in 1994. In this year, two-thirds of the Donetsk electorate expressed their support for federalism through a local referendum (Kudelia, 2022, p. 208). The referendum outcome was indicative of the growing desire among the people to have a greater say in the political affairs of their region and to exercise more autonomy in their decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the autonomy demands withered away due to Kyiv's staunch implementation of what Charles J. Furtado Jr. (1994) categorised as "social nationalism". Subsequent to the independence declaration on 24 August 1991, the Ukrainian elite embarked on a carefully crafted nation-building project that was distinctly non-ethnic in nature (Furtado, 1994, p. 92). Meanwhile, it also eschewed any overt declaration of Russia as its negative "Other" (Şahin, 2020, p. 104).[7]

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[7] For more information, see (Arel, 1995; Arel, 2017; D'Anieri et al., 1999; Magosci, 1996; Plokhy, 2008).

In line with this, a balanced approach was embraced in Ukraine's foreign affairs, with Kyiv maintaining a nuanced and pragmatic stance towards both Russia and the West. When this political position began to shatter first in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution (22 November 2004–23 January 2005) and later the Euromaidan Revolution, the autonomy demands of the Donbas people resurfaced once again (Kudelia, 2014, p. 6). Yet, only after the Euromaidan, the infirm call for federalisation, which was not necessarily indicative of a desire to separate from Ukraine, escalated into an armed conflict. The primary catalyst for that was the militarisation of the Russian incursion after 2014 (see Kuromiya, 2019). Russia, a neighbouring country to the Donbas, has been long engaged in persistent endeavours to mobilise and cultivate pro-Russian sentiments among the Donbas people. However, these efforts have only been able to gain traction among a small segment of the regional population. Therefore, it should be hereby emphasised that the calls for autonomy, which were present in the region both and after the Euromaidan Revolution, were not supported by each and every Donbasite. Similarly, the separatist demands, which recently emerged as a foreign-imposed phenomenon, were never widely popular among Donbasites. Despite the presence of a significant number of ethnic Russians and the prevalence of the Russian language among the local population, the inhabitants of the Donbas have always been inclined to identify primarily with their region and/or with the Ukrainian state.

More than fourteen thousand people lost their lives in the first seven years of this regional war (Masters, 2023), in which the Russian Federation played a substantial role in causing and prolonging it. Meanwhile, thousands more, armed and unarmed, got injured. The line of contact between the government-controlled territories and separatist-held areas became a scene of a grave humanitarian crisis. Despite the documented commitment of the self-proclaimed authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk and the Ukrainian government, the international mediation efforts since 2014 under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and with the support of the Normandy Format[8] did not yield any meaningful results on the ground

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[8] The informal grouping of "the Normandy Format" was established on 6 June 2014 by the joint initiative of Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine to support the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) of the OSCE. The TCG's ultimate purpose (and so of the Normandy Format) was to find a permanent solution to the war in the Donbas. Their first meeting took place in Normandy, France during the

(Palermo, 2020, p. 371). The unwillingness and incapability of all conflicting sides and their foreign supporters to comply with the requirements of the Minsk I and II Protocols soon gave way to a larger, bloodier, and costlier war stretching beyond the Donbas region in the winter of 2022.

1.2. Theoretical Background

Geopolitics is the study of analysing the relationship between geography and politics (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 191). Classical geopolitics, also referred to as conventional, realist, or traditional geopolitics, argues that geographical characteristics of polities have a direct and irrevocable influence on the trajectory of their political fate (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 191; Sharp, 2009, pp. 358-359). It minimises the role of human beings during this process to solely analyse geographical characteristics with the aim of mentoring their political entities (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Mukerji, 1948, p. 16).

Classical geopolitics has its roots in the positivist and realist schools of thought. This political theory, owing to its positivist and realist breeding ground, primarily claims to be objective, as it arguably puts political science, characterised by abstractness, on the physical, and thus measurable, realm of geography (Kuus, 2017, pp. 2-3). Furthermore, in line with its theoretical foundation, classical geopolitics portrays nation-states as greedy vicious species, driven by an endless desire to gain an edge over each other in the international arena. As such, international politics is perceived as a zero-sum game, where one's gain comes at the expense of another's loss. Geopolitical analysis, within this perspective, is a mere tool for nation-states to achieve strategic advantage over their competitors.

The term "geopolitics" was uttered for the first time by the Swedish political scientist and politician Johan Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) towards the end of the nineteenth century (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Deudney, 2023; Sidaway, 2001, p. 225; Mukerji, 1948, p. 12). It went through its heyday at the beginning of the next *siècle* with the

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seventieth anniversary of Operation Neptune (also known as the "D-Day"). The Normandy Format talks, which were held at the level of state leaders, came to an end with Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.

theoretical contributions of Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914)[9] (from USA); Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) (from Germany); Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947) (from Great Britain); Karl Haushofer (1869–1946) (from Germany); and Nicholas John Spykman (1893–1943) (from USA). However, it got a bad name due to its affiliation with Nazi Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War (WWII) (3 September 1939–2 September 1945) (Dodds et al., 2022, p. 79; Sidaway, 2001, pp. 229-230; Kuus, 2017, p. 3; Deudney, 2023; Dalby, 1991, p. 273). Although its popularity as a political theory declined during this period, it still discreetly held on to both academia and politics.

Geopolitics had a substantial influence on politics during the Cold War (1947–1991), despite not being overtly credited. George F. Kennan (1904–2005), who served as the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 14 May to 19 September 1952, was the leading protagonist of the classical understanding of geopolitics during this tumultuous period. Kennan believed that a confrontation between the United States of America (USA) and the Soviet Union was inevitable because of the inherent characteristics of the latter, which were accordingly moulded by its historical legacy and geography (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, pp. 200-202; Sharp, 2009, p. 360). Therefore, under the influence of Mackinder and Spykman, he urged the United States to follow an active foreign policy to contain the communist malady by encircling this malignant state and its satellites in the wider Eurasian landmass. Kennan, as the mastermind of the United States' containment policy, was instrumental in creating a framework that dictated this country's foreign relations for decades to come, leading to a prolonged period of high political and military tension on the international stage (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 191).

A critical approach to classical geopolitics was initially formulated by Simon Dalby and Gearoid Ó Tuathail [Gerard Toal] (who wrote collaboratively and separately) towards the end of the Cold War (Sharp, 2009, p. 358). Emerging in the intellectual

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[9] In 1890, US naval strategist Mahan, in his book *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, wrote about the vitality of the control of sea routes for global supremacy (Deudney, 2023; Owens, 1999, p. 65). Considered one of the founders of classical geopolitics (Svarin et al., 2019, p. 27), his theoretical arguments are excluded from the scope of this thesis so as not to disrupt the flow of the narrative.

domain of post-positivism and post-structuralism, this political theory essentially challenges the core arguments of classical geopolitics, which characterise geography as an objective, pre-given, and fixed reality (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192; Svarin et al., 2019, pp. 28-37). Based on this, this approach firmly disavows the argument that geography is the sole determinant of political history. Instead, it contends that the responsibility of shaping the political trajectory predominantly rests on human agents, particularly those employed in the upper echelons of major political powers (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, pp. 192-195). In order to support this, the first critiques of classical geopolitics drew attention to the ideological and political dimensions of the geopolitical arguments that were produced during the Cold War (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2009, p. 358). Without a doubt, of these arguments, the containment policy has garnered the greatest scholarly notice over the past years. Nevertheless, the arguments of the theory's founding fathers, as in the case of Kennan's containment policy, were similarly not devoid of their political agendas: Mackinder wrote from the British perspective, Haushofer from the German, and Spykman from the American. Critical geopolitics thereby argues that geopolitical analysis cannot be independent of one's political interests (Sharp, 2009, p. 359; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192).

Critical geopolitics, owing much to Edward Said's (1935–2003) *Orientalism* (1978) sees a strong correlation between geopolitics and identity formation (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2009, pp. 359-361). According to this viewpoint, the political discourse built around the rivalry between a "democratic West" and an "authoritarian East" during the Cold War was simply an extension of the long-standing Occidental-Oriental narrative, which was put forward by Said's seminal work (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). What was thus proclaimed "the most influential and durable geopolitical script" by Ó Tuathail and John Agnew (1992, p. 190) was constructed on a systematic and recurrent pattern with the West ascribed with all positive things and the rest with the absolute opposite (Sharp, 2009, pp. 359-361).

Based on the close relationship between geography-making and identity formation, critical geopolitics, with its apparent Foucauldian nuances, claims that geopolitical narratives are deeply entrenched in power politics (Sharp, 2009, p. 359; Ó Tuathail &

Agnew, 1992, p. 192). Accordingly, discourse holds a crucial role in the process of legitimising or delegitimising particular political options, both at national and international levels, through the use of language (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Svarin et al., 2019, pp. 34-37). Therefore, it is of utmost significance for critical geopolitics to meticulously scrutinise discourse employed by high-ranking intellectuals of statecraft to unveil the true motives behind states' actions.

The Donbas is located in a unique geographical location between the European and Asian land masses with a considerable amount of material assets: direct land borders with Russia, abundant and high-quality underground resources, an industrialised economy, and a dense population (Furtado, 1994, p. 104; Lakomy, 2016, p. 286; Fischer, 2019, p. 7). Each of these factors collectively, though unevenly, flared up a war in these lands. However, this thesis argues that the escalation of an armed conflict in this borderland region, which spread over the entire country eight years later, was primarily driven by the issue of identity between Russia and the West, and, by extension, between Russia and Ukraine. Throughout the war, the political elite of Russia and Ukraine utilised a perfectly calibrated discourse to justify their standpoint and to discredit the opposing side. It should be highlighted beforehand that in this verbal altercation, Russia assumed an offensive approach, while Ukraine adopted a defensive one, given that the former was indisputably the aggressor.

Based on its argument regarding the decisive role of the aforementioned identity issues, this thesis aims to reveal the drawbacks of classical geopolitics within the context of the war in the Donbas region. To achieve this goal, it scrutinises the relevance of the major points of critical geopolitics to this particular armed conflict:

- Geopolitics is firmly related to one's national identity (Sharp, 2009, pp. 359-361; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992).

- Political elites invoke geopolitical narratives in their service to legitimise or delegitimise certain arguments and actions in their foreign policy (Svarin et al., 2019, pp. 34-37). Therefore, geopolitics is a discursive practice as much as a material one (Dalby, 1991, p. 273).

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By applying its major theoretical arguments over the context of the war in the Donbas region, this thesis seeks to endorse critical geopolitics, which, according to Jo Sharp (2009, p. 361), is an unending theory that requires constant validation due to its critical nature.

1.3. Methodological Framework

This thesis study largely revolves around the period between 22 February 2014 and 24 February 2022. The starting date refers to the triumph of the Maidan protest movement, as it was argued to be the main impetus behind the outbreak of the anti-Maidan protests, which later evolved into an armed conflict in the Donbas region between Russian-sponsored separatists and the Ukrainian government in the spring of 2014 (Trenin, 2014; Lakomy, 2016; Masters, 2023). The ending date refers to President Putin's "special military operation" speech, which has subsumed the armed conflict in the Donbas region into a full-blown war between Russia and Ukraine with no peace prospect on the horizon at the time of writing this thesis. However, this thesis still acknowledges that the war in the Donbas cannot be isolated from the prior and subsequent political developments in Ukraine and the international sphere. Therefore, when it is deemed to be necessary, it makes references to certain events in Ukraine and the international sphere that fall outside of this period.

This thesis embraces the documentary research method as its data collection technique. Within this framework, this thesis undertakes an in-depth analysis of a substantial dataset, comprising both primary and secondary sources that include academic literature and public declarations of senior state people. By doing that, it seeks to detect the consistent elements in the academic and official narrative to provide insight into the underlying reasons for the war in the Donbas. However, it should be noted that the secondary sources constitute the core of the dataset. The primary sources, on the other hand, appear solely to endorse or counter an argument.

On this basis, it occasionally makes references to the public speeches of the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine during the specified period, as this institution is the principal authority in both countries to shape foreign policy. The public declarations

of the high-ranking officials of the EU, NATO, and the USA are deliberately excluded from the scope of this thesis. The leaders in the subject are identified as Vladimir Putin (7 May 2000–2008; 7 May 2012–to date) in the case of Russia and Oleksandr Turchynov (23 February–7 June 2014), Petro Poroshenko (7 June 2014–20 May 2019), and Volodymyr Zelenskyy (20 May 2019–to date) in the case of Ukraine. The public declarations of Putin and Zelenskyy are derived from the official websites of the Presidency of Russia (http://en.kremlin.ru/) and the Presidency of Ukraine (https://www.president.gov.ua/en) in the English language, respectively. The public declarations of Turchynov and Poroshenko on the war in the Donbas are collected from the archives of the Kyiv Post (https://www.kyivpost.com/) and BBC (https://www.bbc.com/) in the English language as being absent in the official website of the Ukrainian Presidency.

1.4. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is composed of five chapters. It is structured as follows: Chapter One introduces the major arguments, theoretical background, and methodological framework. Chapter Two explains the theoretical basis of this thesis. It clarifies the fundamental arguments of classical and critical geopolitics throughout the historical evolution of this political theory. Chapter Three provides a brief historical overview of the Donbas region under four sections: early, distant (Cossacks and Russian Empire), recent (Soviet Union), and modern (Ukraine) eras. Chapter Four makes a meticulous analysis of the underlying factors that precipitated the war in the Donbas, drawing upon a comprehensive review of academic literature and official statements of Russia and Ukraine. Chapter Five serves as the concluding chapter of this thesis, wherein the research findings are analysed.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: CLASSICAL AND CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

2.1. Introduction

Throughout history, the impact of soil on political occurrences has been a topic of discussion in countless works. Nevertheless, geopolitics with its modern connotations, was born at the turn of the twentieth century (Owens, 1999, p. 64; Hagan, 1942, p. 478). Going through its heyday during the same period, its reputation has been volatile in academic and political circles ever since its nascence due to its bold assumptions and expansionist nature. Nowadays, this political theory has been revived once again to elucidate the current Russian-Western strife that manifested in numerous geographical settings, including Ukraine. The war in the Donbas, which attracted pale international attention and engagement, was not bestowed with an exclusive emphasis among the myriad of academic works on the geopolitical analysis of the grand Russia-Ukraine crisis. This thesis undertakes the task of filling this academic niche on what Ivan Shovkoplias (2022) called "the Invisible War"[10]. It unfashionably attempts to reconcile the classical and critical approaches in the battle-scarred steppes of the Donbas. Within this framework, this chapter, in its first section, addresses the main arguments of classical geopolitics through its historical evolution. Thereafter, in the second section, it focuses on the criticism towards the realist version of geopolitics and explains the fundamental theoretical points of critical geopolitics. The primary objective of this chapter is to establish the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

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[10] Shovkoplias' perception, shared by many Ukrainians, originated from the fact that the war in the Donbas did not receive substantial attention from the international community at the time. This was largely due to the fact that the conflict was overshadowed by Russia's military intervention in another country, Syria (Karatnycky & Motyl, 2015). Russia has been militarily involved in the Syrian Civil War since 2015 at the request of Damascus.

2.2. Classical Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the study of the relationship between the earth's surface and politics (Cahnman, 1943, pp. 55-56; Bowman, 1942, p. 648; Mukerji, 1948, p. 12; Hagan, 1942, pp. 480-481). It argues that physical geographical traits, such as location, territorial size, natural resources, topography, and climate, have a significant and permanent impact on the fate of political outcomes (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 191; Hagan, 1942, p. 478; Mukerji, 1948, p. 23). It mitigates, if not eliminates in its entirety, the influence of human beings in political processes, both at national and international levels. The bare, yet still significant, role of human agents is attributed to geopoliticians, who can analyse a country's geography, identify its geographical strengths and weaknesses, and formulate an effective foreign policy agenda to reinforce or improve its position on the global stage (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Mukerji, 1948. p. 16). Regardless, it vehemently holds on to the argument that geography, which steers state behaviour (Sidaway, 2001, p. 226; Mukerji, 1948, p. 18), cannot be changed. Based on the unalterable nature of geographical conditions, this political theory claims to be objective and scientific with positivist, determinist, and universal elements (Kuus, 2017, pp. 2-3). In parallel with this, Spykman (1944, p. 41 as quoted in Owens, 1999, p. 59), one of the prominent figures of classical geopolitics, once said: "Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent."

2.2.1. Ratzel, Kjellén, and Mackinder: Making Classical Geopolitics

The impact of physical geographic characteristics on human beings was discussed as early as the time of the ancient Greeks (Hagan, 1942, p. 478). The traces of geopolitical reasoning were present in the works of Herodotus (484 BC–425 BC), Thucydides (460 BC–400 BC), and Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) (Owens, 1999, p. 64; Deudney, 2023). The most notable argument produced in this era belonged to Herodotus, who was also credited as the first to write about the history of Ukraine (Plokhy, 2021). According to Herodotus, the characteristics of individuals were largely shaped by their surrounding geographical conditions (Owens, 1999, p. 64). In the early modern period, Jean Bodin (1530–1596) and Montesquieu (1689–1755) sought to theorise the influence of geographical environment on political events

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(Hagan, 1942, p. 478; Deudney, 2023). However, their efforts soon turned out to be largely futile. It would take three more centuries to compose a profound theoretical ground for illustrating geography's relation to politics. Many studies still harboured the credentials of geopolitical reasoning before the invention of the "science" of geopolitics.

Modern geopolitics started taking shape in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century (Owens, 1999, p. 64; Dodds et al., 2022, p. 77). During the following few decades, particularly in the interwar period, this political theory reached the zenith of its popularity (Deudney, 2023). Three political scientists moulded the main pillars of classical geopolitics during this period: Ratzel, Kjellén, and Mackinder.[11] During its premature stage, geopolitics was deeply influenced by politics, as the founding fathers, motivated by the desire to secure their countries' future within Europe's closed political system, sought solutions to achieve this ultimate goal (Flint, 2006, p. 17 as cited in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 25; Owens, 1999, p. 64).

Ratzel's organic state theory was primarily built on the inevitable impact of territory or with his own term "*Raum*" ("space" in German) on political entities (Hagan, 1942, p. 479). His goal was to ground social sciences, including its offspring political science, on an objective basis, as territory was a fundamental prerequisite of a state's existence (Cahnman, 1943, p. 55; Hagan, 1942, p. 479). Ratzel identified political communities with their organismic characters in his *Politische Geographie* (1897) by associating their tenor with human beings (Mukerji, 1948, p. 11; Owens, 1999, p. 64). Inspired by Social Darwinism, he believed that political communities behave similarly to individual human beings (Hagan, 1942, p. 479). According to his viewpoint, states, like all living organisms, required a territory with sufficient resources to thrive and prevail against their peers in a competitive and chaotic environment (Kruszewski, 1940, p. 964 as quoted in Hagan, 1942, p. 488; Sidaway, 2001, p. 226). Ratzel coined the term "*Lebensraum*" ("living space" in German) to refer to this wider habitat with adequate soil and natural reserves (Owens, 1999, p. 64). His organic state theory, under the influence of the "survival of the fittest" of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), had deep roots in realist political thought.

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[11] Spykman's theoretical contribution shall be addressed later in the chapter.

Although Ratzel made significant theoretical contributions, it was actually his pupil, Kjellén, who first used the term "geopolitics" (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Deudney, 2023; Sidaway, 2001, p. 225; Mukerji, 1948, p. 12). It was for this reason that the Swedish political scientist and politician was credited with the title of "the father of geopolitics" (Mukerji, 1948, p. 12). Kjellén emphasised the expansionist tendencies of states as living organisms by taking his mentor's arguments one step further (Hagan, 1942, pp. 481-482). Their arguments collectively constituted the backbone of the Munich school of geopolitics or shortly *geopolitik* in the aftermath of Germany's defeat in the First World War (WWI) (28 July 1914–11 November 1918). Mackinder approached geopolitics differently than Ratzel and Kjellén, as he did not occupy himself with overarching "scientific" considerations. He did not even explicitly use the term "geopolitics" (Sidaway, 2001, p. 227; Dodds et al., 2022, p. 79). Instead, Mackinder immersed himself in the practical aspect by visiting the field of geopolitics from the lens of the British Crown (Svarin et al., 2019, p. 27; Hagan, 1942, p. 481; Sidaway, 2001, p. 228). His primary objective was to devise a foreign policy that would safeguard Britain's position in the global political landscape, given the increasing influence of Germany, Russia, and the United States (Sidaway, 2001, p. 228; Hyndman, 2004, p. 380). Mackinder identified a specific geographical location, where British rule could yield an advantage over other states in this upcoming political competition, as the Western colonialism came to an end with the running out of new frontiers to explore (Sidaway, 2001, p. 227).

Mackinder, in his famous article *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904), put forward the prophecy that acquiring control over "the Heartland," which was designated as the centre of the Eurasian landmass, would eventually lead to global dominion due to the massive human and natural resources available in this region (Dodds et al., 2022, p. 79; Deudney, 2023; Ikenberry, 2014, p. 81; Hagan, 1942, pp. 480-481). His much-cited dictum was precisely as follows: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island [Asian, African, and European continents]; who rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder, 1919, p. 194 as quoted in Sidaway, 2001, p. 228). Mackinder revised his theory two decades later, arguing that the geopolitical significance of the Heartland could only be encountered through an alliance between

the powers of what he called the "Midland Basin", which was composed of North America and Western Europe (Owens, 1999, p. 66). The Heartland theory of Mackinder was a source of inspiration for German *geopolitik* (Hagan, 1942, p. 486; Sidaway, 2001, p. 229). It also had a significant impact on the foreign policy of the United States during the Cold War era (Sidaway, 2001, p. 229; Owens, 1999, pp. 68-70).

2.2.2. Haushofer: Making the German *Geopolitik*

Geopolitics found fertile ground to flourish in the war-wrecked Germany during the inter-war period (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 141 as quoted in Sidaway, 2001, p. 229). The Munich school of geopolitics was developed at this time by the editors of the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*: Erich Obst (1886–1981), Hermann Lautensach (1886–1971), and more importantly, Haushofer (Mukerji, 1948, p. 17). These geographers, in line with the core argument of the classical version, defined geopolitics as "the science dealing with the dependence of political events upon the soil" (Mukerji, 1948, p. 17). Nevertheless, despite its intentions of being scientific, German *geopolitik*, spearheaded by Haushofer, was focused on achieving specific political goals. Its main aim was to develop a foreign policy strategy that would undo the outcomes of WWI for Germany (Hagan, 1942, p. 489; Taylor, 1994, p. 405 as quoted in Sidaway, 2001, p. 229; Owens, 1999, p. 66). Therefore, *geopolitik* was not innocent of political interest just like Mackinder's Heartland theory (Mukerji, 1948, pp. 13-14).

Geopolitik was a synthesis of Ratzel's *Lebensraum* and Mackinder's Heartland theories (Owens, 1999, p. 66). According to Haushofer, the control of Eastern Europe, wherein the trivial statelets were arguably erected by the Allied Powers[12], was a question of life and death to supply a living space for the growing population of Germany (Owens, 1999, p. 66; Mukerji, 1948, p. 15). Moreover, Germany required additional manpower and material assets to reclaim its political influence in the international arena. Haushofer believed that German rule in Mackinder's

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[12] The major members of the wartime coalition that was formed in 1914 were Great Britain (founder), France (founder), the Russian Empire (founder), and the United States (joined three years later).

Heartland would be a solution because of this region's plentiful human and natural resources (Hagan, 1942, p. 486; Mukerji, 1948, p. 14). However, Haushofer's plan contained an interim period before the eventual German dominance in international politics. During this transitionary period, pan-America would be ruled by the United States; pan-Asia by Japan; and pan-Europe (including Africa) by Germany after the artificial states of this region were defeated (Deudney, 2023; Owens, 1999, p. 66). As Mackinder scried, if Germany were to rule over Eastern Europe, it would result in the downfall of the Soviet Union's control over pan-Russia (covering much of the Heartland) and pave the way for German global supremacy (Deudney, 2023; Owens, 1999, p. 66).

Besides the *Lebensraum* and Heartland theories, the Munich school of geopolitics was influenced by eugenics and the theory of racial superiority (Dodds et al., 2022, p. 79; Bowman, 1942, p. 654). It was for this reason geopolitics was put a veil on in North America and Europe after WWII, although it was (and is still) controversial whether Haushofer's arguments had an impact on the policies of the Third Reich (1933–1945) of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) (Dodds et al., 2022, p. 79; Sidaway, 2001, pp. 229-230; Kuus, 2017, p. 3; Deudney, 2023; Dalby, 1991, p. 273). However, many intellectual works, including the constituent documents of the Cold War, still contained geopolitical reasoning without explicitly referring to "the science of geopolitics", as was the case before the invention of this political theory.

2.2.3. Spykman: Making US Foreign Policy during the Cold War

Spykman, an International Relations scholar, made significant revisions to Mackinder's Heartland theory in 1942. He thought that Mackinder's emphasis on the importance of the Heartland in achieving global dominance was overrated (Owens, 1999, p. 68). Spykman, instead, assigned the decisive role to the control of the coastal regions of the Eurasian landmass, which was called "the Inner or Marginal Crescent" by Mackinder (Owens, 1999, p. 68; Svarin et al., 2019, p. 27). Spykman collectively referred to these outer areas of the Eurasian landmass as the "Rimland" (Owens, 1999, p. 68). He believed that the key to ruling Eurasia and deciding on "the destinies of the world" lay in controlling this region (Spykman, 1944, p. 43 as quoted

in Owens, 1999, p. 68). Spykman's Rimland theory was formulated as a strategic vision to protect and amplify US power in international politics by encouraging this country to follow an active and non-isolationist policy (Svarin et al., 2019, p. 27). The theory became successful in its objective after the end of WWII when Spykman's ideas made a huge impact on the formulation of US foreign policy during the Cold War, notably the policy of containment (Owens, 1999, p. 68).

The United States emerged as a superpower in international politics out of the deadliest conflict in human history in 1945. It monopolised this position for a few years until having to share the title with the Soviet Union. Following the end of WWII, US leadership was convinced that the continuation of American power was closely linked to its ability to access the world's every region in the wake of the rising communist threat (Ikenberry, 2014, p. 84). A foreign policy strategy, that urged Washington to actively and physically engage in faraway regions in order to prevent the control of the Rimland by a hostile political power, was embraced. Spykman's Rimland theory was the main theoretical inspiration behind the containment policy of Kennan (Owens, 1999, p. 68). It aimed to circumvent the spread of communism by encircling the Soviet Union and its faithful allies (Deudney, 2023; Sidaway, 2001, pp. 230-232). Due to this reason, the renowned scholar has largely been referred to as the "godfather" of containment policy, while Kennan was honoured with the title of the "father" (Owens, 1999, p. 68). The traces of Spykman's Rimland theory were evident in American geopolitics throughout the Cold War, including the policies of Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928–2017), who, in addition to their academic works, held key administrative positions in foreign policy-making (Sidaway, 2001, p. 231).

2.3. Critical Geopolitics

A critical approach was aroused from the wreckage of the Iron Curtain almost one hundred years after the development of classical geopolitics. It was one branch of a wider academic discussion on the concept of power in social sciences (Kuus, 2017, p. 3). The critique of geopolitics, at its core, revolved around the classical assumption about the relation between the earth's surface (affecting) and politics (affected).

Instead of depicting geography as the determinator of politics, the critical approach assigned this role to those behind the wheels of political entities. It was accordingly human beings and their political imaginations, especially those at the higher echelons of state structures of major powers, that created geographical orders (Sharp, 2009, p. 359; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 195). Echoing Alexander Wendt's 1992-dated famous catchphrase, Toal (2017, p. 40 as quoted in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 21) simply explained the core argument of this political theory as "geography as earthly location and resource endowment is what states make of it".[13]

2.3.1. Brief History of Critical Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics was developed in the 1980s by Dalby and Ó Tuathail within the intellectual realm of post-positivism and post-structuralism (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Svarin et al., 2019, p. 28). However, as in the case of its classical version, the term "critical geopolitics" was coined much later than the incurrence of its theoretical logic. It was first uttered by Dalby in his *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* titled book in 1990 (Kuus, 2017, p. 4). Nevertheless, even today, critical geopolitics does not entirely embody the qualities of a theory due to its focus on present problems rather than overarching theoretical principles (Kuus, 2017, p. 5). It still lacks a precise definition, a set of fundamental concepts, and a methodology (Koopman et al., 2021, pp. 2, 7; Kuus, 2017; Ó Tuathail et al., 2010, pp. 320-321). In contemporary scholarship, there exist various endeavours aimed at delimiting critical geopolitics on the basis of subject matter, theoretical framework, and methodological approach (Kuus, 2017). However, the unrestricted nature of critical geopolitics has been seen by some scholars as a strength that does not require rectification, contrary to the perspective that views it as a shortcoming in need of correction.

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[13] In his pioneering study titled *Anarchy is What States Makes of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, Wendt (1992) argued that security dilemmas and wars are not simply natural outcomes of the anarchic structure of the international system as neo-realist scholars argued, but rather, social constructions that are shaped by states' perceptions of each other (as cited in Baylis, 2020, pp. 245-246). According to Wendt, how states behave towards one another in the international system is not determined solely by material factors such as military capabilities or natural resources but largely depends on how the actors perceive and understand their own interests and identities in relation to others. His arguments formed the foundation of constructivism in International Relations Theory (Baylis, 2020, pp. 245-246).

2.3.2. Main Arguments of Critical Geopolitics

The critical approach sees classical geopolitics "not as a neutral consideration of pre-given 'geographical' facts, but as a deeply ideological and politicised form of analysis" (Dodds et al., 2013, p. 6 as quoted in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 29; Kuus, 2017, p. 1; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). Therefore, critical geopolitics initially targets the fundamental claim of its predecessor: objectivity. By doing this, it overwhelmingly relies on the main argument of Critical Theory, which opposes the application of positivism in the field of social sciences. Critical Theory argues that there is no universal truth because social scientists cannot escape from their cultural background (Dalby, 1991, p. 267; Johnston, 1997 as quoted in Reuber, 2000, p. 38). Therefore, it is accordingly not possible to produce an unbiased and neutral representation of the social world (Dalby, 1991, pp. 265-267). As a result, Critical Theory considers the concept of "universal truth" to be a form of ideological imperialism (Dalby, 1991, p. 275).

Critical geopolitics seeks to expose the ideological and political intentions behind geographical orderings that have been promoted as "universal". It argues that all geopoliticians are motivated by political interests and, therefore, cannot be considered impartial (Sharp, 2009, p. 359; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). This chapter has already demonstrated the founding fathers' political motives in shaping their theories: Mackinder's Heartland theory was influenced by British interests, Haushofer's *geopolitik* by German interests, and Spykman's Rimland by American interests. Critical geopolitics concludes that the existing geographical arrangements are imposed by imperial political powers for their absolute benefit. This is why Ó Tuathail (1996, p. 256) describes critical geopolitics as "a small part of a much larger rainbow struggle to decolonise our inherited geographical imagination so that other geo-graphings and other worlds might be possible" (as quoted in Koopman et al., 2021, p. 4).

Critical geopolitics fundamentally argues that individuals construct geographical orderings for political gain, rather than such orderings being naturally present. It draws heavily from the works of French post-modernist philosophers, Michel

Foucault (1926–1984) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), who saw knowledge as inseparably embedded in power (Dalby, 1991, pp. 267-269; Reuber, 2020). These political thinkers, particularly Foucault, attributed a significant amount of importance to discourse in order to reveal the politics behind the construction of knowledge (Dalby, 1991, p. 273). Thus, critical geopolitics, despite recently embracing different methodologies, rely overwhelmingly on discourse analysis (Svarin et al., 2019, pp. 32-37; Kuus, 2017, pp. 11-13). It asserts that political actions against other states are rendered meaningful to "average" people inside and outside of borders through discourse (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 191). Because of this very reason, this thesis resorts to analysing the political discourse in order to uphold its main methodological approach, the documentary research method, to reveal how the Russian and Ukrainian leaders vindicated their positions in the Donbas war to their citizens and the international community.

The point of departure of critical geopolitics was the geopolitical analyses that developed during the Cold War, which were often labelled ideological and political (Sharp, 2009, p. 358; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). According to this approach, these foreign policy analyses were simply employed to justify the unhinged rivalry between the US and the USSR (Kuus, 2017, p. 3). The containment policy of the United States, which was based on Kennan's *Long Telegram* (1946) and *Mr X* (1947), was the principal point of the criticism. According to Kennan's documents, the United States and the Soviet Union were bound to come into confrontation because of the latter's allegedly inherent traits, stemming from its history and geography (Sharp, 2009, p. 360; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 202). Based on this, it envisioned a foreign policy concentrated on the "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment" of the Soviet menace in the Rimland (Kennan, 1947, p. 575 as quoted in Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 200).

Critical geopolitics extensively examined the theoretical framework of the Cold War era, revealing a compelling correlation between geography-making and identity formation. According to the approach, borders not only establish nation-states but also define "us" and "them" or "the Self" and "the Other" (Agnew, 2007 as cited in Kuus, 2017, p. 7; Sharp, 2009, pp. 359-361). The argument that geographical writing

inherently contains an identity component was inspired by Said's *Orientalism* (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2009, pp. 359-361), which was occasionally regarded as "the first instance of geopolitics" (Sharp, 2009, p. 359). Drawing upon Said's ground-breaking work, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) argued that the political rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and their respective political blocs, was essentially a politicised and militarised version of the old Occidental-Oriental narrative. Any negative characteristics attributed to the "Rest" were automatically reflected positively back on the side of the West in this necessarily confrontational nexus (Sharp, 2009, pp. 360-361).

One strand of critical geopolitics, although sharing its general critique of the dominant geographical representations, decried the initial wave of scholars of resuming the masculinist tradition of the old geopolitics (Sharp, 2009, pp. 361-362; Kuus, 2017, p. 15). It has criticised critical geopoliticians, as well as realist ones, for their narrow focus on male-dominated perspectives, leading to this strand's rejection of both (Kuus, 2017, p. 15; Koopman et al., 2021, pp. 2-3). This wave of criticism was initially seen under the umbrella of the Feminist International Relations Theory. It has now evolved into a distinct field of inquiry known as feminist geopolitics. The notion of 'the personal is political' has undergone an expansion under this strand's tutelage from being a purely international concern to now encompassing a geopolitical dimension (Kuus, 2017, p. 15). This thesis does not enclose the geopolitical analysis of the Donbas war from a feminist perspective. Instead, it centres on critical geopolitics' argument on the intricate relationship between geography-making and identity formation, as it essentially argues the identity issue between Russia and the West, and subsequently between Russia and Ukraine, was the decisive factor in the escalation of an armed conflict in the Donbas region.

2.3.3. Levels of Geopolitical Analysis: Popular, Formal, and Practical Geopolitics

In their book titled *Rethinking Geopolitics*, Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998) introduced a taxonomy of geopolitical analysis, dividing it into three levels: popular, formal, and practical geopolitics (or state geopolitics) (as cited in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 31).

Despite the fact that practical geopolitics has received more attention in academia, all three genres are described as closely connected and of equal importance (Kuus, 2017, p. 11). According to this categorisation, popular geopolitics pertains to international popular culture, which is produced and consumed through various forms of mass communication by members of everyday politics (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998, p. 4 as cited in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 31). This level of analysis has recently gained momentum, owing to the fact that nation-states are increasingly investing in the domain of mass communication in the information age to advance their respective interests in the global arena. Secondly, formal geopolitics refers to the academic aspect of geopolitics and involves the works of scholars, political advisers, and think tanks (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006, p. 355 as cited in Svarin et al., 2019, p 31). The producers of the formal form of geopolitics guide senior politicians and make sense of politics to average people. Lastly, practical geopolitics concerns the actual formulation and implementation of foreign policy, which falls under the responsibility of appointed and elected bureaucrats, including state leaders and foreign ministers (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998, p. 4 as cited in Svarin et al., 2019, p. 31). Practitioners of practical geopolitics explain their reasoning to both domestic and international audiences in order to legitimise their foreign policy actions (Kuus, 2017, p. 11). The popular depiction of the war in the Donbas through various means of communication was intentionally exempted from the scope of this thesis. Instead, this thesis is concerned with formal and practical geopolitics, as it analyses the repetitive elements in academic and public discourse to shed light on the underlying reasons that contributed to the emergence of an armed conflict in the Donbas region.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORY OF THE DONBAS

3.1. Introduction

The Donbas region has been a matter of rivalry between Russians and Ukrainians[14] starting from the sixteenth century, with the former having the upper hand in their everlasting tussle. The deteriorating relations between Kyiv and Moscow in the post-Soviet period, reaching its climax with the downfall of President Yanukovych (25 February 2010–22 February 2014) after the Euromaidan Revolution, eventually paved the way for an armed conflict in these long-disputed territories between the region's separatists, backed by Russia, and Ukraine's central government, supported by the West, from 12 April 2014 to 24 February 2022. The long-standing quarrel between Russia and Ukraine in the Donbas even gave birth to a handful of arguably local political entities in this region in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The most notable ones were the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic (12 February–20 March 1918), the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) (7 April 2014–30 September 2022), and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) (27 April 2014–30 September 2022). This chapter sheds light on the long past of the region in order to reveal the historical stimuli behind the war in today's Donbas. In line with this, it respectively addresses the early, distant (Cossacks and Russian Empire), recent (Soviet Union), and modern (Ukraine) periods of the Donbas region. By doing that, it seeks to explain the story of the formation of a distinct regional persona from the rest of Ukraine, which consequently played a role in the escalation of an armed conflict in this region.

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[14] The term "Ukrainians" herein refers to the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who spoke an old version of the Ukrainian language. During their time, this group was known as "Ukraine". Today, Ukrainian historiography draws an ethnic lineage through Kievan *Rus'*, the Cossack Hetmanate (officially known as the Zaporozhian Host), and the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR). This thesis shall provide pertinent information about each of these political entities.

3.2. Early History of the Donbas

There is a lack of historical arguments in the academic literature regarding the earliest period of the Donbas region. The period until the seventh century is eerily arcane. This is primarily due to the fact that the Donbas had meagre importance until the discovery of the region's lucrative underground resources in the nineteenth century (Fischer, 2019, p. 7). It was only then that people, ethnic Russians in the majority, began to settle in these lands *en masse*. Prior to this, the Donbasite steppes were mainly inhabited by nomadic tribes, making it difficult to trace its earlier history. The very first findings date back to the Scythians, an Iranian nomadic folk based on the Crimean Peninsula, which was present in the Donbas area by the seventh century BCE (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a). These lands were subsequently settled by other nomadic folks of Iranian and Turkic origin, namely Alans, Huns, Bulgars, Pechenegs, Kipchaks, Mongols, Tatars, and Nogais (Claus, 2022, September 30). According to Hiroaki Kuromiya (1996), this historical background brought about the Donbas region to be later characterised by a spirit of solecism, freedom, and independence, which even persisted under the authoritarian rule of the Soviet Union.

3.3. Distant History of the Donbas: Donbas under Cossacks and the Russian Empire

The Donbas region came under the sphere of influence of Don and Zaporozhian Cossacks between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. This period is often referred to as "the Cossack era" due to the significant impact that these groups had on the region (Wilson, 1995, p. 271). According to Andrew Wilson (1995, pp. 271-272), despite both being adherents of the Orthodox Catholic Church, Don and Zaporozhian Cossacks belonged to different ethnic groups with distinct political and social characteristics. Within the scope of this thesis, the most important distinction between them was undoubtedly their contradictory political agendas: Don Cossacks had political allegiance with Moscow and Zaporozhian Cossacks were in a bitter rivalry with Moscow (Wilson, 1995, p. 272). Because of this, the question of which one of the Cossack groups was more influential in the Donbas region has been of

great significance. Even though being a firstcomer to a territory has no universally accepted applicability in international law (Dupuy & Dupuy, 2013 as cited in Askerov, 2020, p. 57), these arguments were still incorporated into the national historiographies of Russia and Ukraine to morally promote their positions in the Donbas war and the wider Russia-Ukraine crisis. However, it should be indicated beforehand the accuracy of these claims is not of primary concern in the scope of this thesis. Rather, the focus is on how these claims are utilised in the current conflict scenario, as the theoretical background of this thesis sees geopolitics as a subjective and discursive practice closely related to identity formation.

Ukrainian historiography argues that, until the Russian seizure in the eighteenth century, the Donbas was controlled by Zaporozhian Cossacks, who spoke an old version of the Ukrainian language (Wilson, 1995, p. 272). However, while defending that, it also admits that Zaporozhian Cossacks never designated their borders with the rivalling Don Cossacks (Wilson, 1995, p. 272). Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934), a renowned historian, politician, and nationalist figure in this country's political history, was the banner bearer of this argument (Wilson, 1995, p. 272). Principally, Ukrainian historiography, on the basis of its arguments on the Cossack era, claims that the Donbas had long been an indigenous land of Ukrainians. Departing from this assertion, it argues that the region was later colonised by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Wilson, 1995, pp. 274-276). Accordingly, the long Russian rule eventually altered the demographic and cultural characteristics of the Donbas in favour of Russians. This emphasis in Ukrainian historiography was significantly accentuated starting from the Orange Revolution – a watershed event in Ukraine's political history, which marked a significant shift in this country's historiography from the previously dominant East Slavic school to the Ukrainophile school (also named as the Hrushevsky school after its creator) (see Kuzio, 2005). The Ukrainophile school of thought, in contrast to its Eastern Slavic counterpart, held an utterly negative view towards the Russian and Soviet rule in Ukraine and regarded Russia as the inimical "Other" of this country (Kuzio, 2005, pp. 33-34; Şahin, 2020, p. 104).

Russian historiography has rather diverse claims on the early period of the Donbas that oscillate between a moderate position to a radical one. Moderate scholars argue

that the Donbas was more of a "wild field" or a "no man's land" located between Orthodox Christian Slav and Muslim Tatar civilisations with a multi-ethnic population (Kuromiya, 1996, p. 2; Wilson, 1995, p. 276). Radical scholars, on the other hand, based on their claims on the legacy of Kievan *Rus'* (*c*. 879–1240), say that the Donbas cannot be Ukrainian, as there exists no such thing as a Ukrainian nation (Wilson, 1995, p. 276).[15] With regard to the Cossack era, Russian historiography pleads that Don Cossacks were assigned here as the frontier security forces of the Russian Empire as of the sixteenth century (Wilson, 1995, p. 277). In order to reinforce this argument, it points out the scattered and unorganised political structure of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. According to this view, Don Cossacks, having political loyalty to Moscow, had a more compact political organisation (Wilson, 1995, p. 278). The tentative nature of Zaporozhian Cossacks' political authority, the argument goes, nullifies any claims on their so-called control in the Donbas region (Wilson, 1995, p. 278). Finally, Russian historiography repels Ukraine's colonisation claims and argues that the Donbas was long under the influence of voluntary Russification before the direct rule of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century (Wilson, 1995, p. 278).

The colonisation of the Donbas by the Russian Empire began as early as the sixteenth century through Don Cossacks. However, it was not until two centuries later that the Russian grip on this region gained substantial strength, prior to which it remained relatively weak. The process of stabilising Russian rule began with the suppression of the last major Cossack upheaval in 1709 by Tsar Peter I (1672–1725), the first emperor of the Russian Empire (Plokhy, 2021). After successfully quashing the Cossack revolt, Tsar Peter I, famously known as Peter the Great, implemented measures to consolidate imperial control over the Cossack community during his long rule from 1682 to 1725. One of the most significant of these measures was the placement of the Cossack Hetmanate, officially the Zaporozhian Host, under the jurisdiction of the Little Russian College, which was administered by imperial appointees (Plokhy, 2021). The incorporation of the Donbas into the Russian Empire was completed during the reign of Empress Catherine II (1729–1796) between 1729 and 1796 (Wilson, 1995, p. 273). It remained as such until the final establishment of

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[15] These claims shall be extensively analysed in the last section of the fourth chapter.

the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) on 30 December 1922, as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, by the first of the Soviet leaders, Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), who held this position from 1917 to 1924. Determined to fully integrate the Cossack territories into the Russian Empire, the Empress, commonly known as Catherine the Great, made the decision to liquidate the Hetmanate altogether. Consequently, the Cossack community was stripped of its relative autonomy and subjected to direct Russian rule (Plokhy, 2021).

During the period of Catherine the Great, the administrative concept of *Novorossiya* ("New Russia" in Russian) was created to refer to the new acquisitions of the Russian Empire in the southeast of modern Ukraine (Wilson, 1995, p. 273; Nechepurenko, 2014, April 20). Donbas was encompassed within the borders of this imperial project. Characterised as "wild fields" and "savage frontier lands", this newly-acquired territory had to be colonised to establish firm control of the imperial centre (Toal, 2017). In line with this objective, the Tsardom settled Russians and small ethnic groups, who were believed to be more prone to assimilation, in order to form "New Russians" in the region (Wilson, 1995, pp. 273-274). These minority groups were primarily Germans, Greeks, Jews, Moldovans, and Serbs (Wilson, 1995, p. 273-274). The requests of Ukrainians residing in the other parts to settle in this territory were strongly discouraged by the centre in coordination with the arrival of the new settlers (Wilson, 1995, pp. 273-274).

The concept of *Novorossiya* was revived at the onset of the anti-Maidan protests by President Putin to support the separatist claims in the Donbas region (Härtel, 2016, p. 108; Masters, 2023; Aydıngün, 2020, pp. 6-7). The initial and maximalist version of this foreign policy concept envisaged an extensive coverage of various regions in eastern and southern Ukraine, including Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Kharkiv[16], Kherson, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Zaporizhzhia *oblast*s. A more assertive interpretation additionally covered the territories of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and Moldova's Transnistria region[17]. The geographic definition of *Novorossiya* has been

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[16] According to Serhii Plokhy (2021), Kharkiv was never a part of *Novorossiya* during the Russian Empire.

[17] This region, also called the Dniester, became a hotspot for an ethnoterritorial conflict following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Predominantly inhabited by Russian speakers, Transnistria declared

subject to much controversy, while a clear geographic definition still remains elusive. This concept soon lost popularity with the failure of the anti-Maidan protests everywhere in eastern Ukraine but in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Despite the state's incentive to promote the migration of ethnic Russians and minorities to the Donbas during the eighteenth century, the process of Russification in the region remained limited (Wilson, 1995, p. 274). The Donbas acquired an overwhelmingly Russian character in the second half of the subsequent century due to industrialisation and urbanisation, which occurred without significant state intervention (Wilson, 1995, p. 274; Flynn, 1996, p. 344). It started with the discovery of high-quality coal and iron reserves in the region in 1721 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a). However, the exploitation of the region's underground resources came about a century later (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 498). The disruption in the English coal supplies with Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856); the construction of multiple railroads connecting the region to the imperial centre; and the arrival of Belgian, British, and French engineers and businessmen to the region prepared all the suitable conditions for industrial development and urbanisation during this period (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a; Shovkoplias, 2023).[18] What we call Donbas today was moulded around this time.

3.4. Recent History of the Donbas: Donbas under the Soviet Union

The Russian Revolution of 1917, which overthrew the Russian monarchy and brought the Soviets to power, created a power vacuum in the former territorial possessions of the Russian Empire. The period between 1917 and 1921 was marked by political turmoil and instability, during which Ukrainian nationalists seized the opportunity to establish the Ukrainian National Republic, or shortly UNR (*Ukrainska Narodnia Respublika* in Ukrainian)[19] (1917–1918; 1918–1921), as an independent

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its independence from Moldova in 1990 with substantial support from Russia. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) continues its existence as a *de facto* state with no recognition from its parent state (Moldova), its donor state (Russia), and the international community (see Büscher, 2016).

[18] In fact, Donetsk, formerly named *Yuzovka*, was established in the nineteenth century as an industrial settlement by a Welsh engineer and entrepreneur named John Hughes (1814–1889) (Nechepurenko, 2014, April 20; Shovkoplias, 2023).

[19] It is also translated as the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) in some accounts.

nation-state. Despite its initial success, the UNR was short-lived, as the Soviet regime regained control of Ukraine merely three years later and dissolved the independent Ukrainian nation-state altogether.

Even though the UNR was recognised by the Provisional Government of St. Petersburg, the Donbas region fell outside of its loose political borders (Wilson, 1995, p. 280). Instead, another political entity was concurrently founded in eastern Ukraine under the leadership of a dedicated Bolshevik, Fyodor Sergeyev (1883–1921). The Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic under Sergeyev's leadership refused to recognise the political authority of the UNR (Wilson, 1995, p. 274). Nevertheless, it soon collapsed just like its rivalling counterpart when the Soviets ensafed political control in the centre and periphery. According to Wilson (1995, p. 274), the sudden disappearance of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic was an indicator that it was a Bolshevik project against the UNR. Despite its brief life span, the Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic and its founding Chairman Sergeyev constituted the major pillars of the Donbas "national" historiography (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 503). They have become the main references of Donetsk and Luhansk separatists in their quest to gain independence from Ukraine since the spring of 2014 (Nechepurenko, 2014, April 20).

Under the Soviet rule, the Donbas region was first hit hard by the Great Famine of 1932-1933, also known as the *Holodomor* ("to kill by starvation" in Ukrainian) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a; Claus, 2022, September 30). The man-made famine of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953), which aimed at the annihilation of the peasantry as considered to be the stronghold of nationalism and chauvinism, killed millions of Ukrainians between 1932 and 1933 (Delwaide, 2014, pp. 187-189).[20] The criminal intent behind the *Holodomor* was not acknowledged in eastern Ukraine despite harbouring some of the worst-hit areas (Delwaide, 2014, p. 195; Tuncel, 2020, p. 21). Besides the destructive consequences of the *Holodomor*, the Donbas, as well as the other parts of Ukraine, came under German occupation in 1941 with the

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[20] According to a UN joint statement, issued on 7 November 2003, seven to ten million Ukrainians died during the *Holodomor* (United Nations, 2003 as cited in Claus, 2022, September 30). The *Holodomor* has been recognised as a genocide since 2006 by Ukraine (Claus, 2022, September 30). As of 2023, a total of over thirty countries have officially acknowledged it as such (see National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide, n.d.)

help of the militant faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).[21] Taking advantage of the Nazi Germany-Soviet Union confrontation in Ukraine, the OUN-UPA of Stepan Bandera (1909–1959) made the decision to collaborate for a short period of time with the former, who pledged to re-establish the short-lived UNR.[22] With their help, Ukraine, including the Donbas, came under German occupation in 1941. Donbasites, rejecting to cooperate, were subject to brutal treatment under the Nazi occupation (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a). In the Donetsk *oblast* alone, more than 270 thousand civilians were killed during the occupation of Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1942 (Claus, 2022, September 30). Concurrently, the industrial reserves of the Donbas region were severely exploited to equip the German military for the invasion of Russia (Claus, 2022, September 30). The German occupation was brought to an end by the vigorous efforts of the Soviet armies. The short-term, goal-oriented, and tenuous collaboration between Nazi Germany and the OUN-UPA indefinitely damaged the image of Ukrainian nationalism in the region thereafter. This infamous partnership that was once formed for the sake of obtaining national independence was manipulated to eradicate, or to encroach at the very least, nationalist seeds in Ukraine later in the Soviet era. Throughout the various stages of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, President Putin employed a similar strategic approach that involved emphasising the alleged ideological connection between Bandera's OUN-UPA and the post–Euromaidan leadership (see Putin, 2014a, March 18; Putin, 2022b, February 24).

The drastic loss of human lives during the *Holodomor* and the Nazi occupation necessitated a resettlement project in the Donbas region. This initiative prioritised the settlement of "trusted nations", primarily Russians, in the region (Shovkoplias,

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[21] The OUN was founded in 1929 with its operational base located in Polish Galicia (Hahn, 2018, p. 36). Embracing a revolutionary nationalist ideology, its primary objective was to establish an ethnically homogeneous Ukrainian nation (Hahn, 2018, p. 36). The organisation underwent a division within its ranks in 1940, with a moderate group led by Andriy Melnyk (1890-1964) and a radical faction under the leadership of Bandera (Şahin, 2020, p. 102). The faction led by Bandera established the UPA during WWII (Şahin, 2020, p. 102). The UPA engaged in battles against both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany throughout the war (Şahin, 2020, p. 102). Therefore, it should be emphasised that the brief allegiance of the Ukrainian nationalists under Bandera with Nazi Germany was rather volatile (Hahn, 2018, p. 38). This organisation shall be shortly referred to as the OUN-UPA for the rest of this thesis.

[22] For more information about the occupation of Nazi Germany in Ukraine during WWII, see (Snyder, 2012; Plokhy, 2021).

2022). In addition to the resettlement project, the growing industrial economy of the Donbas attracted huge numbers of migrant labourers from all over the Soviet Union (Delwaide, 2014, p. 189). Significantly, the migrant workforce predominantly communicated in Russian. As a cumulative consequence of all these developments, the Donbas which was already predominantly Russian before the fall of the Romanovs (Wilson, 1995, p. 280), was Russified to its core before the crumbling of the Soviet Union.

Throughout the reign of the Russian Empire, the Donbas region experienced a gradual increase in Russian influence and control. However, it was not until the advent of Soviet rule that significant state control was fully established in the region (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 498). Despite this, the degree of state control exerted by the Soviet authorities in the Donbas region remained comparatively weaker than in other regions of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet era, the deportation of unwanted socio-political elements to be employed in mines and factories to the Donbas inadvertently served to reinforce the disobedient character of the region (Kuromiya, 1996). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the industrial strikes of Donbasite workers in 1989 contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent establishment of an independent Ukraine (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 247).

3.5. Donbas under Independent Ukraine

Thus far, this chapter explained how the idiosyncratic character of the Donbas region was shaped over the course of history. This section shall delve into how this unique regional persona fuelled an armed conflict in the post-Soviet period. It shall address the landmark political developments in Ukraine during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in relation to their repercussions in the Donbas region: the independence of Ukraine in 1991; the Orange Revolution; the Euromaidan Revolution; Russia's annexation of the Crimea; the war in the Donbas; and finally the Russia-Ukraine War of 2022.

3.5.1. Independence Declaration of Ukraine

Russian nationalists were vocal about the fate of ethnic Russians outside of the Russian Federation as early as the first days of the post-Cold War era (Furtado,

1994). However, facing a severe economic recession, political turmoil within the country, and a significant setback in the international arena, Russia's first democratically-elected President Boris Yeltsin (10 July 1991–31 December 1999) did not heed these extremist slogans. Nevertheless, the ethnic Russian population of Ukraine remained a major area of concern for Kyiv, as this issue not only posed great dangers for the future of Ukraine-Russia relations but also for a successful nation-building project in this multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-religious country. Because of this reason, the Ukrainian political elite, especially President Leonid Kravchuk (1934-2022) from 24 August 1991 to 19 July 1994[23], embraced an inclusive nationality and citizenship approach, in which "Ukrainianness" as an ethnic criterion was repudiated (Furtado, 1994, p. 92; Armstrong, 2004, p. 34). It went to great lengths to reassure Russian and Russian-speaking citizens that the establishment of Ukrainian statehood would not pose any perceived threat to them (Sotiriou, 2016, p. 52). The uncompromising stance on this inclusive approach, according to Furtado (1994, p. 95), hindered the emergence of substantial secessionist movements among Ukraine's ethnic minorities, including in eastern Ukraine, which would jeopardise the fate of this recently established nation-state. The trust of Ukraine's ethnic minorities in the new government, as argued by Furtado (1994, p. 94), was testified by the results of the referendum elections, which were held on the first day of December 1991. More than 80 per cent of the Donetsk and Luhansk electorate and 90 per cent of the overall voters in the country declared their will in favour of Ukraine's independence declaration (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1992, pp. 7-8).

The rapid decline of economic conditions soon caused widespread disappointment across the country. It was more visible in the eastern and southern parts of the country, in which most people commemorated the Soviet rule with deep nostalgia (Flynn, 1996, pp. 342-343). The robust Soviet identity in these regions ultimately succumbed to pro-Russian separatism (Kuzio, 2016, p. 2), as disillusioned locals grew disenchanted with the new government (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 247). The territories of Donetsk and Luhansk were recognised as among the locations, where

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[23] Before being elected as the first President of Ukraine, Kravchuk served as the acting President from 24 August 24 to 5 December of the same year, following this country's independence from the Soviet Union.

the old autonomy aspirations re-emerged. A regional and consultative referendum in Donetsk, with a concurrent opinion poll in Luhansk, was held on 27 March 1994 on the political autonomy of the *oblast*s in a federal government system; the status of Russian as a second state language; and Ukraine's participation in Moscow's Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) scheme (Flynn, 1996, p. 342). According to the results, 79.6% of voters in Donetsk advocated for federalism; 87.2% of voters in Donetsk and 90.04% in Luhansk agreed on the adoption of Russian as a second state language along with Ukrainian; and 88.7% of voters in Donetsk and 90.7% in Luhansk were in favour of Ukraine's participation to the CIS (Flynn, 1996, p. 345).

According to Flynn (1996), the mental disassociation of Donetsk and Luhansk from the centre, as shown by the consultative referendum and opinion poll results, was solely derived from economic reasons rather than political or cultural considerations. The major motive behind the overwhelming support of Donbasites for the pro-independence vote in December 1991, just as in the case of the Donetsk referendum and Luhansk opinion poll of 1994, was purely economic, as the industrial strikes of 1989 in the region revealed their dissatisfaction with the economic rule of the Soviet Moscow (Flynn, 1996; Claus, 2022, September 30). Furthermore, the political aspirations of the Donbasite people did not necessarily harbour secessionist elements in 1994 (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 248). A decade later, a similar referendum project for the Donetsk *oblast* came to the fore in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution only to be put aside shortly after (Kudelia, 2014, p. 6; Toal, 2017). However, as differently from the developments of 1994, their eagerness for regional autonomy was essentially political during the tense period of 2004–2005.

3.5.2. Orange Revolution (22 November 2004–23 January 2005)

The Color Revolutions was the collective name of the civic, peaceful, and pro-democracy protests that swept through the post-Soviet space at the turn of the twenty-first century: the Rose Revolution in Georgia (3–23 November 2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (22 March–11 April 2005).[24] Ukraine's Orange Revolution broke out just after the second round

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[24] A broader interpretation of the Color Revolutions includes the wave of nonviolent demonstrations and political developments that took place worldwide from the late 1980s (i.e. Czechoslovakia,

of the presidential elections, which were held on 21 November 2004. Contrary to the anticipated outcome, the election results declared the victory of incumbent President Yanukovych against his political opponent, Viktor Yushchenko (23 January 2005–25 February 2010).

Many Ukrainians went out to the streets, especially in western and central parts of the country, with Kyiv being at the forefront, to protest the Yanukovych government for fabricating the election results in his favour. On the third of December, the Supreme Court of Ukraine annulled the results of the presidential elections and ruled a revote scheduled before the end of the year due to the unappeased resentment of demonstrators (Walsh, 2004, December 4; Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 508). The re-run of the presidential elections on 26 December proclaimed Yushchenko as the third President of Ukraine with an eight per cent vote margin (The Guardian, 2004, December 27). One month later, Ukraine's Supreme Court validated his electoral triumph after it declined Yanukovych's legal challenge (The Guardian, 2005, January 20).

A number of prominent Western states, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) publicly demonstrated their support for people's legitimate will, which would be a recurring incident a decade later in the same country. Their moral encouragement even found expression in the form of material support at times. Because of that, the Orange Revolution marked the turning point when the Kremlin started to perceive Ukraine as a zone of geopolitical rivalry with the West (Allison, 2016, p. 27). In line with this, the success of the Orange Revolution was perceived as a US-backed *coup d'état* to advance Western geopolitical interests in Russia's imminent backyard. The former Soviet space was increasingly referred to as Russia's "Near Abroad" (*blizhneye zarubezhye* in Russian) by the Kremlin in this period. Therefore, the geopolitical doctrine of the Near Abroad, despite being created in the early 1990s, became popular under President Putin in the aftermath of the Color Revolutions (Özçelik, 2022, p. 188).

Poland, Yugoslavia) to the early 2010s (i.e. Libya, Egypt, Syria). The former date refers to the protests that resulted in the downfall of communist governments in Europe and elsewhere. The latter, on the other hand, denotes the onset of the so-called Arab Spring, a series of protests and social movements across the Middle East and North Africa that contested authoritarian regimes and demanded enhanced political freedom and democratic participation.

In stark contrast to western and central Ukraine, which witnessed the large-scale demonstrations that ultimately culminated in the Orange Revolution, the eastern part of the country, and in particular the Donbas region, held an unfavourable view of the events that unfolded during that period. The Donbas, a region consisting of his birthplace, was the political base of Yanukovych and his political party, the Party of Regions. He obtained more than 90 per cent in Donetsk and Luhansk in both the controversial second round of the 2004 presidential elections and its rerun. Therefore, it can be argued that the rigging allegations of the political opposition regarding the outcome of the second round were not embraced in the Donbas. On the contrary, small-scale demonstrations were held in many cities of the Donbas in support of Yanukovych, whom they considered "their own". The Kremlin's media propaganda[25], which was particularly intense in this region, bore fruits as more than 46 and 54 per cent of the respondents perceived the Orange Revolution as a *coup d'état* in southern and eastern Ukraine, respectively (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, pp. 502-509).

As a result, the autonomy aspirations of Donbasites resurfaced once again a decade after the 1994 regional referendum because of the pro-Yushchenko protests and consequent political events that took place in the country. A meeting of Pro-Russian politicians including deputies and regional governors took place in the city of Severodonetsk, on 26 November 2004, to discuss regional autonomy for Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*s (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 507). During this period, the local administration in Donetsk planned a referendum on regional autonomy for the *oblast* (Toal, 2017). However, it should be emphasised that their autonomy aspirations did not necessarily imply secession from Ukraine and joining Russia but rather greater political autonomy to the local administrations. Not long after, their faith in the region's self-sufficiency heralded no tangible action of their ill-famed meeting (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 507). Despite the absence of any significant protests at the public level against the outcome of the re-conducted presidential elections, it is worth noting that the Orange Revolution did have a notable impact on the

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[25] The impact of the Russian media outlets had been substantial everywhere in Ukraine, especially in the Donbas region, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the wake of the critical events of 2014, this issue became a pressing one for Kyiv, prompting a series of measures under President Petro Poroshenko (7 June 2014-20 May 2019) aimed at hampering the intrusive hand of the Kremlin through Russian media outlets (see Kudelia, 2022, p. 210).

strengthening of the regional identity of the Donbas (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, pp. 510-511).

Despite high expectations, the Orange government under President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (24 January 2005–8 September 2005; 24 January 2005–4 February 2005; and 18 December 2007–4 March 2010) largely failed to produce influential reforms in the country, which was attributed to the personal animosity and rivalry between the two politicians (Lakomy, 2016, p. 283; Larrabee, 2010, p. 38; Krushelnycky, 2013). Their incompetence, perhaps most importantly, resulted in missing out on the country's full integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political structures, particularly the EU and NATO (Larrabee, 2010, p. 38). However, it is worth noting that President Yushchenko still took significant steps to initiate the membership process of Ukraine in both of these organisations, particularly during the initial two years of his tenure. Specifically, in March 2007, the Ukrainian leader commenced negotiations for a new enhanced agreement between Ukraine and the EU (Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine, n.d.). The following year, President Yushchenko requested a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO, signalling Ukraine's intent to join the alliance (Pifer, 2020, p. 46).

3.5.3. Euromaidan Revolution (21 November 2013–22 February 2014)

In the last quarter of 2013, Kyiv found itself in the midst of a dangerous competition between the EU and Russia regarding the country's future geopolitical and geoeconomic orientation (Trenin, 2014, p. 4). President Yanukovych, whose foreign policy approach was characterised by multivectorism and pragmatism until then (Lakomy, 2016, pp. 284-285; Larrabee, 2010, p. 40), sat at the negotiating table with Brussels and Moscow at the same time. Yanukovych's strategy was to leverage his position by flirting with both sides, thereby inciting a rivalry between them and ultimately securing the best possible deal (Trenin, 2014, p. 4). In the end, the close economic ties between Russia and Ukraine, Moscow's $15 billion economic bid and offer to sell natural gas at a discounted price, and the EU's demand to end the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Tymoshenko resulted in a Russian triumph (Lakomy, 2016, p. 284; Roberts, 2017, p. 41; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 4). Thus,

President Yanukovych made the decision not to sign the Association Agreement (AA) with Brussels a few days before the Eastern Partnership Summit, which was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 28–29 November 2013 (Götz, 2015, p. 5).[26] The Ukrainian government's decision failed to get the desired support from its citizens, especially those in western and central Ukraine (Trenin, 2014, p. 5).[27] Consequently, a wave of demonstrations, similar to the Orange Revolution, erupted in the major cities and towns with the largest taking place in the capital's famous site *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* ("Independence Square" in Ukrainian). According to Dmitri Trenin (2014, p. 5), not long after, what started as peaceful civic protests evolved into a violent and militant one, as the Yanukovych government further toughened their uncompromising stance and extreme rightist groups[28] joined in the demonstrations.

In the aftermath of the deadliest clashes on 18–20 February 2014 between protesters and security forces, the Ukrainian government (led by President Yanukovych himself) and the parliamentary opposition (represented by Arseny Yatsenyuk, Oleh Tyahnybok, and Vitaly Klitschko) signed an agreement under the mediation of France, Germany, Poland, and Russia (Trenin, 2014, p. 6; Shevel, 2015, p. 11).[29] The deal brought about a couple of considerable legal commitments on the side of the Yanukovych government, including the constitutional limitation of presidential powers, the conduct of an early presidential election, and the establishment of an

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[26] As already explained earlier in this chapter, the origins of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement go back to the spring of 2007 (see Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine, n.d.). It was formulated to enhance economic cooperation and political association between Brussels and Kyiv (The European External Service, n.d.). The ultimate objective of this agreement was to bring Ukraine one step closer to EU membership.

[27] A majority of the Maidan protests, precisely two-thirds of them, were recorded in western and central Ukraine (Toal, 2017).

[28] It should be noted that the phrase "extreme rightist groups" is insistently used in the Russian official narrative, which has the potential to manipulate international public opinion. On the other hand, it is worth emphasising that this phrase is understood as "patriot" in Ukraine.

[29] Yatsenyuk served as the Chairman of the *Verkhovna Rada* (4 December 2007–12 November 2008); Minister of Economy (27 September 2005–4 August 2006); and Minister of Foreign Affairs (21 March 2007–4 December 2007). After the Euromaidan Revolution, he was appointed as the Prime Minister of Ukraine until 14 April 2016. Tyahnybok, known for his far-right political outlook, was the leader of *Svoboda* (All-Ukrainian "Freedom") political party since 14 February 2014. Klitschko was the founder and leader of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR) political party. He was also the mayor of Kyiv at the time of the revolution. These politicians came forward as the heads of the three most prominent political factions represented within the Maidan protest movement (Shevel, 2015, 11). All three supported the post-Euromaidan leadership.

interim government until the snap election (Traynor, 2014, February 21). Nevertheless, it was rejected by the Maidan demonstrators, who were determined to oust President Yanukovych (Trenin, 2014, p. 6; Lakomy, 2016, p. 285). On 22 February 2014, Yanukovych, whose legitimacy was significantly damaged at the public level after his notorious order to shoot the Maidan protesters, left the capital in order to take refuge in Kharkiv (Frizell, 2014, February 22). On this day, the *Verkhovna Rada* (Ukraine's Unicameral Parliament) voted for the impeachment of President Yanukovych for abusing his presidential powers (Al Jazeera, 2014, February 22; Sotiriou, 2016, p. 58).[30] More than one hundred Maidan protesters lost their lives at the hands of Ukraine's own police officers at the expense of President Yanukovych's eventual flee from the country to Russia (Amnesty International, 2019, February 19).

As mentioned earlier, before the Russian invasion of 2022, different local dynamics dominated Ukraine's socio-political structure along regional lines (Lakomy, 2016). Contrary to western and central Ukraine, people in southern and eastern territories, regardless of their ethnic background, mostly spoke Russian in their daily lives; had negative views of the OUN-UPA and the organisation's leader Bandera; and favoured closer cooperation with Russia in the country's foreign policy (Lakomy, 2016, pp. 287-291; Masters, 2023). Furthermore, these regions were exceptionally home to a substantial amount of ethnic Russian population (Furtado, 1994, p. 92; Sotiriou, 2016, p. 52).[31] Taking these peculiarities into consideration, it was no surprise that the Euromaidan Revolution was perceived with the utmost distaste in southern and eastern Ukraine (Kudelia, 2014).

A substantial portion of Donbasites and Crimeans embraced the Kremlin's narrative on the Euromaidan Revolution (Lakomy, 2016, p. 291), what President Putin referred to as "a Western-supported *coup* [*d'état*]", thanks to the intense propaganda of pro-

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[30] 328 of the 447 deputies voted in favour of President Yanukovych's impeachment and holding early presidential elections on 25 May later in the year (Al Jazeera, 2014, February 22). No countervotes were cast at the parliamentary session (Kyiv Post, 2014a, February 23). According to Stylianos A. Sotiriou (2016, p. 58), the decision contradicts the Ukrainian Constitution of 1996, which mandates a three-fourths majority (338 votes) for the impeachment of a president. Yanukovych described his impeachment as an "illegal" act and a "*coup d'état*" (Al Jazeera, 2014, February 22).

[31] Ukraine's *oblast*s with a significant population of ethnic Russians and Russophones were Crimea, Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, and Odesa (Sotiriou, 2016, p. 52).

Russian media outlets operating in the region (quoted in Kudelia, 2014, pp. 2-3).[32] Indeed, the Maidan protest movement was both discreetly and publicly supported and funded by the leading Western governments and NGOs (Lakomy, 2016, p. 284). According to Sergiy Kudelia (2014, p. 4), the role of the ultra-nationalist groups, who were the long devotees of Bandera and the OUN-UPA, further aggravated the negative perception of the Euromaidan Revolution in the Donbas. In addition to these, in the eyes of most of the regional people, Yanukovych, a local of the Donetsk *oblast*, was the legitimate President of Ukraine, as the second round of the 2010 presidential elections held on 7 February 2010 declared.[33] The post-Euromaidan government under acting President Turchynov were thus considered illegitimate (Kudelia, 2014, pp. 2-3; Kuromiya, 2019, p. 253).

President Yanukovych had taken the lead in the adoption of a controversial language law back in 2012 that would grant a regional language status to minority languages in Ukraine's administrative units, where they are spoken by at least one-tenth of its total population (Palermo, 2020, p. 374).[34] Despite the subsequent veto of acting President Turchynov, the decision by the *Verkhovna Rada* to revoke the language law that had previously made Russian the regional language in the Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, and ten other Ukrainian *oblast*s (out of twenty-seven in total) dealt a blow to the post-Euromaidan government's image in the region and created further tension with Moscow (Shevchenko, 2015, pp. 19-20; Delwaide, 2014, p. 192). The signing of the infamous Association Agreement with the EU on 21 March of the same year was the last straw for pro-Russian Crimeans and Donbasites – but especially for the Kremlin, which perceived the Euromaidan as a Western geopolitical project devised to undermine Russia's political influence in Ukraine (Fischer, 2019).[35] It is

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[32] Russia was the leading media producer in the Donbas, enabling it to make its own propaganda in this region (Osipian & Osipian, 2006, p. 500). According to a poll conducted by KMIS on 8–16 April 2014, more than 70% of the Donetsk and 61% of the Luhansk electorate considered the Euromaidan Revolution as a Western-supported *coup* (as cited in Kudelia, 2014, pp. 2-3; Kuromiya, 2019, p. 252).

[33] According to Osipian and Osipian (2006), Yanukovych's Donetsk roots influenced the voting behaviour of Donbass people in his favour in all the elections that he participated in.

[34] This law recognised eighteen minority languages. However, in all the *oblast*s, wherein a regional language was adopted, the "minority language" was Russian (Shevchenko, 2015, pp. 19-20). The Crimean Tatar language was exempted from this law.

[35] The political provisions of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement were signed on 21 March 2014. The economic clauses, on the other hand, were signed on 27 June of the same year (The European External Service, n.d.).

noteworthy to highlight that this signature put an end to the prospect of Ukraine's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), an international organisation that Russia's President anticipated to be a significant pole in the emerging multipolar global order (Mankoff, 2022, p.8; Putin, 2023, January 23).

3.5.4. Russia's Annexation of the Crimea (20 February–26 March 2014)

The first anti-Maidan protests mushroomed in southern and eastern Ukraine almost simultaneously with the downfall of President Yanukovych. The demand for political and cultural self-governance, accompanied by the official recognition of Russian and other minority languages, on a regional scale was uttered with utmost fervour by protesters (Trenin, 2014, p. 7; Kudelia, 2014, p. 5). The movement gained significant success in the Crimea, which stands out from other parts of Ukraine due to the high percentage of ethnic Russians among the peninsula's total population (Sotiriou, 2016, p. 52). The local administration, bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies in the Crimea were predominantly stuffed with individuals, who were sympathetic to Yanukovych and were also pro-Russian (Härtel, 2016, p. 116; Kudelia, 2014, pp. 2-3). This was a consequence of the prevalent rule of the Party of Regions throughout the twenty-first century, except for Yushchenko's presidential term (Härtel, 2016, p. 116). In addition to the thousands of Russian troops already stationed in the peninsula, the odds of success of the anti-Maidan protest movement in the Crimea were advanced by the ethnic makeup of the peninsula's population and the pro-Russian sentiment among its security and administrative personnel.

The Crimean Peninsula held significant geopolitical importance for Russians throughout history, as it has provided them with a secure foothold in the Black Sea. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia maintained a naval presence on the peninsula, which was extended in 1997 with a lease agreement between Kyiv and Moscow for a duration of two more decades (Palermo, 2020, p. 370). The signing of the so-called Kharkiv agreement between Kyiv and Moscow, subsequent to Yanukovych's ascension to the Ukrainian Presidency in 2010, extended Russia's lease on the naval base in Crimea for an additional twenty-five years in exchange for a discounted price on Russian natural gas (Kanet, 2015, p. 509; Götz, 2015, p. 4). However, it did not deter the Kremlin from being apprehensive about the fate of the

Russian Black Sea Fleet under a pro-Western government (Dannenberg et al., 2014, p. 2; Götz, 2015, p. 5). As a result, the thousands of Russian special forces, lacking military insignia in their uniforms, who built a reputation as "little green men" in international media, infiltrated the peninsula following the success of the Euromaidan Revolution (Mankoff, 2022). They supported the anti-Maidan protesters to seize strategically important institutions, including the local parliament building (Trenin, 2014, p. 7; Mankoff, 2022). Besides the *Verkhovna Rada* of the Crimea, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People ("*Qırımtatar Milliy Meclisi*" in Crimean Tatar) was also forcefully taken over by Pro-Russian Crimeans and unidentified armed personnel of the Russian Federation (Aydın Bezikoğlu, 2022, pp. 31-33). As a result of what can be regarded as a foreign-induced *coup d'état*, Sergey Aksyonov, a highly controversial figure, was brought as the head of the parliament, subsequently assuming the role of leader of the self-proclaimed Republic of Crimea, which has not gained international recognition (Aydın Bezikoğlu, 2022). In the face of this large-scale invasion, Crimean Tatars, together with the Ukrainian army, refrained from taking up arms against the occupiers (Aydın Bezikoğlu, 2022, p. 31).

On 16 March 2014, an unlawful and illegitimate referendum was held by the self-proclaimed authorities in the Crimea, which was carried out under a *de facto* occupation (Härtel, 2016, p. 117; Baumann & Junginger, 2017, p. 30). The illegal referendum results, which have not been recognised by the international community, endorsed a political union with the Russian Federation (Baumann & Junginger, 2017, p. 30; Trenin, 2014, p. 6). According to the local leadership, roughly 96 per cent of the votes were in favour of this decision (Sotiriou, 2016, p. 58). A treaty was signed two days later between the self-proclaimed authorities of the Crimea and the Kremlin to finalise the Russian annexation of the Crimea and Sevastopol, which Moscow prefers to call "reunification" instead (Härtel, 2016, p. 117). This particular choice of wording was a reference to the decision of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) to transfer the Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the reunification of two Slavic folks (Larrabee, 2010, p. 42).[36] Despite all the

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[36] The historical event in question denotes the Treaty of Pereyaslav signed between the Cossack Hetmanate and the Muscovy in 1654. This treaty brought the Cossack lands under Russian rule until

concrete evidence, the Kremlin rejected all international accusations regarding any kind of Russian involvement, politically or militarily, in the developments that took place in the Crimean Peninsula during the spring of 2014. The annexation of Crimea by Russia has been extensively characterised in academic literature as a prime example of hybrid warfare, in which military and non-military means are invoked to destabilise the political, military, and social structures of adversary/-ies for strategic objectives (Aydın Bezikoğlu, 2022; Özçelik, 2022).

3.5.5. War in the Donbas (12 April 2014–24 February 2022)

In the aftermath of the removal of President Yanukovych from office, anti-Maidan protests emerged in the Donbas region, much like the events that unfolded in the Crimea. However, these protests quickly evolved into a violent and protracted armed conflict between the separatist factions of the Donbas, aided by Russia, and the central government of Ukraine. This section explores the reasons behind this transformation; Russia's motivations and objectives in this armed conflict; the Russian-sponsored state-building process in the separatist republics of the Donbas; the reaction of Western powers to Russia's role in the Russia-Ukraine crisis; the international efforts to resolve the war in the Donbas; and finally the failure of these attempts on 24 February of 2022.

3.5.5.1. Anti-Maidan Protests in Eastern Ukraine

The origins of the anti-Maidan protest movement are a matter of debate in academic works, which can be broadly categorised into three groups. The first group of scholars, being a minority in size, claims that the anti-Maidan was a solely local insurgency. The second group, on the other hand, argues that the anti-Maidan was a Moscow-induced separatist project. These scholars make reference to the famous statement of Igor Girkin (Strelkov), a former Russian soldier, who straightforwardly

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1922. The interpretation of this agreement has been a matter of debate in the national historiographies of Russia and Ukraine (particularly the Ukrainophile school of thought) in the modern era. While the former views this event as a "reunification" of the *Rus'* people, the latter argues that the agreement was forced upon the Cossacks (Kuzio, 2005, pp. 32-33). According to Taras Kuzio (2005) and Plokhy (2021), the Treaty of Pereyaslav cannot be regarded as a "reunification" as the Soviet and Russian historiographies have been endorsed because of the cultural and linguistic differences between the Cossacks and Russians at the time of the signing.

said he himself "pulled the trigger" of the war in the Donbas (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 257).[37] Finally, the last group of scholars adopts an in-between position, describing the anti-Maidan protests as a local movement supported by Moscow largely in its later phases (e.g. Kudelia, 2014; Kudelia, 2022).

The anti-Maidan protests that occurred in eastern Ukraine were characterised by a notable absence of organisation and coordination (Kudelia, 2014). As a result, they were not as successful as their omnipresent versions in the Crimean Peninsula – and certainly not comparable to its *raison d'être*, the Maidan protest movement itself. According to Kudelia (2014), during the initial phase of the movement, there seemed to be a lack of an identifiable leader, a coherent organisational structure, a solid action plan, and substantial financial resources to support the protests. Similarly, the anti-Maidan protest movement, in contrast to the local support observed in the Crimea, did not garner widespread support from the public in eastern Ukraine (Aydıngün & Aydıngün, 2020, pp. 423-424). Instead, it found its primary base of supporters among extremist factions. Consequently, the anti-Maidan protests in the Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, and Zaporizhzhia soon subsided without achieving any significant outcome. Contrary to expectations, perhaps including those of the Kremlin, the protests proved to be successful only in the Donbas region (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 254). However, even then, the lack of substantial public support had a significant negative impact on the trajectory of the anti-Maidan protest movement, ultimately leading to a prolonged armed conflict between pro-Russian Donbasite separatists and the central government.

The political presence of Ukraine in the Crimean Peninsula, which was gifted by Khrushchev a few decades ago, was relatively recent. Prior to the Russian takeover in the eighteenth century and subsequent migration policies, the population of the peninsula was predominantly composed of Crimean Tatars, who were brutally deported in the spring of 1944 by the most notorious Soviet leader, Stalin. On the other hand, before Russia's second annexation[38], the majority of inhabitants, as noted

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[37] However, Girkin claims that he did not perform his actions on the orders of Russia (Prokhanov & Strelkov, 2014 as cited in Robinson, 2016, p. 6).

[38] The Crimean Peninsula witnessed two annexations by Russia, the first of which occurred in 1783 and the second in 2014.

earlier, were ethnic Russians. Furthermore, before Russia's annexation took place, a considerable number of Ukrainian security forces stationed in Crimea, approximately 90 per cent, joined the Russian military force that was already present in the region (Aydıngün & Aydıngün, 2020, p. 420). Due to all these reasons, Kyiv's response to Russia's annexation remained verbal, despite the great geopolitical importance of this peninsula to Ukraine. The annexation of the Crimea, in the own words of President Putin (2014a, March 18), was completed in a few weeks "without a single shot being fired".

After the recovery from this initial shock, a passive reaction to the situation in the Donbas was deemed unacceptable by the Ukrainian leadership due to the region's crucial economic and demographic significance for the country (Lakomy, 2016, p. 286). Consequently, on 13 April 2014, following a decision by the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, acting President Turchynov launched an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) to cease the Donbas insurgency (Shovkoplias, 2022; Secrieru, 2015, p. 45). According to Sabine Fischer (2019, p. 20), certain radical ultranationalist militant factions, namely Aidar, Azov, and the OUN, were integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces with the primary mission of combating terrorism in the eastern territories of the country. Of the various paramilitary groups comprised of Ukrainian volunteers, Aidar and Azov, along with the Right Sector, attracted significant negative media coverage both in Ukraine and in Western countries due to their extreme right position in the political spectrum (Motyl, 2015). The launch of a military operation and the role of the radical groups in this operation, as argued by Kudelia (2014, p. 208), increased the salience of the regional identity of the Donbas people.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces performed quite poorly in the first phase of this operation (Fischer, 2019, p. 9). However, it got close to surrounding the separatists in the summer by interrupting their land connection to their major political, economic, and military donor, Russia (Mitrokhin, 2015, pp. 241-242). This Ukrainian success incited comparatively more explicit Russian military involvement in August of 2014, boosting bloodshed in the region and plunging the conflict into a quagmire (Secrieru, 2015, p. 46; Shovkoplias, 2022; Mankoff, 2022, p. 9). The war in the Donbas, which

claimed over fourteen thousand lives between 2014 and 2021, was considered the bloodiest conflict in the European continent in the twenty-first century until it was dethroned by the Russia-Ukraine War of 2022 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a; Masters, 2023).

According to the official statistics, 1.5 million Donbasites fled to Ukrainian-controlled territories between April 2014 and December 2017 and became Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) there (Fischer, 2019, p. 27). The IDPs from the Donbas region were frequently subjected to discrimination in their new settlements (Brayman, 2015). The reason for that was the deep-seated prejudice against Donbasites, who were perceived as having sympathies for Russia and therefore welcoming Russian aggression (Brayman, 2015). Another one million Donbasites took refuge in the Russian Federation as announced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), marking the largest refugee flow to this country (Fischer, 2019, pp. 27, 29). The Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories and IDPs[39] was established on 20 April 2016 with the primary objective of providing prompt and practical solutions to the problems arising from the "temporary occupation" of the Crimea and Donbas by Russia. However, despite its founding objectives, this state institution proved to be largely ineffective due to its weak political and economic structure (Fischer, 2019, p. 26).

3.5.5.2. Russia's Motivations and Objectives in the Donbas

The primary motivation for Russia's military intervention in the Donbas region, as argued by Trenin (2014, p. 7), was to render Ukraine's prospects of being a member of the EU and NATO "structurally impossible". Typically, an armed conflict, whether internal or external, impedes a state's bid to join both of these organisations. In the case of Ukraine, both forms of armed conflict were present and intertwined, making the country's aspirations of seeking membership in the EU and NATO unlikely to be realised. However, the Ukrainian prospect in these organisations remains an unsettled matter, as the geopolitical feud with Russia has the potential to

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[39] It was renamed "the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories" later on 23 January 2020.

induce the Western bloc to approve Ukraine's membership in the future. For this very reason, during the Minsk negotiations, the Kremlin expressed its ardent support for the political autonomy of Donetsk and Luhansk within a federal political framework inside Ukraine with the constituent administrative divisions preferably having a say in foreign policy. This condition, which entailed a constitutional guarantee from Ukraine, was crucial for Russia to consider a lasting resolution to the armed conflict in the Donbas.

The Russian strategy of infiltrating the Donbas was aimed at impeding Ukraine's potential membership in the Western bloc, either through a frozen armed conflict or the creation of pro-Russian autonomous regions that would be subject to the constant supervision of the Kremlin and obedient to each and every decision of the Russian authorities (Lakomy, 2016, p. 307). However, it should be noted the dynamics between Russia and the separatist regions were not always characterised by seamless cooperation (Jensen, 2017, pp. 9-14; Kudelia, 2014). The prominent personas in the Donetsk and Luhansk leadership were occasionally, yet harshly, critical towards the Russian leadership (Fischer, 2019, pp. 15-16; Jensen, 2017, pp. 9-14; Robinson, 2016, pp. 7-8). Some had to be eliminated from the political scene of their breakaway republics by the Kremlin's ruthless methods, including dismissal, abduction, and even murder (Fischer, 2019, pp. 15-16; Jensen, 2017, pp. 9-14; Robinson, 2016, p. 8). Given the historical defiance of the Donbas, it can be asserted with certainty that any attempt to control the region, if at all possible, would be fraught with considerable challenges and difficulties.

3.5.5.3. Russia's Role in the State-Building Processes of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics

The Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic were established as independent political entities from Ukraine by the pro-Russian separatists on 7 April 2014 and 27 April 2014, respectively (Fischer, 2019, p. 9). A local referendum was conducted in both breakaway regions on May 11 of the same year in order to give a sense of legitimacy to their independence declarations (Secrieru, 2015, p. 45). Based on the claims of the self-proclaimed authorities of Donetsk and Luhansk, an

overwhelming majority of the electorate in both *oblast*s, 89 and 96 per cent respectively, expressed their support for independence from Ukraine (Feeney, 2014, May 12). However, it should be noted that the territories of the self-proclaimed republics did not encompass the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*s during this period (Mitrokhin, 2015, p. 247).

The referendums of 11 May were largely regarded as unlawful and illegitimate as in the case of the Crimean referendum, as they were held under military occupation and in the absence of international election missions (Shovkoplias, 2022; Feeney, 2014, May 12). Due to a fear of further sanctions from the West, Russia refrained from recognising the independence declarations of Donetsk and Luhansk (Secrieru, 2015, p. 41). Such that, President Putin went as far as to encourage the separatists to engage in talks with Kyiv at the dawn of the referendums of May 11 (Feeney, 2014, May 12; Sotiriou, 2016, p. 61). It is plausible that President Putin's motivation for such a directive was to prevent any further backlash from the West. The Kremlin, amidst the already strained relations with the West and Ukraine, officially recognised the independence declarations of Donetsk and Luhansk on 21 February 2022. This move was followed by the annexation of both of the self-proclaimed republics, together with Kherson and Zaporizhzhia *oblast*s, on 30 September of the same year.

The self-proclaimed republics of the Donbas were deprived of international recognition. These *de facto* states exhibited premature and scarcely functional state structures. Despite the presence of governments, parliaments, militaries, law enforcement forces, intelligence services, and constitutions, neither the DPR nor the LPR had the administrative structure of modern nation-states (Mackinnon, 2023; Fischer, 2019, p. 16). Both were significantly reliant on Moscow's support in the political, economic, and military spheres (Jensen, 2017; Fischer, 2019). Russia, in return, had a vested interest in the survival of these loyal pseudo-states, as it served their ultimate objectives in Ukraine, the Near Abroad, and beyond. The quasi-state structure of Donetsk and Luhansk was moulded within the framework of this co-dependent relationship between the Donbasite self-proclaimed republics and Russia.

The democratic credentials of Ukraine's breakaway republics became a matter of scrutiny, given their reliance on the principle of self-determination as a justification

for their existence. The legislative framework in Donetsk and Luhansk was predominantly controlled by pro-government political groups, which raised concerns about the fairness and impartiality of their decision-making processes. In addition, both self-proclaimed republics imposed significant constraints on their respective judiciaries and media, which further exacerbated the issue of non-democratic governance (Fischer, 2019, p. 16). The cumulative effect of these factors was the indirect subjugation of all three branches of government (namely, judiciary, legislation, and executive) in both these self-proclaimed republics to the influence of the Kremlin.

The war in the Donbas, in its initial two years in particular, caused a severe economic plunge in the region (Fischer, 2019, p. 17). Kyiv, under the influence of a similar economic recession, ceased payment of pensions and wages to its citizens residing in Donetsk and Luhansk by the end of 2015, further aggravating the economic situation in the Donbas region (Fischer, 2019, p. 17). The responsibility of supporting the DPR and LPR then fell on Moscow, costing the Russian state over $1 billion annually, according to the 2016 report of the International Crisis Group (ICG) (as cited in Fischer, 2019, p. 17). On 15 March 2017, Kyiv implemented a trade embargo on Donetsk and Luhansk as an act of protest, ceasing all kinds of official economic exchange with the insurgent regions (Fischer, 2019, pp. 10-11; Baumann & Junginger, 2017, p. 34). It further deteriorated the economic conditions in the self-proclaimed republics, as it cut their links with the outside world that refused to recognise their legitimacy. As a consequence, Donetsk and Luhansk became more reliant on the economic and financial aid provided by Russia (Fischer, 2019, p. 25). However, this support was limited due to the Kremlin's refusal to officially acknowledge the independent status of these regions (Fischer, 2019, p. 25).

In the fall of 2015, the self-proclaimed leadership in Donetsk and Luhansk consecutively replaced the Ukrainian *hryvnia* with the Russian *ruble* as their official currency (Åslund, 2018, p. 6). Subsequently, on 18 February 2017, the Kremlin announced that all official documents, including passports issued by the self-proclaimed authorities of Donetsk and Luhansk, would be recognised by the Russian Federation (Åslund, 2018, p. 7). Two years later, Russia introduced a simplified

procedure to grant citizenship to residents of Donetsk and Luhansk (Palermo, 2020, p. 375). This measure was part of a larger strategy that the Kremlin employed in the breakaway republics within the post-Soviet space to justify its interference in the domestic affairs of their parent states (Kanet, 2015, p. 514). According to the Associated Press, the Russian Federation issued over more over 720 thousand passports in the Donbas, corresponding to one-fifth of this region's total population (Claus, 2022, September 30).

3.5.5.4. Western Response to Russia's Role in the War in the Donbas

Since the onset of events in 2014, the West consistently voiced its criticism towards Moscow's approach to Ukraine. The West's sanctions were initially imposed on Russia due to the annexation of the Crimea and were primarily economic in nature. A new series of Western sanctions was implemented after the downing of the Malaysian Airlines passenger jet (Flight MH17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur) by a Russian missile on 17 July 2014, which killed all 298 civilians aboard (Shovkoplias, 2022; Jensen, 2017, p. 1; Secrieru, 2015, p. 46). Despite the Kremlin's denial of any responsibility for this tragic incident, it was considered concrete evidence of Russia's role in the war in the Donbas in Western political and public circles (Jensen, 2017, p. 1; Fischer, 2019, p. 9). The imposition of new sanctions by the Western states aimed at curbing the growth of Russia's strategically important sectors, such as banking, defence, energy, and technology, resulted in a significant decline in this country's already troubled economy (Shuya, 2018, p. 2).

Besides the economic measures, in an effort to curtail Russia's global influence, the West resorted to punitive actions against the Kremlin in the diplomatic sphere. The flourishing political relations with Russia, which were at their peak during the first decade of the twenty-first century, were halted as exemplified by its expulsion from the Group of Eight (G8)[40] and the suspension of its progress towards joining the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Trenin, 2014, pp. 8-12; Secrieru, 2015, p. 44). The primary objective of the Western measures was to exert pressure on Russia to alter its foreign policy and actions. However,

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[40] It was subsequently renamed the Group of Seven (G7), as it was prior to Russia's accession in 1997.

according to Stanislav Secrieru (2015), the diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries on Russia only served to inhibit Moscow's formal recognition of the DPR and the LPR until 21 February 2022; halted the territorial dissemination of the conflict; and provided Kyiv with a much-needed opportunity to reinforce its defence and security forces.

3.5.5.5. Minsk Peace Process (8 June 2014–24 February 2022[41])

Throughout 2014 and 2015, the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) consisting of Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE convened in the capital of Belarus to engage in a series of negotiations aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution to the war in the Donbas (Fischer, 2019, p. 11; Palermo, 2020, p. 371). The informal representatives of Ukraine's breakaway republics, as one side of the warring parties, were also present at the talks. However, these self-proclaimed entities were not recognised in the conclusive documents, namely the Minsk Protocols (Mitrokhin, 2015, p. 247). Prior to the first meeting, Kyiv sought to include the Crimean issue in the Minsk agenda. However, Moscow, seeing the "incorporation" of the Crimea *fait accompli*, refused the Ukrainian request. It was widely argued that European countries, particularly Germany, were willing to make concessions to Russia on the Crimean issue to bring an end to the Russia-Ukraine crisis (Aydıngün & Aydıngün, 2020, p. 427). In addition to this, it is worth emphasising that, despite the diplomatic and economic sanctions imposed by the Western countries and the protests of Ukraine, Russia was never treated as a conflict party during the Minsk peace process (Fischer, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, neither of the Minsk Protocols imposed formal obligations on Russia (Fischer, 2019, p. 12).

During this time period, Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine held further meetings at the foreign ministry level under the Normandy Format to support the Minsk peace process. While the United States did not participate in the diplomatic talks either in the Minsk or Normandy platforms, it did lend its support to the settlement of the war in the Donbas under the OSCE's scheme, up until the Russian invasion of 2022

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[41] The dates refer to the first meeting of the TCG and the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, respectively.

(Masters, 2023). Meanwhile, Washington engaged in discussions with Moscow related to the armed conflict in the Donbas through an informal Russian-American tract, facilitated by their low-ranking diplomats and state officers (Fischer, 2019, pp. 11-12).

The talks conducted by the TCG with the support of the Normandy Format produced the formulation of two identical protocols: Minsk I (5 September 2014) and Minsk II (12 February 2015). Fundamentally, the Minsk Protocols laid out the following key points for the peaceful resolution of the war in the Donbas region: an OSCE-monitored immediate ceasefire; a special status law for the contested territories of the Donbas in the Ukrainian Constitution; a security zone along the line of contact between the government-held and separatist-controlled areas (addressed in an additional protocol to the Minsk I); a buffer zone along the Ukrainian-Russian land border; local elections in Donetsk and Luhansk under the supervision of international election monitoring missions; the immediate release of hostages and illegally held persons by the conflicting parties; an amnesty law for pardoning Donbas separatists; and finally a reconstruction project for the war-torn areas of the Donbas (Fischer, 2019, p. 12; Sotiriou, 2016, pp. 62-63).

The most contested Minsk decision in Ukraine was surely the points on a special status law, which was the main requirement of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Russia during the peace talks. The Ukrainian public and political opposition perceived any kind of political autonomy for the contested territories of the Donbas as a breach of the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, as it would accordingly bestow Russia with the most desired chance to control Ukraine in its own favour. Therefore, the attempts to implement political decentralisation in the Constitution encountered severe resistance from the public and political opposition, forcing the Ukrainian leadership to incorporate it into the reform packages about local governance and to exclude any reference to the Minsk Protocols in the writing of these laws (Palermo, 2020, p. 373; Fischer, 2019, pp. 20-21).

In the same year, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who served as Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs between 17 December 2013 and 27 January 2017, suggested a way

to overcome the chronological ambiguity surrounding the implementation of Minsk II. What earned a reputation as "the Steinmeier Formula" envisaged the law on special status to be granted on the day of local elections (Federal Foreign Office, 2019). The permanent legalisation of the law, however, was conditioned on a positive review of the OSCE's election monitoring mission on these elections (Federal Foreign Office, 2019). Despite the initial optimism, the Steinmeier Formula failed to reach its promise due to several factors, many of which were also responsible for the shortcomings of the Minsk Protocols: the reluctance of the warring sides to compromise, the lack of trust between them, and the continuation of the armed conflict.

3.5.6. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (24 February 2022–To Date)

The post-Euromaidan period witnessed an ever-growing rift between a peculiarly insensitive West and an increasingly aggressive Russia over the issue of Ukraine. The culmination of this cold, yet dangerous, tension between them was widely believed to have been sparked by this country's membership prospect in the EU and NATO – with the latter receiving greater emphasis in realist works as being a (political-) military alliance. President Yushchenko was Ukraine's first head of state, who uttered his intention to apply for NATO membership (Mankoff, 2022, p. 8). In line with this, in 2008, the Ukrainian leader officially requested an action plan from the military organisation (Pifer, 2020, p. 46). The United States welcomed the utterly daring initiative of President Yushchenko, however, the prominent NATO members, particularly Germany and France, were against the expansion of the alliance in the post-Soviet space, citing a potential reaction from Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2; Pifer, 2020, p. 46). Nevertheless, the disagreements among the NATO member countries resulted only in a delay in the planned candidacy for Ukraine (and Georgia) in Bucharest, in April of 2008, as the notorious summit declaration proclaimed: "These countries *will* become a NATO member" [emphasis mine] (as quoted in Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3; Pifer, 2020, p. 46).

The senior politicians at the Kremlin, including the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (11 March 1985–24 August 1991) and President Yeltsin, whose foreign

policies were appreciated in the West, long criticised NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders. According to them, the NATO enlargement was contradictory to the Western assurances to not expand the military alliance "one inch eastward"[42] as long as Moscow gave its tacit approval for the membership of a unified Germany, which was arguably the leading culprit of the two world wars (Dibb, 2022, p. 7; Hunter, 2016, pp. 4-5). President Putin, being the loudest and harshest of these critics, demanded an immediate end to NATO's enlargement endeavours in the former Soviet space, where he drew the red line in Ukraine (see Putin, 2022b, February 24).

Throughout 2021, Moscow accumulated hundreds of thousands of military personnel and advanced military equipment along the Russo-Ukrainian border. Initially, Moscow insisted that it was part of a routine military exercise in Russia's southwest-most territory. Meanwhile, Western leaders, intelligence departments, and political analysts saw it as a preparation for a full-scale invasion. In the first days of 2022, many Western countries and international organisations, including OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), which was the only international mission authorised to collect data in both the government-controlled and separatist-held territories of the Donbas, requested their diplomatic representatives to leave the country (Secrieru, 2015, p. 41; Baumann & Junginger, 2017, p. 27; ICG, n.d.).

It was when President Putin came with the ultimatum requiring concrete assurances from Washington in order to end the militarisation of the land border with Ukraine (Guyer, 2022, January 27). The Western countries made it clear that NATO shall not abandon its foundational principle enshrined in Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty (also known as the Washington Treaty) (4 April 1949): NATO's doors were open for any willing and eligible European country (Guyer, 2022, January 27; Pifer, 2020, p. 48). Ukraine was no exception to NATO's open-door policy, and in this

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[42] This quotation makes reference to an alleged conversation that took place between US Secretary of State James Baker (25 January 1989–23 August 1992) and Soviet leader Gorbachev on 9 February 1990 (Prashad, 2021). Accordingly, Baker gave assurances to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand even one inch eastward if the Soviet Union agreed to the reunification of Germany within NATO (Prashad, 2021). The alleged statement has since become a highly contentious issue, with some claiming that it was never made, while others argue that it was made but not fulfilled (see Sauer, 2017).

regard, the military alliance reiterated its commitment to the declaration of the Bucharest Summit of 2008 (Demko, 2022). The West long argued that Ukraine, just like other sovereign nation-states, has the right to freely determine its foreign policy without interference from an outside actor (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 11).

On the day of 21 February 2022, the Kremlin recognised the independence of the Peoples's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. This move signed the death warrant of the already nonoperative Minsk peace process (ICG, n.d.; Claus, 2022, September 30). Three days later, Russian battalions entered into the Ukrainian territory with the primary purpose of overthrowing the Zelenskyy government which, President Putin (2022b, February 24) argued, was conducting a "genocide" against the Russian-speaking people in the Donbas. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, two-thirds of the Donbas region was already under the control of Russian-backed separatists (Vohra, 2022). In stark contrast to what happened following the Euromaidan Revolution, a significant influx of humanitarian, economic, and military support from the West poured into Ukraine, accompanied by an unprecedented package of diplomatic and economic sanctions on Russia (Masters, 2023; Dibb, 2022, p. 18). Nonetheless, neither Russia's annexation of the Crimea, its tangible engagement in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, nor its current war with Ukraine stirred up a Western military response. Instead, the West relied upon diplomatic and economic sanctions once again.

According to the UNHCR, almost a year after Russia's invasion, eight million people in total fled from the country to all over Europe (Stoquer, 2023, February, 22). Roughly, more than 350 thousand soldiers were killed or injured in a year (Faulconbridge, 2023, April 12).[43] The Russia-Ukraine War, despite the Kremlin's initial objective for a swift and decisive victory, is now trapped in a bloody stalemate. Failed in the ambitious goal of overthrowing the "fascist" government in Kyiv, the bulk of the armed clashes concentrated in eastern Ukraine. Moscow, following the same formula implemented in the Crimea, announced the annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia on 30 September 2022 after the

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[43] However, the official figures announced by Kyiv and Moscow are deemed to be unreliable (Stoquer, 2023, February, 22), as warring sides tend to declare fewer casualties due to its possible psychological effects on their army and citizens.

illegal referendums conducted in these *oblast*s. According to the Kremlin, 90 per cent of the electorates voted in favour of joining the Russian Federation (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a).

CHAPTER 4

GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WAR IN THE DONBAS

4.1. Introduction

The current millennium has witnessed a widespread trend of political instability, which is frequently attributed to the resurgence of multipolarity in the global political landscape. It has been observed that a significant number of prominent global players, such as China and Russia, along with several other middle powers, have demonstrated a notable disinterest in adhering to the prevailing Western-led international order. Undoubtedly, no one has expressed their dissatisfaction with the "Pax Americana" as loudly as the leader of Russia. During the twenty-first century, President Putin has often found himself at odds with Brussels and Washington in relation to their political activities in the Balkans and the Middle East. Yet, nothing got on President Putin's nerves as much as the Western showdown in the post-Soviet space – most notably, in one specific country, holding ancient political, economic, and cultural connections with the Russian Federation.

John J. Mearsheimer (2014), a prominent scholar of the neo-realist school in International Relations Theory (Baylis, 2020, p. 244), in his self-explanatory-titled article *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin*, attributed the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine crisis to the dual enlargement of the EU and NATO and the Western democracy promotion within the former Soviet space. Mearsheimer (2014, p. 2), in a very minor key, argued that the limited power of Russia at the time, coupled with the "tiny" size of Estonia and Latvia, prevented their membership in these international organisations from provoking a comparable international crisis. Instead, the Baltic countries managed to maintain their domestic political stability and avoid any major crisis on the global

scale. The argument positing Russia's lack of capacity as the reason for Moscow's passive reaction holds some legitimacy, albeit overlooking this country's status as the primary inheritor of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Mearsheimer's subsequent statement regarding the meagre territorial size and political influence of the Baltic states runs counter to one of the fundamental arguments of the realist geopolitical understanding that he himself espoused in the very same article: "Great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory" (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 5-6). This was why, as I believe he would agree as well, the installation of Soviet nuclear-armed missiles on a small Caribbean island close to the United States shores brought the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe in the fall of 1962.

While acknowledging the realist and neo-realist perspective concerning the EU-NATO dual expansion towards Russia's borders, the Western unilateralism in international sphere, and the West's democracy promotion policy in the post-Soviet space, this chapter seeks to shed light on an aspect overlooked by the classical geopolitical outlook regarding the emergence of an armed conflict in the Donbas region. This orthodox perspective, as already mentioned, was famously spearheaded by Mearsheimer in his seminal work from 2014 and has been mirrored in the myriad of academic works with similar arguments (e.g. Trenin, 2014; Kanet, 2015; Chengyi, 2017; Dibb, 2022). Drawing upon the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics, this chapter argues that the complex web of identity issues between Russia and the West, and consequently between Russia and Ukraine, was a significant factor in triggering the Donbas war and the broader Russia-Ukraine crisis. This identity issue was absent in Russia's relations with the Baltic countries, despite their possession of many of the traits of Ukraine, which allegedly caused the ongoing crisis. Much like Ukraine, the Baltic countries were constituent republics of the USSR, hosted a sizeable ethnic Russian and Russophone population within their state borders, and shared a direct land border with the Russian Federation.[44] The public speeches delivered by the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 serve as a

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[44] Lithuania stands out as an exception from the rest, as it did not have a significant population of Russians. Moreover, it does not share a direct land border with the Russian mainland but instead shares a border with the Russian exclave Kaliningrad. As previously stated, this analysis solely concerns the mainland of the Russian Federation.

testament to the crucial role played by the identity issue in the escalation of the war in the Donbas, as this chapter shall demonstrate.

4.2. Realist Geopolitical Analysis of the Donbas War

This section explains the fundamental realist and neo-realist arguments on the outbreak of an armed conflict in the Donbas. It examines the subject on three major levels: first, by exploring NATO's eastward enlargement, second, by analysing the West's unilateral activities in the post-Cold War global politics, and last, by focusing on the EU's expansion and its democracy promotion efforts in the former Soviet space. The arguments about the EU-NATO dual enlargement and the Western democracy promotion in Russia's neighbouring countries were advocated by Mearsheimer (2014), as previously stated. In addition to Mearsheimer's explanations, the Western unilateralism in the global political arena has been also extensively discussed in the realist geopolitical literature as another major reason behind the Russia-Ukraine crisis (e.g. Kanet, 2015; Roberts, 2017; Dibb, 2022; Guyer, 2022, January 27; Sauer, 2017). Although it had meagre academic coverage, the last part of this section discusses the significance of the Donbas region for the warring sides from a purely geopolitical and geoeconomic standpoint. In general, through a detailed analysis, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contributed to the emergence of a ruthless armed conflict in the Donbas region from a realist geopolitical perspective.

4.2.1. NATO's "Encroachment" in Russia's "Sphere of Influence"

The seven-decade-long high military tension between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective blocs suddenly came to an end on an excessively typical day. Despite many years of fear about a possible nuclear catastrophe, the Cold War did not result in a significant war nor did it lead to the signing of a peace treaty. The absence of a peace treaty has caused a plethora of issues to remain unaddressed in what has been commonly referred to as the "New World Order". These problems have slowly simmered beneath the surface, until their eruption in diverse geographical settings, with the most notable one taking place in Ukraine.

NATO, hailed as the most successful mutual defence alliance in history, was founded in Washington, D.C., on 4 April 1949 by the joint initiative of the US and its like-minded allies in Europe and North America, which were namely Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom (Hunter, 2016, p. 7; NATO, 2023b). The territorial coverage of the organisation was gradually extended by the accession of new member states later during the Cold War: Greece and Turkey (18 February 1952), the Federal Republic of Germany (commonly known as West Germany) (9 May 1955), and Spain (30 May 1982) (NATO, 2023b). The establishment of NATO was initiated with the primary objective of averting any possible military aggression by the Soviet Union against the European nations that were allied with the United States.[45] The organisation's success took its source from Article 5 of the founding Washington Treaty, which entails NATO's collective retaliation in the event of an armed attack against one of its own (NATO, 2023b). This clause on collective defence was based on Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations (UN), recognising the right of individual and/or collective self-defence in response to military aggression (NATO, 2023b). Although designed with the Soviet threat in mind, it was only invoked by the United States against al-Qaeda in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Hunter, 2016, p. 17).

The admission of West Germany into NATO brought along the establishment of a socialist collective security organisation on 14 May 1955 by the initiative of the Soviet leader Khrushchev in order to counterweight the Euro-Atlantic military alliance (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023c). The Warsaw Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, or shortly the Warsaw Pact, comprised the subsequent countries of the Eastern Bloc, along with the Soviet Union: Albania (withdrew in 1968), Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (commonly known as East Germany) (withdrew in 1990), Hungary, Poland, and Romania (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023c). The fall of the communist regimes all over the European continent, the Soviet Union being in the first place, tolled the

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[45] It marked a significant milestone in the country's political history as Washington, for the very first time, made a permanent commitment to defend other nations (Hunter, 2016, p. 6). US foreign policy was isolated to the Northern and Southern Americas before the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) from 1913 to 1921 (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, pp. 195-199).

death knell of this relatively ineffective organisation at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

The end of the Cold War similarly sparked debates about whether the Euro-Atlantic military alliance should continue its existence as its *raison d'être*, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, no longer existed (Hunter, 2016, p. 3). The major powers of the West, emerging victorious from the Cold War, saw no valid reason to disband the most successful military alliance in history (Hunter, 2016, p. 7). On the contrary, the decision was made to broaden the scope of the organisation's mission beyond military affairs, extend its membership space, and flex its muscles beyond the borders of its mandate, with the ultimate aim of sustaining and augmenting its remarkable achievements (Hunter, 2016, pp. 9-12; Roberts, 2017, p. 41). The first two strategic objectives were devised on paper by Western foreign policy-makers following the end of the Cold War in order to safeguard political and economic stability across a larger membership area in Europe. The last objective, on the other hand, arose out of necessity when Yugoslavia entered into a bloody fragmentation process in the summer of 1990.

NATO, in accordance with its earlier-mentioned aspirations, did not forbear itself from efforts to enlarge its membership zone after the end of the Cold War – displaying, in fact, an unwavering determination in the pursuit of this objective. This initiative was reciprocally met with great enthusiasm by the former communist countries, including the Russian Federation, which wished for protection from some of the world's most prominent military powers. On 3 October 1990, Eastern Germany automatically joined the organisation with the reunification of this country. On 12 March 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, the former bastions of communism, participated in the military alliance. On 19 March 2004, NATO underwent its largest expansion to date with the admission of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The significance of this specific expansion should not be understated, as it not only encompassed the post-communist nations of Eastern and Central Europe but also included the former Soviet countries located in the Baltic region. Albania and Croatia on 1 April 2009, Montenegro on 5 June 2017, and North Macedonia on 27 March 2020 were officially welcomed into

NATO after meeting the requirements for membership. Finally, on 4 April 2023, as an outcome of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, Finland became the newest member by joining the ranks of the Euro-Atlantic military alliance. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine are the latest aspirant countries with Sweden one breath away from its official accession (NATO, 2023b).

Moscow was remarkably left out of the scope of the vigorous agenda of the Euro-Atlantic military alliance despite the establishment of a few, yet woefully inadequate, formal mechanisms between Russia and NATO during this period. The most notable one was the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), established on 28 May 2002 to facilitate consultation and cooperation, based on the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security (NATO, 2022).[46] However, even the NRC appeared to be nothing more than a superficial attempt at communication between NATO and the Kremlin. Many realist and neo-realist thinkers, including Kennan, who was the brains behind the US containment policy, voiced their continuous warnings, saying that NATO's territorial enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe, which they saw as an utterly redundant action in the absence of any meaningful threat, could trigger nationalism and revanchism inside Russia (Mearsheimer, 2016, pp. 6-7; Guyer, 2022, January 27; Roberts, 2017, p. 41). This realist foresight came to life in Ukraine when the dismal prospect of NATO-Russia relations worsened Moscow's view of the organisation's eastward enlargement.

The territory that was formerly under the control of the Soviet Union was unilaterally perceived as Russia's sphere of influence after the peaceful collapse of the communist "empire". This special territory was officially declared Russia's Near Abroad, within which it has ascribed significant political, security, and economic interests (Torbakov, 2017). The Near Abroad policy was initially introduced during the Yeltsin era (Duncan, 2005, p. 282). It has since been repeatedly emphasised in various Foreign Policy Concept and Military Doctrine documents under President Putin as a warning to neighbouring states and those beyond the region (see Light, 2015). It has been the least expectation of the Kremlin that the countries located in

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[46] The NRC's operations were severely impacted first by Russia's annexation of the Crimea and later by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, NATO decided to keep the Council intact in order to maintain communication channels with Russia (NATO, 2022).

the Near Abroad would adopt a neutral stance in their foreign affairs if they are not willing to embrace a friendly approach towards Russia (Lakomy, 2016, p. 293). Besides its bilateral efforts, the Kremlin, particularly under President Putin's leadership, sought to cultivate elaborate political, military, economic, and cultural relations with the countries in this rather self-imaginary territory through various regional integration mechanisms: CIS[47], the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)[48], and EAEU[49]. Each of these organisations has served Russia's post-colonial interests in the Eurasian region in line with its Near Abroad policy rather than yielding noteworthy benefits for their member states.

Russia's Near Abroad policy, which aims to maintain influence in the neighbouring regions, made it impossible for the Kremlin to accept the emergence of a hostile political regime in Ukraine (Lakomy, 2016, p. 301). The political landscape of Ukraine went through a significant change in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, with a newly elected pro-Western government taking the reins at the capital. The government under President Yushchenko placed significant emphasis on aligning Ukraine with the EU and NATO, with membership in both organisations being their topmost priority in the foreign policy agenda. Moscow sought to bring back Kyiv into its political orbit and punish Brussels for its support to President Yushchenko through trade restrictions and the disruptions in the supply of natural gas in 2006 and 2009 (Aydıngün & Aydıngün, 2020, p. 427).

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[47] The CIS was established to take the place of the Soviet Union on 8 December 1991 by Russia, Ukraine (ceased all relations with the organisation in 2018), and Belarus. The organisation's membership zone was later extended before the end of the year with the joining of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia (withdrew after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023b).

[48] The CSTO was founded on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty, signed on 15 May 1992 by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (withdrew in 1999 and 2012 after its re-accession in 2006). It was expanded two years later by the admission of Azerbaijan (withdrew in 1999), Belarus, and Georgia (withdrew in 1999). Article 4 of the Treaty, in accordance with the UN Charter, mandates that all parties provide military aid and assistance to any member(s) under attack. The Treaty evolved into a military organisation a decade later of its signing (CSTO, n.d.).

[49] The EAEU was established by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia following their signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union on 29 May 2014, after the failure of a few similar projects in the post-Soviet space. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan formally joined the Union a year later, further strengthening the organisation's economic and political influence in the region. The main goal of the EAEU is to enhance economic growth in the Eurasian region by creating a free trade zone, which would enable the unrestricted movement of goods, services, capital, and labour between member states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019).

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was a critical event that displayed President Putin's determination to prevent what he perceived as NATO's "encroachment" in Russia's sphere of interest (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3; Chengyi, 2017, p. 269; Kanet, 2015, p. 504). This conflict took place a few months after NATO's announcement at the Bucharest Summit on 2–4 April 2008, where the organisation declared its eventual plans to offer membership to Georgia and Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 2-3). President Putin demonstrated that he would not tolerate any perceived infringement of Russia's strategic interests and security concerns in his country's imminent backyard. The absence of influential Western backing behind Georgia and the indefinite delay in Tbilisi's NATO membership plans due to the armed conflict that had taken place inside its official state borders convinced President Putin of the effectiveness of military means in dealing with the West. The perception that the West was unable or unwilling to provide meaningful support to its allies outside of the European and Euro-Atlantic alliances encouraged Russia, leading it to embrace a more assertive and aggressive foreign policy stance in the years that followed.

President Yanukovych, who arguably had a favourable stance toward Moscow, came to power following his victory at the presidential elections held in 2010, replacing the pro-Western government that was previously led by Yushchenko. Ukraine was not an acute matter of concern for President Putin from this date forward until another pro-Western government rose to power a decade later as a result of a second civilian revolution, supported once again by the major political powers in the West. It consequently induced a notable change in Russia's approach towards Ukraine, prompting President Putin to employ the oldest conflict resolution method, first in the Crimean Peninsula and later in the Donbas region, as was what happened priorly in Georgia. Following the gruesome events of 2014, the Ukrainian public and political elite have widely come to perceive NATO membership as the only viable solution for safeguarding their country's sovereignty and territorial integrity from their intrusive and aggressive neighbour (Pifer, 2020). Consequently, the *Verkhovna Rada*, under the leadership of the newly elected President Poroshenko, annulled the law on Ukraine's non-bloc status in its foreign affairs at the end of 2014, which had been previously legalised by President Yanukovych (Vorobiov, 2015; Pifer, 2020, p. 46-47). Five years later, Ukraine's full integration into the European and Euro-

Atlantic organisations, namely the EU and NATO, was officially identified in the Constitution as the country's most significant strategic objective in its foreign relations (Pifer, 2020, pp. 46-47).

The Near Abroad policy puts great emphasis on individuals of Russian ethnicity, those who speak Russian, or anyone who has affiliated themselves with the Russian Federation (was later granted with the special naming of "compatriots" by the Kremlin), residing within the former borders of the Soviet Union (Lakomy, 2016, p. 293). This rather self-proclaimed, intrusive, and imaginary narrative was legalised in Russia's domestic law in the summer of 2009, assigning the country a unilateral protectorship role for an extensive group of people beyond its official state borders (Roberts, 2017, p. 52; Larrabee, 2010, p. 37). Moscow used this regulation to punish Ukraine for leaving its yoke after the *Verkhovna Rada* voted for abrogating the ousted President Yanukovych's 2012-dated law on minority languages (Torbakov, 2017, p. 72; Shevchenko, 2015, pp. 19-20). The Russian leadership sought to legitimise this particular law and its related foreign-policy actions in the international sphere, particularly in Ukraine, by invoking the notorious, yet enshrined as a legal norm by the UN as of 2005, responsibility to protect (R2P). The controversy on this doctrine shall be addressed in the following section on the West's unilateral political activism in the post-Cold War era.

The West insistently emphasised that NATO's eastward expansion did not contain any intention of encircling Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 6). Furthermore, as was guaranteed in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, it was made sure that none of these new members would permanently host NATO's military forces and nuclear weapons (Kirchick, 2015; Sauer, 2017, p. 86; Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 6). It was again persistently clarified that NATO's deployment of anti-ballistic missiles in Europe was a response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, aiming at countering the potential threat from what US President George W. Bush (20 January 2001–2009) referred to as the "axis of evil": Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (Hunter, 2016, p. 14). Nonetheless, Russia has approached the West's assurances with utmost pessimism and disbelief. According to the Russian official standpoint, NATO's eastward expansion was a violation of the Western affirmations made to Gorbachev (Trenin, 2014, p. 11). The promise was not to extend the organisation into the former Soviet

space in exchange for letting reunited Germany join the military alliance (Hunter, 2016, p. 5; Trenin, 2014, p. 11; Prashad, 2021). The motive behind Gorbachev's decision was to have the West keep an eye on Berlin, which was arguably the main reason behind the two world wars. The West has never acknowledged those assurances that were uttered beyond closed doors (Trenin, 2014, p. 11). Instead, it has been argued that "no third country has a veto over NATO's enlargement", as boldly declared in 2014 by Anders Fogh Rasmussen (1 August 2009–1 October 2014), NATO's Secretary-General at the time (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 10; Pifer, 2020, p. 50) In addition to this, Moscow sees NATO's eastward enlargement as a move that goes against, at least spiritually, the cooperative and collaborative approach that the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act aimed to establish between the two sides in the post-Cold War period (Hunter, 2016, pp. 14-15). Nonetheless, the West, considering Russia as an inferior power in post-Cold War politics, repelled Moscow's claims of a special zone of influence in its former colonial lands (Trenin, 2014, p. 11; Kanet, 2015, p. 506). These Russian assertions are simply deemed obsolete and, therefore, void.

The primary objective behind Russia's involvement in the Donbas, as previously explained, was to prevent Ukraine's alignment with the West in political, security, and economic spheres (Jensen, 2017, p. 2; Secrieru, 2015, p. 40). Particularly, the fear of a potential military coalition between Ukraine and the Western countries through NATO was the major driver behind Russia's drastic actions in the Donbas and Ukraine. The Kremlin believed that the fulfilment of such a scenario would pose a substantial and permanent threat to its national security. Therefore, Moscow, in line with this mindset, preserved its stance of recognising the Donbas as a part of Ukraine at the risk of facing harsh criticism both from within the region and at home (Robinson, 2016, pp. 4-5). Russia officially advocated a maximalist version of political decentralisation during the Minsk peace process, which meant the transfer of certain powers and responsibilities from Kyiv to local authorities, to bring a peaceful and enduring resolution to the armed conflict in the Donbas region. By doing so, however, Moscow hoped to have an influence over Ukraine through autonomous or semi-autonomous regions to prevent NATO's encroachment in its imminent vicinity.

Despite the perceived obstacle presented by the ongoing armed conflict, Ukraine's aspiration for membership in NATO has not been dismissed, nor has the organisation abstained from reinforcing its ties with the country. On 12 June 2020, Ukraine became one of the six Enhanced Opportunities Partners of the Euro-Atlantic military alliance, a position widely regarded as the closest to full membership (Prashad, 2021; NATO, 2020). Two years later, in 2022, the organisation officially acknowledged Ukraine's aspiration for membership (Demko, 2022). This was soon followed by a full-blown military intervention by Russia, prompted by NATO's unyielding commitment to Ukraine.

4.2.2. Western Unilateralism in Global Politics

The period after the Cold War, commonly referred to as "peace", was not entirely peaceful, especially in post-communist countries with diverse ethnic and cultural citizenry. Numerous ethnoterritorial conflicts arose soon after the end of the Cold War, creating a highly complex and volatile situation in regional and global political landscapes. The bloodiest conflict of all erupted in the former Yugoslavia, shocking the international community with the horror taking place in the middle of Europe. The disintegration of this federated political union led to a civil war between the ethnic communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995: Bosnian Serbs (supported by Yugoslavia), Bosnian Croats (supported by the recently independent Croatia), and Bosnian Muslims (not supported by any kin state). Many incidents of ethnic cleansing occurred during this civil war due to the asymmetrical power dynamics between the warring sides. The largest one took place in Srebrenica, mainly perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs against Bosnian Muslims, with the support of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević (11 January 1991–23 July 1997; 23 July 1997–7 October 2000) in their behind.

The failure of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to safeguard Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica resulted in several bombing campaigns of NATO during 1994 and 1995, without clear authorisation from the UN (Headley, 2003, p. 209), aiming Bosnian Serbs' targets in order to drag them to the negotiating table. By succeeding in its ultimate objective, the military interference of NATO led to the signing of the

Dayton Peace Agreement on 21 November 1995, which effectively ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Clinton, 2023). NATO, as part of the deal, was assigned to oversee the execution of the military obligations (NATO, 2023a). The February 1994 airstrike was the first-ever crisis response operation in the history of the Euro-Atlantic military alliance (Clinton, 2023). This watershed moment signified the beginning of a new era in the organisation's expanding role in global politics.

NATO had to take a similar action a few years later, this time in a pre-emptive manner, without a UN mandate, and inside the state borders of a historical ally of Russia (Roberts, 2017, p. 45). The threat of ethnic cleansing arose in Yugoslavia[50] at the turn of the twenty-first century due to the emergence of an ethnic secessionist movement in Kosovo, a borderland zone at the country's southmost territory, inhabited predominantly by Muslim Albanians. NATO conducted an extensive bombing campaign against the Yugoslav military forces in the spring of 1999 in order to force them to retreat from the Kosovo region to prevent another "Srebrenica". Lacking the authorisation of the UN Security Council, NATO's military campaign in Yugoslavia was highly criticised, Moscow taking the lead, for violating international law, particularly the sacred principles of the UN Charter: the prohibition of the use of force, the inviolability of territorial integrity, and the respect for sovereignty.

NATO's military intervention played a significant role in the independence declaration of Kosovo from Serbia on 17 February 2008 (Sauer, 2017, p. 87), which is recognised by the United States and major European powers, but not Russia (see Al Jazeera, 2023, February 17). The Western triumph *vis-à-vis* Serbia was viewed as a humiliating defeat in Moscow due to the deep-seated historical, cultural, and political bonds between the two nations (Roberts, 2017, p. 45). Following what was perceived as an act of aggression against a sovereign nation-state, Russia proceeded to sever almost all diplomatic ties with NATO, thereby marking the nadir of its

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[50] Here, the term "Yugoslavia" specifically refers to Serbia, despite the fact that this federal entity included another republic at the time, Montenegro. In 2003, the country was renamed the Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Three years following this amendment, Yugoslavia as a political entity was dissolved, ultimately resulting in the establishment of two separate nation-states, the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro.

relations with the West since the end of the Cold War (Headley, 2003, p. 226). Later, President Putin, in response to the mounting Western criticism of Russia's policies in Ukraine, called out the events that took place in Yugoslavia as a recurring reference point to justify his military interventions in this country (Roberts, 2017, p. 50). On 5 January 2016, in an interview with a journalist from the German newspaper *Bild*, President Putin asked: "If the Kosovans in Kosovo have the right to self-determination, why don't the Crimeans have the same right?" (Putin, 2016a, January 11).[51]

Despite the strained relations in Yugoslavia, a tragic event of immense scale and devastation, which came on the morning of 11 September 2001, led to an unexpected period of improved relations between Russia and the United States. President Putin was the first world leader to have a phone call with President Bush, uttering his country's condolences and its support for the fight against international terrorism. It was later revealed that President Putin's phone call was far from a symbolic pledge. It brought about concrete actions on the ground, including the sharing of Russian intelligence on the Taliban, a former Soviet foe, and Russia's assistance to facilitate dialogue between the United States and Central Asian countries to use their air bases for the conduct of military operations in Afghanistan (Kanet, 2015, p. 508).[52] However, not long after, the cordial relations between Moscow and Washington that flourished in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks were damaged by the latter's unilateral abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the deployment of nuclear missiles on the soils of NATO's new members in Europe, as part of the US' "War on Terror" (Hunter, 2016, p. 14; Hunter, 2022, pp. 13-14).

A more significant confrontation arose in this period on the matter of President Bush's highly contentious claims on the Iraqi regime's support for terrorist organisations (including the main perpetrator of the September 11 terrorist attacks,

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[51] However, based on international law, Crimean Tatars, recognised as the indigenous people of the peninsula, are the sole ethnic group entitled to exercise the right to self-determination in the Crimea (Aydın, 2023, p. 18).

[52] According to Peter Duncan (2005, p. 293), President Putin's decision to support the United States was motivated by his desire to establish a connection between Russia's protracted conflict in Chechnya and the American-led war on terrorism. By doing so, President Putin hoped to gain similar support from Washington for his country's own fight against "Islamic" terrorism.

al-Qaeda) and its possession and production of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which could potentially fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Despite Iraq's cooperation efforts with the UN for an inspection, President Bush escalated the tension with the fair contribution of British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2 May 1997–27 June 2007), ignoring the persistent calls from world leaders, including French President Jacques Chirac (7 May 1995–16 May 2007), German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (27 October 1998–22 November 2005), and Russian President Putin for a peaceful resolution of the dispute (Kanet, 2015, p. 508). Turning a deaf ear to international criticism, the United States and its allied forces initiated the invasion of Iraq on 19 March 2003 without the authorisation of the UN. It led to the overthrow and execution of President Saddam Hussein (1937–2006), who had held power from 16 July 1979 to 9 April 2003, within just three years. The US invasion caused immense destruction, loss of life, displacement of millions of Iraqis, and political instability that continues to plague the country to this day. President Putin's position on the matter brought considerable prestige to Russia in the international sphere at the cost of damaging the reputation of the United States.

The grim human rights violations in the Balkans (and Rwanda at the same period) and the criticism surrounding the methods of dealing with them made the revision of international law essential under the UN. The political doctrine of R2P was devised by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001 with the intent of indefinitely halting grave human rights abuses ("genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity" as explicitly articulated in the World Summit Outcome Document) during moments of political crises (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2021). It bestowed the responsibility upon the international community in case of the failure of a nation-state to protect its citizens (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). The United Nations unanimously adopted this principle at the World Summit, held on 14–16 September 2005 in New York City (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2021). Nevertheless, afterwards, the selective enactment of R2P, as well as its monopolisation, by the leading Western countries brought new controversies. Russia's President was at the forefront of expressing his concerns regarding what he viewed as the West's exploitation of this political doctrine. On 10 February 2007, President Putin delivered

a speech at the Munich Security Conference, wherein the Russian leader, for the first time, expressed his criticism of the West in a severe tone. President Putin, in front of an audience of US high-ranking politicians, levelled accusations against the United States, claiming that Washington had violated established international law and contributed to the persistent state of instability that currently plaguing global politics (Shuya, 2018, p. 3; Roberts, 2017, p. 38).

Almost a decade after the US invasion of Iraq, another controversial intervention took place in the North African flank of the Middle East. The violent crackdown of the Libyan regime against protesters that demanded the resignation of the country's longstanding leader Muammar Gaddafi (1942–2011), who had held power since 1969, brought the matter to the attention of the UN Security Council under the R2P doctrine. On 17 March 2011, the UN Security Council, with China and Russia abstaining, voted to impose a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians from the government's air attacks. Nevertheless, NATO's limited humanitarian intervention ultimately resulted in the ousting and killing of Gaddafi by protesters on 20 October 2011. In the aftermath of the regime change, Moscow, together with Beijing, accused NATO of violating the UN mandate by acting beyond the scope of Resolution 1973 (Lakomy, 2016, p. 303). Libya has been grappling with a bloody civil war since NATO's humanitarian intervention, much like Iraq after the US-led invasion. The way NATO implemented the UN mandate in Libya caused China and Russia to persistently veto any resolution at the Security Council regarding the civil war in Syria (Light, 2015, p. 20). The absence of collective international action has allowed the controversial regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who has been ruling this country since 2000, to remain in power until this day.

What happened in the Balkans and the Middle East served as a clear demonstration that Russia's power to veto decisions made by the UN Security Council, which was previously perceived as the primary means of protecting the country's political interests in the global sphere, could be effortlessly bypassed by the West (Allison, 2016, p. 29). Specifically, the unilateral policies pursued by the West in countries such as Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya ultimately convinced Russia that international law could be breached with complete impunity. According to Roberts (2017, p. 37),

President Putin, in the end, deduced that if the West was able to interpret international law in a manner that allowed it to justify its arguments and actions in the global arena, then Russia too would be entitled to do the same.

As this argument stood for, if the West was permitted to engage in military interventions across the world in a pre-emptive manner and without a UN mandate for humanitarian purposes, then Russia could have a similar privilege and responsibility to interfere in its imminent neighbourhood. Consequently, Russia unilaterally invoked the R2P in 2014, which had been under the monopoly of the United States and its political allies in Western Europe until then, to protect ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and pro-Russian people in Ukraine in order to hamper a humanitarian crisis inside this country (Roberts, 2017, p. 52). However, the existence of a threatening situation endangering the lives of Ukraine's Russian or Russia-affiliated citizens is a highly controversial matter with no tangible evidence in favour. It should be particularly mentioned that the Special Monitoring Mission of OSCE, as previously noted the only international mission authorised to collect data on the battleground (ICG, n.d.), firmly repudiated the Russian claims of genocide perpetrated by the Ukrainian government in the Donbas (Marusyak, 2022, February 17). Furthermore, President Putin's allegations regarding Ukraine's infringement of the linguistic rights of Russian-speaking people are similarly unsupported by any concrete proof (Aydın, 2023, p. 18), as a research study conducted by the Rating in 2015 revealed (Aydıngün & Biletska, 2020, pp. 354-356). The relevant study found that only a mere two per cent of Ukrainians, including those residing in the Donbas region, reported experiencing discrimination with regard to their linguistic preferences (Aydıngün & Biletska, 2020, p. 355).

4.2.3. EU's "Encroachment" in Russia's "Sphere of Interest"

Russia did not necessarily see the European Union as a threat to its national security despite the fact that the European family, just like its close kin in the Transatlantic region, went through a substantial territorial enlargement process in the post-Cold War era. The reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990 marked the automatic inclusion of Eastern Germany into the European Union. Five years later, on 1 January 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden officially became members of the EU.

Later, on 1 May 2004, the EU underwent its largest expansion yet, with the accession of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It was followed by the joining of Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2007. Finally, the most recent addition to the EU came six years later, precisely on 1 July 2013, with the accession of Croatia (European Commission, n.d.). It is beyond dispute that the EU's infiltration into the Baltic region, just located on the opposite side of the Russian border and once ruled by the Soviet Union, was regarded by Moscow as the most unsettling of these waves of enlargement. However, despite this, it did not generate a major crisis in EU-Russia relations. One reason for this was that the EU was temperamentally focused on the economic field, as opposed to NATO, which is a (political-) military alliance created to contain Russia's communist predecessor. In addition to this, the EU's political leverage in global affairs was not clearly established during the early years of the twenty-first century. Despite these, the Kremlin still called on its imminent neighbour to take Russia's concerns and reservations into serious consideration in order to maintain a peaceful and stable relationship.

Russia's high volume of trade capacity with EU member countries through the sale of its abundant non-renewable energy resources encouraged Moscow to approach this contemporary polity along its western border with utmost pragmatism. The famous Transatlantic rift, which arose due to the US insistence on waging war in Iraq, prompted Moscow to consider the EU as a potential partner in the political sphere too, particularly in counterbalancing the US unilateralism in the international sphere. By strengthening its ties with the EU, Russia hoped to offset the US dominance in global affairs and create a more balanced and stable international system. In April 2008, France and Germany, the opponents of the invasion of Iraq, vetoed the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine in Bucharest, Romania. The reason for their opposition was to avoid further antagonising Moscow (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2). This move could be another positive development towards the chance of a partnership between Russia and the EU if they had not already been in a confrontation four years prior. This disagreement stemmed from the EU's enthusiastic endeavours to promote liberal democracy in former Soviet countries.

The encouraging attitude of Brussels toward the Color Revolutions had a lasting impact on Russia's perception of the EU project. From this date onwards, it came to be seen in Moscow as a "normative or bureaucratic empire" with ever-expanding borders (Torbakov, 2017, pp. 72-73). From the Russian perspective, the EU had an apparent agenda of seeking to surround Russia by forging hostile regimes in its Near Abroad (Torbakov, 2017, pp. 72-73). In the particular case of Ukraine, Roy Allison (2016, p. 27) argued that Russia, starting from the Orange Revolution, began to view its "ethnic brethren" as a tool for the EU to undermine Russia's strategic interests in the region and beyond. This perception was further strengthened with the Euromaidan Revolution, which engendered Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military incursion in the Donbas.

Another concerning development for Moscow emerged after the EU's realisation of the issue of over-enlargement, in the form of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) under the umbrella of the organisation's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Unlike previous initiatives aimed at former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, the EaP sought to establish closer political and economic relations with a package of post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine (Kanet, 2015, p. 510). During a discussion on whether to grant NATO membership to this country, Moscow interpreted this initiative as a strategically coordinated move of the West aimed at undermining Russia's privileged interests in its Near Abroad (Kanet, 2015, p. 510). President Putin attempted to tackle this issue through his personal project, the EAEU. However, his efforts were precluded by the ascent of a pro-Western government in Kyiv in 2014. Moscow's military adventurism in the Crimea and Donbas was made in an effort to retain Ukraine as an impartial ground between Russia and the EU, as well as NATO (Trenin, 2014, p. 25). By doing so, Russia hoped to maintain its sphere of influence in the region and prevent the perceived encroachment of Western powers towards its land borders.

4.2.4. Geopolitical Significance of the Donbas Region

As this chapter discussed so far, the war in the Donbas region, alongside the annexation of the Crimea and the subsequent military invasion in Ukraine, has been

extensively analysed in the realist and neo-realist literature as a manifestation of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. Despite its geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, the material assets of the Donbas region were not considered by this prevailing perspective to be a decisive factor in Russia's military intervention. Thus, it was vaguely mentioned in realist and neo-realist academic works compared to the other factors that have already been extensively discussed in this chapter. While acknowledging the argument regarding the significant role played by the global confrontation between Russia and the West, it is crucial to mention the geopolitical and geoeconomic traits of the region in order to provide a proper conclusion to the realist-oriented perspective and avoid oversimplifying the conflict as a mere power struggle between the global powers.

First and foremost, the geopolitical location of the Donbas, as a neighbouring territory to Russia, was a determinative factor in this country's military engagement in the region. The usage of the Donbas as an incursion route by Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821) in 1812 and Hitler in 1941 to invade imperial and Soviet Russia was historical evidence in Moscow's logic of reasoning, supporting its concerns with regard to the EU-NATO joint aspirations in Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 5; Sauer, 2017, pp. 88-89; Hahn, 2018, p. 7). The consequences of these military campaigns were catastrophic, resulting in an immense loss of life and an indelible mark on the collective memory of Russians. Besides, the geopolitical location of the Donbas was similarly a matter of great concern in Kyiv. It became clear in the spring of 2014 that Kyiv's distress was not futile, as the region's geographical position soon operated against Ukraine's security interests by substantially facilitating Russia's military infiltration (Kuromiya, 2019, p. 246).

The economic potential of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblast*s was another significant factor for both of the warring sides, which provoked them to come into an armed confrontation in this region. The Donbas was long recognised as "one of the world's largest metallurgical and heavy industrial complexes", which was largely a product of the intense Soviet efforts to process the region's abundant and highly qualified underground resources during the twentieth century (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023a; Toal, 2017). With a gross domestic product (GDP) contribution of sixteen per

cent, industrial output of twenty-five per cent, and exports of twenty-seven per cent, the region had a crucial place in Ukraine's economy (Charap, 2014). Therefore, the undeniable geoeconomic importance of Donetsk and Luhansk made it incredibly challenging for Kyiv to even consider relinquishing its control. Similarly, the economic potential of this region appeared as a mouth-watering opportunity for Moscow, one that was too tempting to ignore.

Finally, the region's demographic capacity, as well as the essence of its demographic formation, contributed to the escalation of an armed conflict in the Donbas. Prior to the onset of the war in 2014, the population of the Donbas region accounted for approximately sixteen per cent of Ukraine's entire population (Fischer, 2019, p. 7). This rich demographic resource, which was overwhelmingly comprised of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, played a substantial role in Russia's decision to take military action in this region. However, despite the Kremlin's belief to the contrary, several research studies demonstrated that an individual's linguistic preference did not necessarily indicate a pro-Russian political sentiment in the case of Ukraine (Toal, 2017). Significantly, it was documented that Ukrainians did not perceive the Russian language as being in contradiction with their national identity (Aydıngün, 2022, p. 12; Aydıngün & Biletska, 2020, p. 356). Instead, the Russian language was merely regarded as a utilitarian tool for communication (Aydıngün, 2022, p. 12). In this regard, it is particularly worth mentioning that a significant majority of the Ukrainian military personnel in the ATO, precisely two-thirds, were Russophone (Kuzio, 2016, p. 3).

4.3. Critical Geopolitical Analysis of the Donbas War

To remind briefly, the realist and neo-realist geopolitical perspective explains Russia's role in the Donbas War and the overall Russia-Ukraine crisis with NATO's eastward enlargement, the Western unilateralism in international politics, and the EU expansion and democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space. However, as previously mentioned, the realist-oriented analysis fails to address why the same conditions did not result in a similar reaction from Russia in the case of the accession of Estonia and Latvia to these international organisations (Demko, 2022). Despite the

significant challenges presented by the Kremlin against the Western choice of the Baltic countries, particularly their aspirations for NATO membership, these challenges remained in words and did not escalate into any form of pre-emptive armed conflict (Demko, 2022). The Kremlin had to swallow hard the final decision made by its long-estranged comrades in the Baltic region to align themselves with NATO in the spring of 2004. This is an unusual outcome running counter to the fundamental premises of the realist and neo-realist geopolitical approach, especially if one considers that the Estonian city of Narva, inhabited by an ethnic Russian majority population, is just some kilometres away from the westmost edge of Russia (Demko, 2022). Furthermore, it is worth emphasising that, in the 1990s, Russia's relations with Estonia and Latvia were characterised by discord and tension due to the considerable challenges that these countries placed on the citizenship and cultural rights of their Russian minorities (Shevel, 2015, pp. 7, 14). In 1989, Russians were the largest minority group in Estonia and Latvia, accounting for thirty and thirty-four per cent of the total population, respectively (Kolstø, 1996, p. 119). In stark contrast to Ukraine, both countries declined to bestow citizenship upon non-titular individuals, predominantly of Russian ethnicity, who settled in the Baltic region during the Soviet era (Kolstø, 1996, pp. 120-123).

The economic potential of the Donbas and Ukraine in agriculture, industry, and transportation (notably in the energy sector), combined with its historical usage as a critical invasion route, provides a relatively valid explanation for the aforementioned question, as this chapter previously explained. However, the current realist and neo-realist literature fails to take into account these geopolitical factors, leading to an oversimplification of the conflict in academia as a mere extension of the power struggle between Russia and the West. This thesis recognises the significance of realist-driven explanations in the analysis of the Russia-Ukraine crisis and this crisis' major chapters. However, it argues that the analytical perspective should be broadened beyond the confines of realism and neo-realism in order to derive a more comprehensive understanding of the crisis.

As this thesis argues, the root cause of the grand Russia-Ukraine crisis lies in the identity issue, which has been turned a blind eye by the realist and neo-realist schools

despite its most apparent reflections in the public declarations of high-ranking officials of the warring sides. In accordance with the critical geopolitical approach, this section aims to shed light on this crucial aspect. It shall analyse the identity component in two highly interrelated axes: between Russia and the West and between Russia and Ukraine. In addition to the academic explanations, it utilises the public speeches of the Russian and Ukrainian state leaders to uphold this claim that lies at the heart of this thesis.

4.3.1. The West as Russia's Eternal "Other"

Russia has grappled with a sense of identity confusion for centuries. The Russian Empire, as early as the seventeenth century, found itself lagging far behind its European counterparts in the political, military, and economic spheres. Tsar Peter I launched a comprehensive program of Westernisation during the early eighteenth century, aimed at modernising his realm and keeping pace with this brand-new world, wherein European nations were achieving political and cultural enlightenment and expanding their economic influence overseas. In the philosophical field, the reforms implemented by Tsar Peter I instigated a profound search within Russian intellectual thought to define its identity, a search that continues to this day. This quest primarily revolved around Europe and subsequently encompassed a broader notion of "the West" following the global rise of the United States after WWII (Roberts, 2017; Torbakov, 2017). The foundational basis for this longstanding pursuit to unveil the true essence of Russian identity was composed of a fundamental set of questions: Who are we? Who are our friends and foes? And where do we stand in the world?

Due to Russia's late arrival in the "great game", Europe played a significant role in shaping the context of its identity quest (Tsygankov, 2008). Central to this inquiry were debates concerning Russia's position *vis-à-vis* the Western civilisation (Tsygankov, 2008). This grand debate was shaped by two extreme philosophical edges. On one hand, there were Slavophiles, who saw Russia as a unique civilisation with its distinct culture and values. On the other hand, there were Westernisers, who defined Russia as an inherent and integral member of the Western civilisation,

sharing a bulk of its values and ideals. In accordance with their divergent perspectives on the Russian self, Slavophiles and Westernisers also envisioned different development trajectories for their floundering empire. The former believed in the unconditional embracement of Russia's *sui generis* cultural traits, while the latter advocated for its return to the Western civilisation (Tsygankov, 2008, p. 766; Shevel, 2015, p. 6). At the beginning of the twentieth century, an in-between philosophical paradigm was born as the third way alongside Slavophilia and Westernism. Named Eurasianism, this philosophical thought viewed the Russian Empire, situated at the crossroads of the Eastern and Western worlds, as the most modern of the civilisations in the Eurasian landmass (Hahn, 2018, p. 9; Diec, 2019, p. 145). In the second half of the 1990s, it made a comeback to Russian foreign policy in response to the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West.

As early as the late 1980s, the Soviet leadership was eager to integrate their country with the West in various domains, including politics and security. It should not come as a surprise that the person who ended the Cold War was the one opening the doors of the Western civilisation to the minds of Russians by including their country within the borders of the "common European home" (Torbakov, 2017, p. 76; Trenin, 2014, p. 9). Beyond this, Gorbachev was also the first Russian leader, who uttered his country's intentions for NATO membership (Sauer, 2017, p. 85). With his optimistic and somewhat naive personality, he held a genuine belief that the Soviet Union would be incorporated into the global leadership of the United States (Trenin, 2014, p. 9). The collapse of the Soviet Union suddenly unseated this politician from power before embarking on his ideals in global politics. However, Gorbachev's sudden downfall from power did not lead to a decline in the popularity of Westernism in Russian foreign policy. The first President of Russia continued his communist predecessor's optimistic policy toward the Western countries.

The political relations between Russia and the West appeared to be promising during the first few years following the end of the Cold War. On the path paved by Gorbachev, President Yeltsin, in declaring Russia's desire to "rejoin European civilisation", articulated his country's interest in pursuing membership in NATO or establishing a joint defence mechanism with the Euro-Atlantic military alliance

(Torbakov, 2017, p. 76; Trenin, 2014, p. 9; Sauer, 2017, p. 85). However, his efforts met with little enthusiasm in the West. According to Trenin (2014, p. 10), in the eyes of the West, Russia was too big, too independent, and too assertive with a large inventory of nuclear weapons arsenal and a realist foreign policy tradition to be integrated into its security architecture. Consequently, in response to Moscow's request to be included in the Euro-Atlantic family, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was officially upgraded into OSCE on the first day of 1995. However, it appeared as a sheer lip service to Russia, as this organisation was unable to attain the same level of influence as NATO because of its structural deficiencies (Sauer, 2017, p. 85).

The initial glimpse of optimism in Russian-Western relations soon faded away, as the West did not seem to embrace Russia as one of its own, as was hoped in this country after long years of political exclusion. In this period, the Western economic aid was insufficient and inadequate in its efforts to reform Russia's troubled economy (Kanet, 2015, p. 505). This resulted in the exacerbation of economic issues, which, in return, led to an increase in public discontent within the country. The Russian leadership found the mounting criticism of the West regarding the gross human rights violations in the First Chechen War (11 December 1994–31 August 1996) to be unfair and, therefore, intolerable (Kanet, 2015, p. 504; Duncan, 2005, p. 290; Shevel, 2015, pp. 6-7). The West's unilateral military interventions in the Balkans, undertaken without prior consultation with Russia and the UN, came as an upsetting shock, causing further disappointment on the Russian side. The eastward expansion of the EU and NATO, despite their arguably opposite assurances and Russia's explicit objections, was viewed with utmost concern by the Kremlin. Yet, even then, neither of these developments was disturbing as much as what they perceived as the deliberate exclusion of Russia from the future plans of these organisations.

The bleak state of Russian-Western relations put the earlier Russian leadership under a storm of criticism for the decision to withdraw Soviet military troops from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the permission for the reunification of Germany within NATO, without any corresponding written assurances from the Western powers (Kanet, 2015, p. 505) The 1994-1995 NATO's unauthorised bombing

campaign against Bosnian Serb targets effectively undermined the already tenuous foreign policy agenda of pro-Western liberal politicians in the country (Headley, 2003). Consequently, the liberal nationalist approach of Andrei Kozyrev, who served as Russia's Foreign Minister between 11 October 1990 and 6 January 1996 under President Yeltsin, fell into complete disfavour in both political and public circles. Foreign Minister Kozyrev believed that Russia's reintegration into the European community, coupled with a staunch commitment to liberal and democratic values, would lead to an automatic convergence of the country's foreign policy interests with those of the Western bloc (Headley, 2003, p. 210; Tsygankov, 2008, pp. 770-771). However, subsequent to what was perceived as the West's reluctance to embrace Russia as an equal partner and its insistence on pursuing a unilateral approach in international affairs, a notable shift was observed in the foreign policy of President Yeltsin. While this transformation had already been initiated during the tenure of Foreign Minister Kozyrev (Headley, 2003), it was largely associated with the political career of his successor, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov (9 January 1996–11 September 1998), who famously characterised Russia as a Eurasian political power (Tsygankov, 2008, p. 770). Much like Kennan's widely recognised role as the architect of the containment policy, Primakov was similarly credited as the mastermind behind the geopolitical doctrine of the Near Abroad, as this geopolitical project was first uttered by himself in 1994.

This new foreign policy approach, as argued by Jim Headey (2003, p. 212) had three fundamental tenets: firstly, Russia had its own distinct interests; secondly, the interests of Russia did not necessarily align with those of the West; and thirdly, as a great power, Russia must have engaged in strategic competition with other great powers in order to ensure the safeguarding of its interests. President Yeltsin's successor and Russia's current President upheld this approach. The adoption of this foreign policy approach was facilitated by the significant economic growth observed in the country between 2000 and 2008 under his rule. The Russian economy, during the first and second presidential terms of Putin, underwent a remarkable resurgence, which was primarily driven by the significant surge in prices and demand for natural gas and oil, both of which Russia possessed in abundance (Larrabee, 2010, pp. 34-35; Kanet, 2015, p. 507). This economic recovery enabled President Putin to pursue

an active and assertive foreign policy, which in turn increased Russia's political leverage on the global stage (Larrabee, 2010, pp. 34-35; Kanet, 2015, p. 507).

However, President Putin, until his third period at the presidential office, still remained open to cooperation with the West, continuing Russia's efforts to be recognised as a key player in European affairs. So much so that, during the early years of his long tenure, Russia made another unofficial appeal for NATO membership (Sauer, 2017, p. 85). In his notorious speech declaring the recognition of the independence of the Peoples' Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, President Putin (2022a, February 21) disclosed that during his meeting with former US President Bill Clinton (20 January 1993–2001) in Moscow back in 2000, he had asked about the possibility of Russia joining NATO. According to President Putin (2022a, February 21), the American leader's reaction to this proposal was "restrained". The NRC was established in response to this appeal to develop a framework for collaboration and dialogue between Russia and NATO. However, as previously explained in this chapter, it soon proved to be an inefficient mechanism.

A prospect of reconciliation arose once again in the spring of 2008 with the inauguration of a liberal-minded politician in the Kremlin, in lieu of the incumbent President Putin. President Dmitry Medvedev (7 May 2008–2012) offered an overarching European security treaty in the first year of his tenure, which implicitly aimed to replace NATO by establishing a more comprehensive security framework across the continent (Allison, 2016, p. 28; Trenin, 2014, p. 10). Despite the fact that it coincided with the reset policy of US President Barack Obama (20 January 2009–2017), which sought to improve the strained relations with Russia, President Medvedev's initiative, too, suffered the same fate as its predecessors and failed to yield any significant results.[53] It marked the last of Russia's attempts to align itself with the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

In the Russian perception, their country was encountered with a twofold challenge from its perceived "Other" in the aftermath of the Cold War. According to this, not only was it met with rejection from the Western powers but it also grappled with a notable lack of respect (Sauer, 2017). In Russia, the unilateral policies of the United

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[53] For more detailed information about the US reset policy, see (Pifer, 2015).

States and the European Union were widely perceived as a sign of disrespect towards this country, which was regarded as a great power on the global scale. In line with this mentality, as the new millennium unfolded, Russia's relations with the West increasingly deteriorated due to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; the Western support for the Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet countries between 2003 and 2005; the recognition of Kosovo's independence declaration by the majority of the Western powers in 2008; NATO's military intervention in Libya in 2011; the Western-backed mass protests in Russia between 2011 and 2013[54]; and finally the Western support for the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014. President Putin repeatedly referred to these turning points in his public declarations between 2014 and 2022 (see Putin, 2014a, March 18; Putin, 2014b, July 22; Putin, 2015b, September 28; Putin, 2016a, January 11; Putin, 2022b, February 24). The Russian-Western relations, among all these places that they came across with each other, reached their nadir in Ukraine, a nation that is regarded as distinct from the rest of the world within Russia's mental mapping.

As the ultimate consequence of all this, Russian foreign policy has undergone a notable shift away from Westernism or "European choice" towards Eurasianism. This ideological shift became even more pronounced in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Eurasianism, a foreign policy ideology that places significant emphasis on Russia's historical and cultural connections with the former lands of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, considered Ukraine to be an integral component of what had been promoted as "historical Russia" by the Kremlin (Hahn, 2018, p. 20). In certain accounts, the western regions of Ukraine, because of their historical and cultural connections with Poland and other neighbouring countries, were not included within the borders of this imaginary political entity (Hahn, 2018, p. 20). Therefore, any perceived infringement in this country, especially in its eastern

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[54] In the aftermath of the legislative elections held on 4 December 2011 in Russia, a wave of mass protests erupted in the country's major cities. The election results showed Putin's United Russia party finishing well ahead, receiving over fifty per cent of the votes (BBC, 2011, December 10). However, protesters contested these results, claiming that the elections had been rigged. On the other hand, then–Prime Minister Putin interpreted the protests as part of a US attempt to "organize a color revolution" inside Russia (Arbatov, 2014 as quoted in Delwaide, 2014, p. 196). The West's political support for the protests, including public statements made by high-ranking officials, and the financial backing provided by various NGOs, sealed off any possibility of rapprochement between Russia and the West (BBC, 2011, December 10; Arbatov, 2014 as quoted in Delwaide, 2014, p. 196).

and southern territories, was declared a direct threat to Russia's national security by the Kremlin.

The EU-NATO dual "encroachment", which was arguably devised on the deliberate exclusion of Russia, was interpreted in this country as an undeclared containment policy. According to this view, the West, which abused Russian goodwill and weakness, not only refused to accept Russia in their special clubs but also embarked on a ruthless isolation project by erecting anti-Russian governments along this country's land borders (Hahn, 2018, p. 16). "We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, continues today", said President Putin (2014a, March 18), in his address announcing the "reunification" of the Crimea. It has been widely argued that the Western powers repeated the same errors made by the victors of WWI by treating Russia as a "defeated nation" rather than a "potential partner" in the post-Cold War era (Karaganov, 2014 as cited in Sauer, 2017, p. 87; Hunter, 2022, p. 19 as quoted in Dibb, 2022, p. 8).

In recent years, an informal acknowledgement of the West, which recognises the post-Soviet region within Russia's sphere of influence, has become the least, yet the most crucial, of the Kremlin's demands (Larrabee, 2010, p. 37; Dibb, 2022, p. 6). However, the West has staunchly opposed any state's claim of a sphere of influence, seeing it as a reflection of a post-imperial mindset. It was declared a nineteenth-century notion (Hahn, 2018, p. 6), which has absolutely no place in the modern world. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Kremlin, the West has taken every opportunity to expand its non-existent sphere of influence since the end of the Cold War, thereby committing to another instance of its double standards (Karaganov, 2014, as cited in Sauer, 2017, p. 87).

The Russia-Ukraine crisis has been advertised in the West as an individual act of an authoritarian leader. However, as shown by the Levada Center's monthly opinion surveys on President Putin's public approval rates, Russians seem to believe in their leader's justifications for the necessity of military actions in Ukraine.[55] From

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[55] It should be noted that while the Levada Center is widely regarded as a reliable research organisation operating in Russia, the accuracy and reliability of polls conducted within totalitarian

February to March 2014, there was an eleven per cent increase in his approval rating, rising from 69% to 80% (Levada-Center, n.d.). This period coincided with the emergence of the secessionist movements in the Crimean Peninsula and the Donbas region, wherein Russia openly supported "the local people's fight" against the new government in Kyiv. Similarly, from February to March 2022, President Putin's approval rating rose by twelve per cent from 71% to 83% (Levada-Center, n.d.). This period marked the initial phase of Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine, which appears to be positively received by the majority of Russians, despite the widespread international condemnation.

These statistics appear to be a testament to the Russian leader's enduring popularity among the country's citizens. It seems that President Putin's actions in Ukraine resonated with many Russians, who supported their leader's efforts to safeguard their country's interests against the West. President Putin, portraying himself as an unyielding defender of the sovereignty of Mother Russia against a hostile bloc of nation-states, seems to be perceived as such by the majority of his people as well. Being a talented orator with an intrusive media network at his disposal, President Putin succeeded in cultivating a belief among Russians that their country was being encircled, not given due respect, and denied its rightful place in the global political arena by the West (Hunter, 2016, p. 21). Many Russians, who got carried away with a sense of pride and defiance, came to see their country as a powerful and resilient nation that would not be cowed by outside pressures.

To conclude, the identity of post-Soviet Russia, consistent with its historical experience, was significantly shaped by its interactions with the Western world (Roberts, 2017; Torbakov, 2017). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia once again found itself struggling to find its place in the international community. According to the Russian perception, Russia, despite Moscow's insistent attempts to integrate their country, was not accepted as a member of the Western world. A small example of this behaviour was given by President Putin (2016b, January 12) during

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states should be approached with a degree of caution, as public opinion in such regimes is heavily shaped by state-controlled media and individuals may be hesitant to express their opponent opinions due to fear of repercussions.

his aforementioned interview with the German newspaper *Bild*: "I think Russia never became a full-fledged G8 member, since there were always separate negotiations between foreign ministers of the other seven countries". This Russian perception was further exacerbated by the unilateral policies implemented by the Western nations on a global scale, along with the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU. These political actions were interpreted by the Russian government and its manipulated public as a manifestation of profound disrespect towards a nation that was previously held in high regard by other states and continues to perceive itself as a prominent global power. In parallel with the earlier analysis of Russians' reaction with regard to President Putin's policies in Ukraine, a change in leadership is unlikely to result in a shift in Russia's foreign policy, as argued by Elias Götz (2015), due to the widespread conviction within public and political circles that the West has been treating their country poorly and unfairly.

4.3.2. Conflicting Perceptions and Narratives on Russian and Ukrainian "Self's": An Analysis of Public Statements of Presidents

Ukraine has historically held a special place in the Russian sight, as the very foundation of Russian history and identity has been rooted in the lands of this country. Being an integral part of the Russian polity for many centuries, this situation did not pose a direct threat until the independence declaration of Ukraine in 1991. Notwithstanding, there were no immediate political issues between Kyiv and Moscow following the demise of the Soviet Union. At the time, it seemed highly unlikely that any sort of problem, particularly one evolving into an armed confrontation, would occur between these neighbouring Slavic nations. This assertion went into complete reverse during the twenty-first century with Ukraine's acquired part in the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. Kyiv's "European choice" in this renewed feud led to Moscow's explicit rejection to consider its "ethnic brethren" as a distinct and separate nation from Russia. Similarly, the Kremlin's assertive policies towards Ukraine have compelled the Ukrainian political and intellectual elite to contend with the deep-rooted narratives in Russian historiography, which rejects the existence of Ukrainian nationhood, more profoundly than ever before.

The long-standing strife between Russia and Ukraine has deep historical roots, stemming from their differing interpretations of the legacy of the mediaeval Kievan *Rus'*, which the former refers to as "Ancient Rus", while the latter opts for the term "Kyivan *Rus'*" or "Kyivan *Rus'*-Ukraine", as can be observed in the public declarations of both countries' leaders from 2014 to 2022 (e.g. Putin, 2014a, March 18; Zelenskky, 2019a, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2021a, July 28; Zelenskyy, 2021b, August 24). Both Russia and Ukraine, along with Belarus, trace their ethnic and political lineage to what is widely accepted as the first of the Eastern Slavic states.[56] The establishment of this ancient federative state of Slavic tribes was recorded by the Primary Chronicle (*c.* 1113) (Plokhy, 2021). Our initial knowledge of Kievan *Rus'*, which was subsequently grown by archaeological and linguistic discoveries, belongs to this archaic religious document. According to the writer of the Chronicle, this ancient state was founded in the ninth century by the Viking Oleh of Novgorod (died *c.* 912) from the Rurik dynasty (Plokhy, 2021). Kievan *Rus'*, now widely regarded as one of the most developed polities of mediaeval Europe, was established on the territories of modern-day Belarus, Ukraine, and western Russia, with today's Kyiv as its administrative capital (The Kyiv Independent, 2023, November 19). A century later of its foundation, during the reign of Vladimir or Volodymyr I[57] (*c.* 956–1015) from 980 until his death, Kievan *Rus'* adopted Orthodox Christianity as its official state religion (Plokhy, 2021; Andrejsons, 2022). This landmark event made Orthodox Christianity the most important element of Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian identities in the modern era.

The period of Christianisation was referred to as the "Golden Age" of this ancient state by historians, as it marked the unification of all of the East Slavic tribes (The Kyiv Independent, 2023, November 19). In this period, Vladimir/Volodymyr I and his successor Yaroslav I (980–1054), who ruled from 1019 to 1054, succeeded in transforming their realm into a full-fledged mediaeval state with stable borders and a governance system (Plokhy, 2021). Despite surviving for nearly two more centuries,

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[56] However, in contrast to Ukraine, Belarus refrained from disputing the established narratives of the Russian historiography concerning Kievan *Rus'*. According to Kuzio (2016, p. 2), the divergent trajectories between Belarus and Ukraine primarily resulted from the fact that the former's nation-building was initially forged within the USSR.

[57] The first Orthodox Christian ruler of the Kievan *Rus'* is known as Vladimir I in Russian and Volodymyr I in Ukrainian.

Kievan *Rus'* eventually met its ultimate demise with the Mongol invasion on 7 December 1240, resulting in its perpetual disintegration into numerous vassal states (Andrejsons, 2022). The Galicia-Volhynia Principality, located in present-day western and central Ukraine, and the Principality of Vladimir-Suzdal, located in present-day Russia, stood out as the most prominent among the political remnants of the vanquished Kievan *Rus'*, as was acknowledged as such by the Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Patriarchate of Constantinople at the time (Plokhy, 2021). The principalities of Galicia-Volhynia and Vladimir-Suzdal, as per the widely shared belief among historians, formed the origins of modern Ukraine and Russia, respectively (Plokhy, 2021).[58]

Following the collapse of the Pax Mongolica in the late fourteenth century, the territories of the Galicia-Volhynia Principality, owing to the extinction of this ruling dynasty in 1323[59], were disintegrated between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Thereafter, the Polish and Lithuanian states embarked on a protracted alliance process against their intrusive enemies in the region. What started with the Lithuanian Duke's decision to embrace Catholicism in exchange for the Polish King's military aid in 1385 culminated in the eventual creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569. The Galicia-Volhynia Principality was thus regarded by Ukrainian historians as the last independent state established on Ukrainian lands until the foundation of the Cossack Hetmanate in the seventeenth century (Plokhy, 2021).

On the other hand, during the onset of the grand Mongol invasion, the Principality of Vladimir-Suzdal underwent an internal power struggle, which ultimately resulted in the rise of Moscow as the new and permanent centre of power on Russian lands. What later gained a reputation as the Grand Duchy of Moscow, or shortly the Muscovy, remained under the "Tatar yoke" until the late fifteenth century,

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[58] Meanwhile, among the many principalities that existed in the former *Rus'* lands, Belarusian historians tend to emphasise the Principality of Polatsk in tracing the roots of their nation-state (Plokhy, 2021).

[59] The Russian branch of the Rurik dynasty became extinct as well with the death of Feodor I (1584–1598), a son of Ivan IV, thereby triggering a dynastic crisis known as the "Time of Troubles" (1598–1613) in the Russian state. The Romanov dynasty emerged victorious from this tumultuous period and subsequently reigned over Russia from 1613 until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 (Plokhy, 2021).

comparatively longer than the Mongol rule in Galicia and Volhynia. Liberating his realm from Mongol rule, Ivan III (1440–1505), also known as Ivan the Great, undertook an ambitious campaign to gather the former lands of the Kievan *Rus'* during his rule from 1462 to 1505 (Plokhy, 2021). For this reason, it can be asserted that his political reign marked the starting point of the long-standing Russian-Ukrainian strife over the legacy of the Kievan *Rus'*.

During the period, following the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453, the belief that Moscow constituted the new centre of Orthodox Christianity found widespread support among the religious and political circles of the Muscovite state (Andrejsons, 2022). Ivan IV (1530–1584), famously known as Ivan the Terrible, seized the opportunity to name himself "Tsar of all *Rus*" during his rule between 1533 and 1584, thereby not only declaring his realm to be the successor of the Kievan *Rus'* but also laying the claim to the legacy of the Byzantine Empire (330–1453) (Andrejsons, 2022).[60] However, it is worth noting that at the time of his coronation, this state did not have control over most of the territories of the Kievan *Rus'*, which the Tsar claimed to be ruling (The Kyiv Independent, 2023, November 19). In the seventeenth century, while the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth continued to rule over the western parts of today's Ukraine, the Russian Empire gained control in the east. This division, which resumed after the final partition of the Commonwealth among the Habsburg Empire (1282–1918), Prussia (1525–1947), and the Russian Empire in 1795, created a political and cultural duality in these lands, plaguing the Ukrainian state during the modern era (Shevchenko, 2015).

Starting with the reign of Tsar Peter I, Ukrainian culture was significantly suppressed in Russian-controlled Ukraine until the Russian Revolution of 1905, symbolised particularly by the prohibition of the Ukrainian language in local administration, press, and education (Shevchenko, 2015, pp. 5-7). Under the rule of Empress Catherine II, the state campaign to suppress the literary use of the Ukrainian language was successfully executed in the eastern parts of Ukraine, including the Donbas region, culminating in the termination of its official use in this region by the

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[60] The naming of its monarch as "tsar", a term that is derived from the Latin word *caesar*, was perceived as an explicit attempt to establish a connection with ancient Rome (Andrejsons, 2022).

end of the eighteenth century (Shevchenko, 2015, p. 5). In the nineteenth century, the Tsardom engaged in the creation of the "All-Russian people", which was supposedly composed of the *Velikorossy* ("Great Russians" in Russian), *Malorossy* ("Little Russians"), and *Belorusy* ("White Russians") (Mankoff, 2022, pp. 2-3; Andrejsons, 2022). This state policy essentially asserted that both Belarusian and Ukrainian were, in fact, part of a larger Russian nation (Andrejsons, 2022). Within this framework, the Tsardom refused to acknowledge the existence of the Ukrainian people and culture separate from the Russian and simply regarded the Ukrainian language as a dialect or a pronunciation of the Russian language (Szporluk, 2000, p. 335 as quoted in Delwaide, 2014, p. 184). The official standpoint with regard to the Ukrainian language was thoroughly put forward on 8 July 1863 by Pyotr Valuyev (1815–1890), who served as the Minister of Interior of the Russian Empire between 1861 and 1868: "There has never been a Ukrainian language, none now exists, and there never will be one" (as quoted in Shevchenko, 2015, p. 6). Meanwhile, in the remaining parts of Ukraine that were under the rule of Poland and later the Habsburg Empire, Ukrainian culture was permitted to thrive, albeit not to the extent that it did during Lenin's era. Renouncing the assimilation policies of the imperialist regime, the Soviet Union, under the leadership of its first head of state, recognised Ukrainians as a distinct nation from Russians and established the Ukrainian SSR in 1922 over the contested territories of the ancient Kievan *Rus'*.

The Russian argument contends that the Ukrainian people as a nation were artificially created by the Soviet Union. For that reason, the argument goes, the nationhood and statehood of present-day Ukraine lack a legitimate historical foundation. The establishment of the Ukrainian SSR as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union was believed to be a deliberate move that was made by the original Bolsheviks with the intention of dividing the Slavic people and the territories of what was considered "historical Russia". This decision was accordingly driven by the political aims of the Bolsheviks to consolidate the authority of their communist project over the nationalities of the old regime. President Putin has been one of the most vigorous, yet unapologetic, proponents of this outlook since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Prior to the full-scale invasion of 2022, the Russian leader stated: "Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by

Bolshevik, Communist Russia" (Putin, 2022a, February 21). In the same speech, the Russian leader further argued that *Novorossiya*, a historical territory located at the Black Sea littoral, was conquered by the Russian Tsardom from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the long battles between 1768 and 1774 (Putin, 2022a, February 21). Therefore, according to his narrative, southern and eastern Ukraine belonged to the Russian Empire before its gratuitous incorporation within the borders of the Ukrainian SSR by the Soviet Union.

Further to that, the borders of what President Putin saw as an "illegitimate political creature" were significantly expanded during the Soviet era. The largest territorial expansion ironically came from the hands of Stalin with the seizure of parts of Hungary, Poland, and Romania after WWII, constituting fifteen per cent of modern Ukraine (Hahn, 2018, p. 34). A decade later, an additional sum of land along the Black Sea, which accounted for five per cent, was integrated into the Ukrainian SSR by another generous Soviet leader, Khrushchev (Hahn, 2018, pp. 34-35). Based on these, in an attempt to give a sense of moral legitimacy to Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its role in the Donbas conflict, President Putin (2014a, March 18; 2022a, February 21) legitimised his move by saying that the transfer of the "large sections of the historical South of Russia" (referring to the eastern and southern regions of modern Ukraine) by the Soviet Union took place without considering the ethnic makeup and political preference of the region. "Nobody asked millions of people living there what they thought", the Russian leader clarified his reasoning in the wake of the full-blown invasion of Ukraine (Putin, 2022a, February 21).

Although the process of the reassessment of Ukraine's history and identity had actively begun during the Presidency of Yushchenko, the Russian military aggression between 2014 and 2022 intensified this introspection. As noted previously, the series of events during this eight-year period brought along the triumph of the Ukrainophile school over the competing approaches in Ukrainian historiography, namely the Eastern Slavic, Russophile, and Sovietophile schools of thought (Şahin, 2020, pp. 99-100). This particular school of history, contrary to its rivalling peers, views Ukraine as the sole direct descendant of Kievan *Rus'*, as the territories of this mediaeval state gradually spread over the neighbouring lands in Belarus and Russia

from this country (Kuzio, 2005, p. 39). Based on this, these countries can only lay claim to an indirect legacy over what is regarded as the proto-Ukrainian state (Kuzio, 2005, p. 33). Rejecting the counterclaims made by the Kremlin, the Ukrainophile school has drawn a rich tradition of Ukrainian nationhood and statehood that spans over a millennium, beginning with the Kievan *Rus'*, through the Galicia-Volhynia Principality, the Cossack Hetmanate, the UNR, and up to modern-day Ukraine (Kuzio, 2005; Tuncel, 2020, pp. 31-34). On the thirtieth anniversary of the independence declaration, President Zelenskyy (2021b, August 24) underlined this by identifying Ukraine as a "young country with a thousand-year history". Earlier in the same year, the Ukrainian leader made a statement refuting the Kremlin's inheritance assertions altogether: "Cousins and very distant relatives should not encroach on her legacy [referring to the Kievan *Rus'*]. They should not try to prove their involvement in the history of thousands of years and thousands of events, being from the places where they took place thousands of kilometers away" (Zelenskyy, 2021a, July 28). This wind of intellectual change found widespread resonance at the public level too, particularly after the war in the Donbas, which shattered Russia's long-held narrative on the fraternal bond between the two nations (Aydıngün & Biletska, 2020, p. 347). Subsequent to Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine, it is anticipated that the prevailing narratives of Russian historiography with regard to this country, including Kievan *Rus'*, to come under scrutiny in the West (see Aydıngün, 2022, p. 4), wherein previously the Russian arguments had been accepted beyond question (Kuzio, 2005, p. 30; Aydıngün, 2020, p. 2).

Concurrently, the Russia-Ukraine crisis led to the consolidation of the Ukrainian national identity, thereby contributing to the development of a more cohesive and unified sense of nationhood among the Ukrainian people. Functioning as a powerful catalyst for Ukraine's nation-building process, it has solidified the civic aspect of Ukrainian national identity, ensuring that the Ukrainian nation is defined by shared values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights, rather than by ethnicity or language (Mankoff, 2022, p. 2). Between 2014 and 2022, the unity of all Ukrainian people, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, was repeatedly underlined in public declarations made by the Ukrainian leadership (see Gorchinskaya, 2014, May 26; Shevchenko, 2014, May 26). It was particularly a

recurring theme in the public addresses of Ukraine's current leader (see Zelenskyy, 2019a, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2019c, October 13; Zelenskyy, 2020a, January 22; Zelenskyy, 2020c, June 28; Zelenskyy, 2020d, July 16; Zelenskyy, 2020e, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2021b, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2021c, September 23; Zelenskyy, 2021d, December 1). The motivation behind this emphasis was not only to cultivate a sense of unity among the Ukrainian people but also to counter the Kremlin's allegations of state-sponsored ethnic discrimination. The Russian accusations against the Ukrainian government went as far as to allege that Kyiv conducted a modern-day genocide against Ukraine's Russian and Russian-speaking citizens, particularly in the Donbas region (Putin, 2022a, February 21; Putin, 2022b, February 24). By doing this, the Kremlin, in an attempt to reinforce its accusations, has repeatedly brought up the alliance between Nazi Germany and the OUN-UPA during WWII and their collaboration in committing mass atrocities against minorities in Ukraine, particularly toward Jews and Poles (see Putin, 2015a, May 8; Putin, 2020a, June 19; Putin, 2022b, February 24).

The ongoing war with Russia was perceived by many Ukrainians as a "sacred cause" (Toal & Korosteina, 2022, December 26), which brought them together and rendered their ethnic, religious, or linguistic differences insignificant (Mankoff, 2022, p. 2). In the meantime, it has also fostered a deep sense of national pride among the Ukrainian people for defending the values that are cherished not only by themselves but also by the Western world (Fischer, 2019, p. 18). Many Ukrainians believe that their ongoing conflict with Russia is not solely a matter of national sovereignty, but rather a struggle for the values of the liberal world order (Fischer, 2019, p. 18). Kyiv actively promoted this narrative to garner political and military support from the West. During his address to the US Congress on 18 September 2014, President Poroshenko highlighted that the ongoing conflict with Russia is not limited to Ukraine alone (Kyiv Post, 2014c, September 19). Instead, the Ukrainian leader argued that his country's fight with Russia concerns the entire free world, including Europe and the United States (Kyiv Post, 2014c, September 19). President Poroshenko's argument was repeatedly emphasised in his successor's public speeches too (e.g. Zelenskyy, 2019b, September 25; Zelenskyy, 2020b, February 15; Zelenskyy, 2022a, February 14; Zelenskyy, 2022b, February 19). Amid Russia's deployment of hundreds of

thousands of military personnel and advanced military equipment along the Russo-Ukrainian land border, President Zelenskyy (2022a, February 14) assigned his country with the protectorship of Europe's security: "Everyone recognises that the security of Europe and the entire continent depends on Ukraine and its army".

Reciprocally, the fight of Ukrainians has been deeply appreciated in the West, which has resulted in increasing sympathy for this European nation in its long-standing struggle against its oppressor neighbour (Mankoff, 2022, p. 8). As an ultimate consequence, the exact opposite of what President Putin had hoped for became reality. Over the last decade, Russia's insistent military aggression has deepened the divide between Ukrainian and Russian identities and caused the former to identify itself with the Western civilisation (Aydıngün, 2020, p. 10). Starting from the interim period of acting President Turchynov, Ukraine's long-awaited return to the European family has been intensively accentuated (BBC, 2014, February 24; Kyiv Post, 2014b, June 7). So much so that, on 7 February 2019, the European identity of Ukrainians was enshrined in the Preamble of the Ukrainian Constitution (Palermo, 2020, p. 375). The spiritual separation of Ukrainian and Russian identities was famously symbolised by the grant of official recognition and autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine on 5 January 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (Fischer, 2019, p. 32; Mankoff, 2022, p. 6). Given the fact that Ukraine held indispensable importance for the leadership in the Orthodox World (Kuzio, 2016, p. 2), this move dealt a significant blow to Russia's religious influence in the canonical lands.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The war in the Donbas resulted from a combination of domestic and international factors (Palermo, 2020 p. 372). As explained in the third chapter, a distinct regional identity that sets the Donbas region apart from the rest of Ukraine was moulded in this borderland territory during the course of history (Kuromiya, 1996). According to Kuromiya (2019), contrary to what the Kremlin has advertised since 2014, the Donbasite identity was not inherently tilted towards anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian sentiments, but rather was fundamentally anti-imperialist and anti-metropolitan. The industrial strikes of 1989, the pro-independence vote in the 1991 national referendum on Ukraine's independence, the pro-autonomy vote in the 1994 local referendum in Donetsk, the infamous meeting of the pro-Russian politicians in the city of Severodonetsk in 2004, and lastly the anti-Maidan protests of 2014 originated from this heterodox spirit. Having said that, although there was explicit unrest among the Donbasite people towards the post-Euromaidan government, it was widely believed among academia that these sentiments were subsequently manipulated and armed by the Kremlin in the wake of Russia's unsuccessful projects in eastern Ukraine.

Based on the research findings, this thesis, while acknowledging that the armed conflict in the Donbas was a result of both domestic and external factors, concludes that Russia was responsible for escalating and prolonging this regional war. Based on that, this thesis primarily deals with the external factors (the eastward enlargement of the EU–NATO, the Western unilateralism in global politics, the Western democracy promotion in the former Soviet countries, and the identity politics of Russia) rather than the internal causes, as it is constructed upon a criticism of the existent academic literature on the international aspect of the war in the Donbas and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis. In addition to this, it should be hereby indicated the inferences of this thesis hold relevance for all stages of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, despite the

fact that the focal point of this research work was the war in the Donbas and its identified timeline encompassed from 22 February 2014 to 24 February 2022.

It was generally agreed in the relevant academic literature that the implicit aggressive policies of the West towards Russia aimed at containing this country in its immediate neighbourhood constituted the principal cause of the armed conflict in the Donbas (see Mearsheimer, 2014; Trenin, 2014; Kanet, 2015; Chengyi, 2017; Dibb, 2022). Notably, the eastward expansion of the undeclared sphere of influence of the West via the EU and NATO, as well as this perceived bloc's unilateral actions on the global stage and democracy promotion activities within the former Soviet space, were widely accentuated as the most critical catalysts behind the Russian behaviour, as frequently mentioned throughout this thesis (see Mearsheimer, 2014; Trenin, 2014; Kanet, 2015; Chengyi, 2017; Dibb, 2022). Famously endorsed by Mearsheimer (2014), this dominant analysis, while offering valuable insights, provides only a partial explanation for both the war in the Donbas and the other chapters of the grand Russia-Ukraine crisis.

The eastward enlargement of NATO received the greatest scholarly attention among the major international incentives stated above, as it was a (political-) military alliance devised to contain the political predecessor of Russia. However, as put forward by Demko (2022), Ukraine was not the first country located along Russia's western land border that sought to join NATO. A decade before the Euromaidan, the Kremlin had raised objections against the membership aspirations of Estonia and Latvia in the Euro-Atlantic military alliance. However, despite this significant discord in their relations, Russia refrained from resorting to any form of military intervention against the Baltic countries (Demko, 2022). Considering the significant number of ethnic Russians that resided in these countries, the Kremlin's decision to use force against its "ethnic brethren" and not against its Baltic neighbours was deprived of a proper explanation in the literature. Given the fact that Ukraine's Donbas and Estonia's Narva were home to a sizeable ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population, what led to the Russian military incursion in the former and not in the latter was similarly left as an unaddressed matter. The geographical adjacency of the city of Narva to Russia, a fact previously mentioned in this thesis, adds an

extra layer of oddity to this inquiry that the relevant academic literature ignored or failed to discuss (Demko, 2022).

While there is surely more than a reason for this outcome, based on the pledge of realist-driven thought, a similar reaction from Russia would be expected in both cases. According to Mearsheimer (2014, pp. 5-6), great powers, especially those with a realist foreign policy tradition, tend to be susceptible and reactive to potential threats in their immediate geographical vicinity. However, as this specific armed conflict shows, the reality on the ground has proven to be more complex than any single political theory can fully capture. For that reason, the theoretical framework of this research study, as explained in detail in the second chapter, relied on two separate, frequently contradictory, schools of thought: classical (also referred to as realist) and critical geopolitics. Within this framework, this thesis, while acknowledging the realist and neo-realist arguments regarding what was seen as the provocative policies of the West against Russia during the post-Cold War period, interprets the drastic response of Moscow in 2014 in light of this country's identity-related issues *vis-à-vis* the West and Ukraine.

To remind briefly, classical geopolitics argues that geographical factors profoundly impact how political systems operate in the global sphere. It portrays a one-sided interplay between geography (subject) and state behaviours (object). By doing that, the classical approach seeks to generate anticipatory analyses that can help to make sense of global events, envision future threats, and identify potential opportunities for cooperation. The critical version of geopolitics, on the other hand, departs from refuting the very premise of its predecessor by remarking on the impact of power dynamics and interests in shaping political processes. Thereby, in contrast to the classical approach, it argues that the global political landscape is primarily shaped by human agency (subject), rather than geography (object). In line with this assertion, the critical approach considers the value of a geographical setting to be firmly tied to human perception and comprehension. Based on this subjective nature, critical geopolitics sees identity formation (both of Self and Others) as an integral part of political mapping. Lastly, this political theory places significant emphasis on the strategic employment of geopolitical narratives in political discourse with the aim of guiding national and international public opinion.

To put it more clearly, from the classical geopolitical perspective, it was not unexpected that the Donbas, a borderline territory of the "Heartland" with immense economic and demographic potential, became a battleground between Russia and Ukraine. This foresight also explains the full-blown invasion that took place eight years later in Ukraine, as this country has been defined in a similar way, a polity positioned on the edge of Europe, adjacent to the Black Sea, with substantial demographic and economic capabilities. However, in the popular academic discourse, the predominant perspective on both the war in the Donbas region and the wider Russia-Ukraine Crisis has been framed within the context of what has been referred to as the "new Cold War" between Russia and the West (see Mearsheimer, 2014; Trenin, 2014; Kanet, 2015; Chengyi, 2017; Dibb, 2022).

The realist and neo-realist perspectives argue that the EU-NATO dual expansion; the West's controversial military involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in 1994 and 1995), Yugoslavia (in 1999), Iraq (in 2003), and Libya (in 2011); and its perceived interference in internal affairs of Russia's formal allies under the guise of color revolutions securitised the Donbas and Ukraine in the strategic thinking of Moscow. Consequently, as per the prevalent realist-driven viewpoint, the Kremlin, after the triumph of the Maidan protest movement, took measures to create a buffer zone in eastern Ukraine, administered by its local sympathisers, to hinder the advancement of the West's sphere of influence towards Russia.

However, as previously emphasised, the realist and neo-realist approaches fell short in providing an adequate explanation as to why the similar circumstances failed to prompt Russia to respond comparably towards the integration of Estonia, Latvia, and even Finland into the Western security framework (see Demko, 2022). This thesis, under critical geopolitics, compensates for the realist and neo-realist shortcomings by signifying the "identity crisis" of Russia as the root cause of the war in the Donbas. In this regard, the critical argument on the inherent connection between geography and identity holds particular significance in comprehending the exclusive attitude of Russia towards Ukraine. This thesis analysed the public statements made by the state leaders of Russia and Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 to reveal the hidden traces of the identity component of the war in the Donbas.

In this regard, the fourth chapter of this thesis provided a detailed explanation of how the seeds of the identity confusion of Russia were planted in this country in the eighteenth century. It explored the beginning of the perception of the West as both the positive and negative "Other" of Russia. Concurrently, it shed light on the intellectual debates with regard to this country's own "Self", which revolved around the abiding question of whether Russia constitutes an integral part of the Western civilisation. After the downfall of the Iron Curtain, this ancient inquiry came to the fore once again when Moscow started to articulate Russia's return to the Western civilisation. The Russian leaders from Gorbachev to Putin expressed a desire to integrate their country into the Western alliance, especially into NATO. Eventually, instead of finding a satisfactory and conclusive solution, the security concerns of Russia were turned a deaf ear. As the West adamantly refused to accept Russia as one of its own, the Kremlin has become increasingly sensitive to the persistent enlargement of a hostile sphere of influence along its western borders and the repeated violations of international law. This perception has led to a more cautious and reactive approach from Russia towards potential threats in its immediate neighbourhood. On this basis, this thesis, drawing on the theoretical assumptions of critical geopolitics on identity, argues that the Kremlin's concerns were not only related to the eastward expansion of the Western sphere of influence but also to the persistent exclusion of their country outside of its borders (see Roberts, 2017). As this relevant chapter demonstrated, the disillusionment of Russia with the West was observed in numerous speeches delivered by President Putin between 2014 and 2022 (see Putin, 2014a, March 18; Putin, 2015b, September 28; Putin, 2016a, January 11; Putin, 2016b, January 12; Putin, 2019, November 22; Putin, 2020b, October 26; Putin, 2022a, February 21; Putin, 2022b, February 24).

Thereafter, the chapter in question illustrated how Russia has historically rejected the notion of Ukraine as a political entity, the Ukrainian people as a nation, and Ukrainian as a language that is separate and distinct from Russia, Russians, and Russian. The genesis of what has been known as the "All-Russian people" narrative was devised in the eighteenth century, when most of the Ukrainian lands fell under the Russian rule. This imaginary scenario gained widespread recognition throughout the Russian Empire in the subsequent centuries, with the Ukrainian nation being

commonly referred to as "Little Russians". Prior to the Bolsheviks' recognition of Ukrainians as a nation in their own right, this prevailing narrative, accompanied by the assimilative policies, had led to a significant erosion of Ukrainian culture under the Russian Empire. This corrosion persisted under the Soviet rule with the exception of a brief period under Lenin, giving way to a bilingual state in 1991. In addition to this linguistic issue, Ukraine, due to the longstanding settlement policies, was also confronted with the formidable challenge of accommodating a substantial Russian population, some of which resided in the Donbas region. Thus, the much-awaited independence of Ukraine did not lead to the immediate formulation of nationalist historiography in this country. The politicisation of Ukrainian historiography and identity only began during the tenure of President Yushchenko. This process gained momentum later under the post-Euromaidan governments.

During this period, the Kremlin, in response to Kyiv's "European choice", resorted to the centuries-old narrative of denying the very existence of Ukrainian nationhood. The shift in the Russian attitude towards Ukraine was evident in the official statements made by President Putin between 2014 and 2022. What was widely believed to be the first Eastern Slavic state was at the heart of his narrative. In his notorious speech announcing the annexation of the Crimea, the Russian leader, celebrated Kievan *Rus'* as a proto-Russian state and characterised Ukrainians "inseparable" component of the broader Russian nation (see Putin, 2014a, March 18). In order to strengthen the Russian claim over Ukraine, President Putin, in his public declarations from 2014 to 2022, made also references to several historical events and concepts. In the context of this thesis, the emphasis on *Novorossiya*, an administrative unit in the Russian Empire containing the Donbas within its borders, was particularly important, as this region was accordingly detached from the Russian Motherland by the first Bolsheviks (see Putin, 2022a, February 21). Further to that, President Putin, in an attempt to vindicate his country's allegations of ethnic discrimination and genocide committed against Russians in the Donbas, frequently utilised narratives associating the post-Euromaidan governments with Bandera's OUN-UPA (see Putin, 2014a, March 18; Putin, 2022b, February 24).

On the other hand, the Ukrainian leaders, in their official statements from 2014 to 2022, depicted Ukraine as the primary inheritor of the Kievan *Rus'* (see Zelenskyy,

2021a, July 28; Zelenskyy, 2021b, August 24), as the administrative capital of this ancient state was located inside the Ukrainian lands and subsequently spread over the territory of the Russian claimant from the Ukrainian core. Furthermore, the Ukrainian leadership, in order to break down the pre-eminent stereotypes in the West portraying them as Russians, insistently identified their country with the Western civilisation (see BBC, 2014, February 24; Kyiv Post, 2014b, June 7). In this regard, the Ukrainiannes was defined by the acclaimed values of the West, such as democracy, freedom, and human rights, rather than by ethnic background or linguistic preferences (see Kyiv Post, 2014b, June 7; Kyiv Post, 2014c, September 19; Zelenskyy, 2019a, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2019c, October 13; Zelenskyy, 2020a, January 22; Zelenskyy, 2020c, June 28; Zelenskyy, 2020f, November 21). Thereby, the Ukrainian leadership sought to nurture solidarity among Ukrainians and counter the Kremlin's serious, yet unevidenced, ethnic discrimination and genocide allegations. The Ukrainian leadership frequently emphasised the unity of all Ukrainian people, regardless of their ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, to strengthen the civic nation-building process in this country and repudiate the Russian claims (see Zelenskyy, 2019a, August 24; Zelenskyy, 2019c, October 13; Zelenskyy, 2020a, January 22; Zelenskyy, 2020c, June 28; Zelenskyy, 2020e, August 24).

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Bu tezin temel amacı Donbas'taki savaşın ve devam etmekte olan Rusya-Ukrayna savaşının altında yatan nedenlere ışık tutmaktır. Bu bağlamda, Donbas'taki savaşa ve daha geniş anlamda Rusya-Ukrayna krizine ilişkin akademik çalışmalardaki yerleşik anlatıların ötesine geçmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Rusya Federasyonu tarafından desteklenen Rusya yanlısı ayrılıkçılar ile Batı tarafından desteklenen Ukrayna hükümeti arasında bu ülkenin doğusunda patlak veren silahlı çatışma, 21 Kasım 2013 ile 22 Şubat 2014 tarihleri arasında gerçekleşen ve "Onur Devrimi" olarak da bilinen AvroMeydan Devrimi'nin başarılı olmasının ardından ortaya çıkmıştır. 25 Şubat 2010'dan bu yana görevde bulunan Cumhurbaşkanı Viktor Yanukoviç'in Avrupa Birliği (AB) ile imzalanması planlanan Ortaklık Antlaşması'nı (İng. *Association Agreement*) rafa kaldırması üzerine başlayan ve ülkenin başkenti Kıyiv'de Batı yanlısı göstericilerin önderlik ettiği AvroMeydan protesto hareketi, söz konusu devlet başkanını devirmiş ve ülkenin doğu ve güney kesimlerinde Rusya'nın kışkırttığı karşıt bir protesto hareketinin doğmasına sebep olmuştur. Bu süreçte, Batı bloku, Kıyiv'i siyasi otoritenin yerelleştirilmesi yönünde teşvik etse de, Ukrayna hükümetinin ülkenin doğusunda başlattığı terörle mücadele kampanyasına destek vermiştir. Rusya ise 24 Şubat 2022 tarihindeki topyekün işgaline kadar açıkça kabul etmese de, Donbaslı ayrılıkçılara siyasi ve askeri yardım da dâhil olmak üzere gizli ve açık destek vermiştir. Rusya ve Batı'nın Doğu Ukrayna'da dolaylı olarak karşı karşıya gelmesi, Donbas'taki bu bölgesel savaşın Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde yeniden canlandığı iddia edilen jeopolitik rekabet çerçevesinde yorumlanmasını beraberinde getirmiştir.

Donbas, Doğu Ukrayna'nın bazı kısımlarını (ağırlıklı olarak Donetsk ve Luhansk *oblast*larını) ve Güney Rusya'nın belirli bölümlerini (ağırlıklı olarak Rostov *oblast*ı) kapsayan Donetsk kömür havzasının topraklarını belirtmek için kullanılan resmî

olmayan bir terimdir. Daha açık belirtmek gerekirse, Donbas bölgesinin sınırları, Donetsk'in orta bölgesini, Luhansk'ın güneyini ve Rostov'un batısını kapsamaktadır. Bu bölgenin Donetsk, Luhansk ve Rostov *oblast*larınının geri kalan kısımlarından farklı kimliksel özellikler taşıması, Donbas'ın sınırlarının net olarak belirtilmesini gerekli kılmıştır. Buna ek olarak, Donbas bölgesinin Ukrayna'nın geri kalanından ayıran kendine has bölgesel bir kimliğe sahip olduğunu ve bu kimliğin tarihin akışında şekillendiğini de belirtmek gerekir. Ancak Kremlin'in 2014'ten bu yana yoğun bir şekilde yaptığı propagandanın aksine, Donbas kimliği Ukrayna karşıtı ve Rusya yanlısı hislere eğilimli olmamakla birlikte, temelde antiemperyalist ve merkez karşıtı olarak tanımlanmıştır.

Sovyet sonrası Ukrayna toplumu, ulusal kimlik (etnik ve sivil), dil (Ukraynaca ve Rusça), tarih (Kıyiv'in ve Moskova'nın tarih anlatısı) ve dış politika (Batılı örgütlere entegrasyon ve Rusya ile yakın işbirliğini sürdürme) konularında birbiriyle çatışan görüşlerle karakterize edilmiştir. Her ne kadar bu toplumsal bölünmeye zaman zaman bölgesel bir karakter atfedilse de, Ukrayna'nın kendine özgü toplumsal yapısı, milliyetçi Batı ve Merkez Ukrayna ile Rusya yanlısı Güney ve Doğu Ukrayna etrafına inşa edilmiş bir ikili tasvirden çok daha karmaşıktır. Aksine birbiriyle çatışan kimlikler ve görüşler bir arada var olmuş ve bölgeler arasında kimi zaman eşit olmayan bir biçimde dağılmış olsa da Ukrayna topraklarının her karışına sinmiştir. Donbas bölgesi, ağırlıklı olarak Moskova'nın tarih anlatısını benimseyen, Ukrayna'nın Rusya yanlısı bir dış politika benimsemesi gerektiğine inanan ve etnik açıdan çeşitli olmakla birlikte ağırlıklı olarak Rusça konuşan bir nüfus ile bu sınıflandırmada ikinci kategori içerisinde konumlanmıştır.

1991 yılında Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetler Birliği'nin (SSCB) dağılmasını takiben, Donbas halkı arasında siyasi otoritenin yerelleştirilmesi yönünde bir talep ortaya çıkmıştır. Donbas halkının özerklik talepleri, Ukrayna'nın bağımsızlığını kazanmasının ardından belirli aralıklarla somut eylemler halinde ülke gündemine gelmiştir. Bunlardan en dikkat çekici olanı, 1994'te istişare amacıyla düzenlenen yerel referandumda Donetsk seçmeninin üçte ikisinin siyasi otoritenin yerelleştirilmesi yönünde oy vermesi olmuştur. Bu referandumun sonucu, Donbas halkının bölgelerinin özellikle ekonomik meselelerde daha fazla söz sahibi olma

yönünde artan arzusunun göstergesi olarak yorumlanmıştır. Bununla birlikte, referandumu takip eden yıllarda, Kıyiv'in sivil bir ulus inşası anlayışını kararlı bir şekilde benimsemesi ve uygulaması nedeniyle, federalleşme yönündeki talepler toplum nezdinde çekiciliğini büyük ölçüde kaybetmiştir. Etnik olmayan ulus inşası projesine paralel olarak, Ukrayna, dış politikasında dengeli bir yaklaşım benimsemiş, hem Rusya'ya hem de Batı'ya eşit mesafede durmuştur. Ukrayna'nın uluslararası siyasetteki bu duruşunun önce Turuncu Devrim'i (22 Kasım 2004–23 Ocak 2005) ve daha sonra da AvroMeydan Devrimi'ni takip eden dönemlerde Batı lehine olarak değişmeye başlaması, Donbas halkının, özerklik taleplerini yeniden sesli olarak dile getirmesine neden olmuştur. Fakat Ukrayna'dan ayrılma isteğinin göstergesi olmayan bu zayıf federalleşme çağrısı, yalnızca AvroMeydan'dan sonra silahlı bir çatışmaya evrilmiştir. Bunun ardındaki başlıca neden, Rusya'nın bu bölgedeki uzun yıllardır süregelen faaliyetlerini 2014'ten itibaren militarize etmeye başlaması olmuştur. Donbas'a direkt komşu olan Rusya, Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasını takiben bu bölgedeki siyasi ve kültürel nüfuzunu korumayı başarmıştır. 2014 yılından itibaren ise bu bölgede, Donbaslılar arasında Rusya yanlısı hisleri beslemek ve harekete geçirmek için yoğun çalışmalar içinde bulunmuştur. Rusya, bu bölgede 12 Nisan 2014'te yerel bir silahlı çatışma başlamasında rol oynayarak Ukrayna'daki bölücülük faaliyetlerinde kısmi olarak başarılı olmuş olsa da, bu projenin bölge nüfusunun yalnızca küçük ve radikal bir kesimi tarafından desteklendiğini belirtmek gerekir. Ukrayna'dan ayrılma ve Rusya ile birleşme çağrılarının da aynı şekilde bütün Donbaslılar tarafından benimsenmediği vurgulanmalıdır.

Ortaya çıkmasında Rusya'nın önemli role sahip olduğu bu bölgesel savaşta, 2014'ten bu yana on dört binden fazla insan hayatını kaybetmiştir. Bununla birlikte, aralarında sivillerin de olduğu binlerce kişi yaralanmıştır. Bu süreçte, Ukrayna hükümeti kontrolündeki bölgeler ile Rusya destekli ayrılıkçıların kontrolündeki bölgeler arasındaki temas hattı (İng. *line of contact*) ciddi bir insani krize sahne olmuştur. Donbaslı yasal olmayan ayrılıkçı makamların ve Ukrayna hükümetinin Belarus'un Minsk şehrinde yazılı olarak verdikleri taahhütlere karşın, 2014 yılından bu yana Avrupa Güvenlik ve İşbirliği Teşkilatı (AGİT) kapsamında gerçekleşen ve Almanya, Fransa, Rusya ve Ukrayna arasında devlet başkanları seviyesinde düzenlenen Normandiya Formatı'nın desteğiyle yürütülen arabuluculuk çabaları sonuç

getirmemiştir. Savaşan tüm tarafların ve onların yabancı destekçilerinin Minsk I (5 Eylül 2014) ve Minsk II (12 Şubat 2015) anlaşmalarının gereklerine uyma konusundaki isteksizlikleri ve beceriksizlikleri, 2022 yılının Şubat ayında yerini Donbas bölgesinin ötesine uzanan daha büyük, daha kanlı ve daha maliyetli bir savaşa bırakmıştır.

Rusya-Ukrayna krizi, ortaya çıktığı 2014 yılından bu yana, pek çok akademik çalışmanın konusu olmuştur. AB ve Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü'nün (NATO) üyelik sınırlarını doğuya doğru genişletmesi, Batı'nın uluslararası alanda yürüttüğü tek taraflı politikaları ve yine Batı'nın eski Sovyet ülkelerinde liberal demokrasiyi teşvik etmesi yaygın olarak uluslararası politikada süregelen bu çalkantılı dönemin ardındaki temel nedenler olarak kabul edilmiştir. Bu kriz, Rusya'nın Kırım Yarımadası'nı yasadışı olarak ilhak etmesi (20 Şubat–26 Mart 2014), Donbas'taki savaş ve 24 Şubat 2022'de başlayan ve bu tezin yazıldığı dönemde devam etmekte olan Rusya'nın topyekün askeri işgali olarak üç ana aşamada şekillenmiştir. Rusya-Ukrayna krizinin bir evresi olarak Ukrayna'nın Donbas bölgesinde ortaya çıkan ve Rusya'nın aktif olarak dâhil olduğu bu bölgesel savaş, Rusya-Ukrayna krizine ilişkin hâkim akademik görüş ışığında yorumlanmıştır. Realist ve neorealist teorilerden beslenen bu bakış açısı, Kremlin'in Doğu Ukrayna'da yerel sempatizanları tarafından yönetilen bir tampon bölge kurma yönündeki çalışmalarının, Batı'nın açık olarak ilan etmediği etki alanının (İng. *sphere of influence*) Rusya'nın batı sınırına ulaşmasını engellemeye yönelik olduğunu iddia etmiştir. Ancak bu görüş, Batı'nın AB ve NATO aracılığı ile oluşturduğu etki alanının, Rusya'nın hâlihazırda kuzeybatı kara sınırında konuşlanmış olduğu gerçeğini hesaba katmamaktadır. Rusya, AvroMeydan Devrimi'nden on yıl önce, Estonya ve Letonya'nın AB ve NATO'ya üye olması sonucunda Batı ile doğrudan sınır komşusu olmuştur. Ukrayna gibi Baltık devletlerinin de bir zamanlar Sovyetler Birliği'nin parçası olduğu ve sınırları içerisinde kayda değer büyüklükte bir etnik Rus ve Rusça konuşan topluluğa ev sahipliği yaptığı göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, bu ülkelerin Batı blokuna üyeliklerinin Rusya tarafından herhangi bir örtülü ve/veya açık askeri müdahaleye sebebiyet vermemesi realist ve neorealist bakış açısının açıklamakta yetersiz kaldığı bir konu olmuştur. Büyük güçlerin, özellikle de realist bir dış politika geleneğine sahip olanlarının, sınırlarına yakın bölgelerdeki potansiyel tehlikelere karşı, söz

konusu ülkenin ya da ülkelerin niteliklerine bakılmaksızın, tepki verme eğiliminde olacakları temel vaadi düşünüldüğünde, Rusya'nın Baltık ülkelerinin üyelikleri konusundaki tepkisizliği, Donbas'taki savaşın ve Rusya-Ukrayna krizinin arkasında başka nedenler olabileceği ihtimalini doğurmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, bu tez, sahadaki gerçekliğin herhangi bir siyasal teorinin tek başına yorumlayabileceğinden daha karmaşık olduğu görüşüne dayanarak, hem Donbas'taki bölgesel savaşın hem de Rusya-Ukrayna krizinin realist jeopolitik bir anlatı ile tam anlamıyla anlaşılmasının mümkün olmadığını savunmaktadır. Bu nedenden ötürü, Donbas'taki savaşı ve Rusya-Ukrayna krizini anlamlandırma gayretinde olan bu tez, teorik çerçevesini çoğunlukla birbiriyle çelişen ancak bir o kadar da birbirini tamamlayan klasik ve eleştirel jeopolitik üzerine kurmuştur. Bu tez, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde Batı'nın Rusya'ya yönelik kışkırtıcı olduğu iddia edilen rolüne ilişkin realist ve neorealist argümanları kabul ederken, Moskova'nın 2014'teki sert tepkisini, bu ülkenin Batı ve Ukrayna'ya ilişkin kimlik sorununun analiz edilmesi ile anlaşılacağını savunmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, Rus ve Ukraynalı devlet liderlerinin, 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar kamuoyuna yönelik açıklamalarını analiz ederek, Rusya'nın Batı ve Ukrayna'ya ilişkin kimlik sorunlarının izlerini Donbas'taki savaş bağlamında sürmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunu yaparken, aynı zamanda, kimliği coğrafya yapımının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak gören eleştirel jeopolitiğin temel argümanlarını doğrulamayı hedeflemektedir.

Realist veya geleneksel jeopolitik olarak da adlandırılan klasik jeopolitik, coğrafi faktörlerin küresel siyasetin işleyişini derinden etkilediğini savunan bir siyasal teoridir. Buna göre, coğrafya (özne) ile devletlerin davranışları (nesne) arasında tek yönlü etkileşime dayanan bir ilişki bulunmaktadır. Bu varsayıma dayanarak, klasik jeopolitik, küresel olayları anlamlandırmaya ve gelecekteki tehditleri ve potansiyel işbirliği fırsatlarını belirlemeye yardımcı olacak analizler üretmeyi amaçlar. Öte yandan, jeopolitiğin eleştirel yaklaşımı, uluslararası sistemdeki güç dinamiklerinin ve devletlerin çıkarlarının siyasi süreçleri şekillendirmedeki etkisine dikkat çeker ve selefinin coğrafyanın siyasal süreçlerin şekillenmesinde başat etken olduğuna ilişkin savını reddeder. Küresel siyasetin coğrafyadan (nesne) ziyade, insan (özne) tarafından şekillendirildiğini ileri sürer. Bu doğrultuda, eleştirel yaklaşım, coğrafi yerlerin değerinin insanın algı ve kavrayışına bağlı olduğunu savunur. Eleştirel

jeopolitik, hem "Benliğe" (İng. *Self*) hem de "Ötekiye" (İng. *Other*) ilişkin kimlik oluşumunun, harita çiziminin ayrılmaz bir parçası olduğunu iddia eder. Son olarak, bu teori, ulusal ve uluslararası kamuoyunu yönlendirmek amacıyla jeopolitik anlatıların siyasi söylemde sık sık stratejik nedenlerle kullanıldığına dikkat çeker.

Klasik perspektiften bakıldığında, Avrasya kara parçasının sınır bölgesinde bulunan ve ekonomik ve demografik olarak yadsınamayacak bir potansiyele sahip Donbas bölgesinin, Rusya ile Ukrayna arasında bir savaş alanı haline gelmesi beklenmedik değildir. Bu yorum, sekiz yıl sonra Avrupa'nın ucunda konumlanmış, Karadeniz'e kıyısı olan ve önemli demografik ve ekonomik kapasiteye sahip bir ülke olan Ukrayna'da meydana gelen topyekün işgali de açıklamaktadır. Ancak daha önce de belirtildiği üzere, akademik çalışmalarda hem Donbas bölgesindeki savaş hem de Rusya-Ukrayna krizi yaygın olarak Rusya ile Batı arasındaki "yeni Soğuk Savaş" olarak adlandırılan süreç çerçevesinde yorumlanmıştır. Realist ve neorealist teorilerden beslenen bu popüler anlatıya göre, AB-NATO'nun eş zamanlı olarak sınırlarını doğuya doğru genişletmesi; Batı'nın Bosna-Hersek'te (1994 ve 1995), Yugoslavya'da (1999), Irak'ta (2003) ve Libya'daki (2011) tek taraflı olarak yürüttüğü tartışmalı askeri müdahaleleri ve Batı'nın renkli devrimler (İng. *Color Revolutions*) kisvesi altında Rusya'nın yakın çevresinde (Rus. *blizhneye zarubezhye*) bulunan devletlerin içişlerine müdahale ettiği algısı, Moskova'nın stratejik düşünce dünyasında Donbas ve Ukrayna'nın sıkı sıkıya güvenlik ile ilişkilendirilmesine neden olmuştur. Ancak daha önce de vurgulandığı üzere, hâkim realist ve neorealist bakış açısı, benzer koşulların neden Rusya'nın Estonya, Letonya ve hatta Finlandiya'nın AB ve/veya NATO'ya entegrasyonuna benzer bir tepki göstermediğini açıklamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu tez, eleştirel jeopolitik çerçevesinde, Rusya'nın "kimlik krizini" Donbas'taki savaşın temel nedeni olarak göstererek realist ve neorealist analizlerin eksiklikleri telafi etmektedir.

Rusya'nın Batı'ya ilişkin kimlik sorununun kökleri on sekizinci yüzyıla kadar uzanmaktadır. Batı, bu tarihten itibaren, Rusya'nın düşünsel dünyasında hem pozitif hem de negatif "Öteki" olarak algılanmıştır ve bu ülkenin kendi "Benliğine" ilişkin entelektüel tartışmaları şekillendirmiştir. Uzun süredir süregelen Rusya'nın Batı medeniyetinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olup olmadığı konusu, bu entelektüel araştırmanın merkezinde yer almıştır. 1991 yılında Soğuk Savaş'ın bitmesinden

sonra Moskova'nın Rusya'nın Batı medeniyetine dönüşünü dile getirmeye başlaması, bu konuyu bir kez daha gündeme getirmiştir. Bu süreçte, Mihail Gorbaçov'dan Vladimir Putin'e bütün Rus liderleri, ülkelerini Batı ittifakına, özellikle de NATO'ya, entegre etmek istediklerini devamlı olarak dile getirmişlerdir. Ancak Batı, ilerleyen yıllarda, Rusya'nın bu isteklerine ve artan güvenlik kaygılarına ilişkin tatmin edici bir yanıt bulmakta başarısız olmuştur. Batı, Rusya'yı kendisinden biri olarak kabul etmeyi inatla reddederken, Kremlin, batı sınırları boyunca hasım olarak gördüğü bir etki alanının genişlemesine ve uluslararası hukukun tekrar tekrar ihlal edilmesine karşı giderek daha duyarlı hale gelmiştir. Bu algı, Rusya'nın Putin yönetimi altında, yakın çevresindeki olası tehditlere karşı daha sert bir yaklaşım benimsemesine yol açmıştır. Eleştirel jeopolitiğin kimlik konusundaki teorik argümanlarından yararlanan bu tez, Kremlin'in kaygılarının yalnızca Batı'nın etki alanının doğuya doğru genişlemesiyle ilgili olmadığını, aynı zamanda ülkelerinin katılmak istedikleri bu özel kulübün fiziksel ve zihinsel sınırlarının ısrarla dışında bırakılmasıyla da ilgili olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Rusya'nın bu konuya ilişkin görüşleri, Devlet Başkanı Putin'in 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar olan kamuoyu demeçlerinde açıkça görülmektedir.

Bununla birlikte, Rusya'nın "Benliği" ile ilgili kimlik sorunu meselesi yalnızca Batı ile sınırlı kalmamıştır. Bu sorun, Rus ulusal kimliği ve tarih yazıcılığının toprakları üzerine dayandığı Ukrayna'yı da kapsamaktadır. 1991 yılında Ukrayna'nın bağımsızlığını ilan etmesi, Rusya'nın ulusal kimliğine ve tarih yazıcılığına ilişkin iddialarını dolaylı olarak da olsa ciddi bir tehdit altına sokmuştur. Fakat Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasını takiben, Kıyiv ile Moskova arasında bu konuya ilişkin önemli bir siyasi sorun yaşanmamıştır. Yirmi birinci yüzyılda, Batı ve Rusya arasındaki yenilendiği iddia edilen jeopolitik rekabette Ukrayna'nın edindiği rol, ulusal kimlik ve tarih konusunda Ukrayna ile Rusya arasında amansız bir mücadele başlamasına neden olmuştur. Kıyiv'in 2014'teki "Avrupa tercihi", Moskova'nın "etnik kardeşlerini" bu tarihten itibaren Rusya'dan farklı ve ayrı bir ulus olarak görmeyi açıkça reddetmesine yol açmıştır. Aynı şekilde, Kremlin'in Ukrayna'ya yönelik 2014'ten beri yürüttüğü saldırgan politikaları, Ukrayna'nın siyasi ve entelektüel seçkinlerinin, Ukrayna ulusunun varlığını reddeden Rus tarih yazıcılığındaki köklü anlatılarla her zamankinden daha sert bir mücadele yürütmesine neden olmuştur.

Rusya tarihsel olarak Ukrayna'yı, Ukrayinleri ve Ukraynaca'yı, Rusya'dan, Ruslardan ve Rusça'dan ayrı ve farklı bir siyasi bir varlık, ulus ve dil olduğunu reddeden bir anlayış benimsemiştir. "Rus halkları" (İng. *All-Russian People*) olarak bilinen anlatının doğuşu, Ukrayna topraklarının büyük bir kısmının Rus egemenliği altına girdiği on sekizinci yüzyıla dayanmaktadır. Oldukça kurgusal olan bu anlatı, sonraki yüzyıllarda imparatorluğun her köşesinde yaygın bir şekilde kullanılmaya başlanmıştır. Bu anlatı, Ukrayin ulusunun "Küçük Ruslar" (Rus. *Malorossy*) olarak adlandırılmasına neden olmuştur. 1922 yılında Bolşeviklerin Ukrayinleri başlı başına bir ulus olarak tanımasına kadar, bu hâkim anlatı, sömürgeci politikalarla birlikte, Rus İmparatorluğu yönetimi altında Ukrayin kültürünün önemli ölçüde erozyona uğramasına neden olmuştur. Bu kültürel bozulma, 1917'den 1924'e kadar olan Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) liderliğindeki kısa dönem dışında, Sovyet yönetimi altında da devam etmiştir. Ukrayin kültürünün aldığı bu ağır darbe, bu ülkenin 1991'de bağımsızlığını ilan ettiğinde kendini iki dilli bir devlet olarak bulmasına yol açmıştır. Buna ek olarak, uzun yıllar devam eden iskân politikaları nedeniyle, bir kısmı Donbas bölgesinde ikamet eden önemli miktarda Rus nüfusunu sınırları içerisinde barındırma sorunuyla da karşı karşıya kalmasına neden olmuştur. Dolayısıyla, Ukrayna'nın uzun yıllardır beklenen bağımsızlığı, bu ülkede milliyetçi bir kimlik anlayışının benimsenmesi ve yine milliyetçi bir tarih yazıcılığını beraberinde getirmemiştir. Ukrayna kimliğinin ve tarih yazıcılığının siyasallaşması ve millîleşmesi ancak Cumhurbaşkanı Viktor Yuşçenko (23 Ocak 2005–25 Şubat 2010) döneminde başlamıştır. Bu süreç daha sonra AvroMeydan sonrası hükümetlerin yönetimi altında ivme kazanmıştır.

AvroMeydan sonrasında Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya yönelik tutumundaki değişim, Devlet Başkanı Putin'in 2014 ve 2022 yılları arasında yaptığı resmî açıklamalarda açıkça gözlemlenmiştir. Tarihçiler arasında yaygın olarak Doğu Slav devletlerinin ilki olarak kabul edilen Kiev Knezliği (*c*. 879-1240) Putin'in Ukrayin ulusunun varlığını inkâr eden anlatısının merkezinde yer almıştır. Rus lider, Kırım'ın yasadışı ilhakını ilan eden 18 Mart 2014 tarihli konuşmasında, Kiev Knezliği'ni Rus devletlerinin ilki olarak tanımlamış ve Ukrayinleri büyük Rus ulusunun "ayrılmaz" bir bileşeni olarak nitelendirmiştir. Aynı şekilde, Putin, 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar yaptığı kamuoyu açıklamalarında, Rusya'nın Ukrayna üzerindeki iddiasını

güçlendirmek amacıyla birçok tarihi olaya ve kavrama da atıfta bulunmuştur. Bu tez kapsamında, Rus İmparatorluğu döneminde Donbas bölgesini de sınırları içinde bulunduran idari bir birim olan Yeni Rusya'ya (Rus. *Novorossiya*) yönelik vurgusu bilhassa önem taşımaktadır. Putin'e göre bu bölge, Lenin'in önderlik ettiği Bolşevikler tarafından siyasi amaç uğruna Rus anavatanından koparılmıştır. Buna ek olarak, Putin, 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar verdiği kamuoyu demeçlerinde ısrarla, ülkesinin Donbas'ta Ruslara ve Rusça konuşanlara karşı işlendiğini öne sürdüğü etnik ayrımcılık ve soykırım iddialarını haklı çıkarmak amacıyla, AvroMeydan sonrası hükümetleri Stepan Bandera (1909-1959) önderliğindeki Ukrayna Milliyetçileri Örgütü-Ukrayna İsyan Ordusu (*OUN-UPA*) ile ilişkilendirmiştir.

Öte yandan Ukraynalı liderler, 2014'ten 2022'ye kadar yaptıkları resmî açıklamalarda, bu kadim devletin idari başkentinin Ukrayna toprakları içinde yer alması ve Rusya'nın da içerisinde bulunduğu komşu ülkelerin topraklarına Ukrayna'dan yayılması nedeniyle, ülkelerini Kiev Knezliği'nin birincil mirasçısı olarak ilan etmişlerdir. Bu görüşe göre, Rusya Kiev Knezliği'ne yalnızca direkt olmayan bir miras talebinde bulunabilmektedir. Bununla birlikte, Ukraynalı liderler, Batı'da kendilerini Rus olarak tasvir eden basmakalıp yargıları yıkmak amacıyla, ülkelerini ısrarla Batı medeniyetinin bir parçası olarak tasvir etmişlerdir. Bu bağlamda, Ukrayna'nın ulusal kimliğini, etnik köken veya dil tercihlerinden ziyade, Batı'nın demokrasi, özgürlük ve insan hakları gibi kabul gören değerleri ile tanımlamışlardır. Bu vurguyu yaparken Kıyiv, Ukraynalılar arasında dayanışmayı artırmayı ve Kremlin'in tamamen asılsız olan etnik ayrımcılık ve soykırım iddialarına karşı koymayı amaçlamıştır. Bu dönemde yaptıkları birçok konuşmada Ukraynalı liderler, bu ülkedeki sivil ulus inşası sürecini güçlendirmek ve Rusya'nın iddialarını reddetmek için etnik kökenlere ve dini ve dilsel tercihlere bakılmaksızın tüm Ukrayna halkının birliğine ısrarla vurgu yapmışlardır.

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