

# UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN CONFLICT IN THE DONBAS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY: CHARACTER, ORIGINS, REASONS

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## ABSTRACT

**Object of research:** analysis of the works of modern foreign authors, which reflect the process of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas, which cast doubt on the European security system, has complicated the lives of millions of citizens. Clarification of the reasons that led to the amorphous national identity of the population of Donbas, rejection of Western values, mythical ideas about fascists-Banderites. Disclosure of the diversity of assessments of Western historiography regarding the origins and causes of the conflict, its nature. From a critical point of view, the work of "geopolitical realists" who are trying to minimize the Kremlin's actions in relation to Ukraine is considered.

**Investigated problem:** to show and prove that the revival of Russian neo-imperialism, which even after 1991 considered Ukraine a vassal, became the main external factor that led to the escalation of the conflict and its actual "freezing". The attention is focused on the reasons for the appearance of peculiar stereotypes of thinking and behavior of residents of the Donetsk basin, contrasted with the mentality of citizens of other regions, especially Western Ukraine. The cultural-historical split of Ukraine, which developed historically, could not be the cause of the armed conflict, even with the pole opposition "Lviv-Donetsk". Therefore, the separatist sentiments that appeared in Donbas at certain times were not a mass phenomenon even in 2014 because of this, it is impossible to explain Russian aggravation of relations between the elites of Kyiv and Donbas without analyzing external interference. The state of affairs was also aggravated by both sabotage of the Donbas elites, they did not recognize the legitimacy of the new government in Kyiv after February 2014, and by the mistakes made by the central government in Kyiv. Hasty and ill-conceived, according to Western experts, was the adoption by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of a law abolishing the regional status of the Russian language. The name of the military operations from the Kyiv side as "anti-terrorist operation" was doubtful. It was changed late.

**Main scientific results:** in fact, for the first time in the historiography of Ukraine, the latest works of Western scholars on the Ukrainian-Russian conflict have been analyzed. Conclusions are made about the inconsistency of the views of Western historians regarding the nature and causes of the conflict, the prospects for its settlement.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1. 1. The object of research**

The set of inconsistent both conceptually and from the point of view of conclusions works of foreign authors on the causes and process of the Ukrainian-Russian confrontation in the Donbas is considered (Ukraine). The sources of separatism in the Donbas (Ukraine), the ambivalence of the views of the local population, the role of the Donetsk elites and the actions of the Kremlin are analyzed.

### **1. 2. Problem description**

The military operations in the Donbas (Ukraine) of the proclamation of the so-called DPR and LPR significantly exacerbated the situation on the European continent. They aroused increased interest of Western scientists and societies, a lot of scientific publications appeared on the events of spring 2014 – spring 2020. The authors are trying to find out the background and specific causes of the conflict, the role of the central government in Kyiv and local elites in the Donbas in its origin and expansion. In the interpretation of these complex events, there is a striking divergence of views regarding the nature of the conflict, although among scientists it is not as polarized as between Ukraine and Russia. A significant part of Western scholars considers these events a civil war, complicated by the intervention of external forces – primarily Russia. Other historians and political scientists are inclined to believe that the events in Ukraine are part of the global rivalry of the great powers, cardinal changes in the balance of power on the world stage.

### **1. 3. Suggested solution to the problem**

There are a lot of works of Ukrainian researchers devoted to this problem, so we settled on a few of the most informative, analytical ones, published only in 2017 and 2019. Prof. Yu. Matsyievsky (National University of Ostroh Academy) was one of the first in Ukraine to raise the question of the assessment of events in the Donbas by foreign scientists. In his opinion, most of them consider them a civil war, others see a combination of phenomena, both public and “hybrid” warfare. It is important that Yu.Matsyievsky noted the fact that most analysts have previously formed ideas about the essence of crisis phenomena, although it is necessary to accurately determine the role of the Kremlin – or is it the initiator of the war, took advantage of the weakness of Ukraine? [1]. Since 2017, the School of Analysis of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has been following the changes in Ukrainian positions during the hostilities in the Donbas, and noted that scientists from both Ukraine and the West have noted an increase in civilian, rather than ethnic, identity in Ukraine. Yu.Matsyievsky, the authors of the article state different positions of Western scientists about the causes of the war, the coinciding characteristics of the mentality of the inhabitants of the West and the South and East of Ukraine [2]. According to Odessa researcher T. Malarenko, after the events of Maidan in late 2013 – early 2014, a vacuum of power arose, which was used by the local elite and Russia in Donbas, who did not want to lose control of Ukraine. In addition, this conflict is one of the kind, she emphasizes, from those that have occurred in Eastern Europe since the late 80s, that is, the crisis in the Donbas is not a purely post-Soviet phenomenon [3]. A collective analytical note by scientists of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine outlines the prospects for solving the problem of integrating Donbas and Crimea into Ukraine, which are still problematic because of the opposite positions of Ukraine and Russia [4]. Thus, in one article, Yu. Matsyievsky has an analysis of some foreign publications with problems, so the goal of deepening the scientific community of Ukraine’s understanding of the level of research on this problem in the West was the impetus for writing this work.

The aim of research is to highlight and critically analyze the work of foreign scientists, which examine the prerequisites of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict in the Donbas, the causes of its exacerbation.

## **2. Materials and methods**

Military operations in the Ukrainian Donbas have become, without exaggeration, the center of attention of the world community, especially the European one. Between 2014 and 2019, a significant number of scientific papers, journalistic reviews, analytical reports appeared that traced the causes and origins of the conflict, the level of engagement of political actors and the

population in it, various assumptions were made about ending the war and the fate of the occupied territories.

It should be emphasized that the crisis in Ukraine, complicated by the tragic events in the Donbas, was to some extent unexpected for many politicians and scientists, although they still knew the specifics of the region. But, for example, a researcher at Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California, G. Solchanyk R. wrote: In 1996, Ukraine, unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, showed regional stability. Ukraine has become a pillar of European security, a relative oasis of stability. At the same time, the scientific conference at the University of Birmingham on June 13–15, 1996 was called “From Soviet to Independent Ukraine: An Alarming Transformation” (opened by L. M. Kravchuk). Although it was argued by the speakers that Ukraine is ahead of other states – the former republics of the USSR in its reforms (the conclusion is inaccurate – the Authors), but has an irregular relationship with Russia, a deformed East-South Ukrainian identity, the use of the Ukrainian language has increased, but imperceptibly. In addition, it is unclear whether the West will consider Ukraine a zone of influence of Russia or a country that could become part of Europe [5].

For more than 20 years, A. Oliinykova (University of Technology Sydney) thought differently. She wrote that in the 80s of the 20th century in the West there was a wave of pessimism regarding the prospects for the development of democracy in Eastern Europe. After 1991, Ukraine experienced a process of social disintegration, changes in the system of spiritual values, and the creation of a new structure of social relations. By 2019, democratic gains remained more nominal than real. Almost every government, including the one created in 2014, sprang from corruption and nepotism. According to sociological data, in March 2013, 27 % of Ukrainians were accustomed to living in conditions of “forced adaptation”, and 25 % did not have a specific life strategy [6]. But the separatist movements had an advantage only in the Donbas and in the Crimea, eloquently testify to a certain difference between these regions from others. At the same time, M. Bojcun, professor of political science at Eastern Europe at the University of New York in London, drew attention in 2016 to a number of global causes of the crisis in Ukraine, against which the events in the Donbas became a certain part. In his opinion, the emergence in Ukraine of a new socio-economic system with elements of capitalism introduced a certain discomfort in the life of citizens. The negative factor was the isolation of Ukraine from the world community, the danger was the revival of Russian neo-imperialism, the rivalry between Russia and Europe for influence on Ukraine, the confrontation between the weakened USA and growing Russia in Europe [7].

In his thesis, I. Muradov (Izmir University) identified three groups of foreign scientists who interpret the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in different ways. The first of them (I. Todorov, S. Master, G. Wilson, T. Kuzio, T. Snyder, S. Ekelchik, S. Fisher, K. Liik) assure: Russia’s fault is unconditional, it clearly demonstrates its intention to keep Ukraine in its own sphere of influence, its non-recognition as an independent state, does not hide the ideology of militant imperialism. And for the professor at Stanford University, these events are Putin’s adventure. For a political analyst from the USA, S. Kudelia, the causes of the crisis are in Ukraine, because the protesters in the square also used violence, like the government of V. Yanukovich; the new government actively used nationalists in the fight against separatists, significantly exacerbated the situation [8]. Columbia University political science professor E. Giuliano believes that in the Donbas they never perceived the collapse of the Soviet Union as positive, and Russia gave birth to nostalgia for a stable Soviet past. That is why the refusal of the Donbas to submit to Kyiv turned out to be stronger than the influence of the Kremlin’s foreign policy on the region [9, 10]. Sharing this conclusion, associate professor at the University of California at San Diego D. Jesse Driscoll adds the fact that part of the population of Donbas acted on the Maidan and the presence of a power vacuum. The third group of scientists includes the so-called “geopolitical realists” (D. Mirsheimer, R. Sakva, S. M. Walt, D. Shapiro, S. Charap, H. Gardner, K.D. Holsti and others). For them, the decisive causes of the conflict were not the Kremlin’s actions, not the crisis in Ukraine, but a change in the world order, the result of a new bipolarity, NATO’s reluctance to recognize Ukraine as a buffer zone for Russia [11]. In practice, these methodological schools combine their evidence.

Professor K. Giles (Oxford University Conflict Studies Center) emphasizes that after 1991 Russia still considered its relations with the former Soviet republics in the form of “overlord-vassal”. According to the witty expression of Carnegie Endowment Consultant P. A. Goble in his

geography lessons, V. Putin explains that the entire former territory of the Soviet Union belongs to Russia. No wonder the British Parliament in 2009 stated: Russia poses a serious military threat to Ukraine. And they did not rule out a scenario where the Kremlin could send its troops to ensure the continued existence of the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol [12].

Some political scientists, on the contrary, do not even recognize this armed conflict international, although back in August 2014, officially there were more than a thousand Russian troops in the territory of Donbas [13].

Former NATO Secretary General J. Solana) said: “Understanding the Ukrainian crisis is not an easy thing.” Some analysts refer to the hostilities in the Donbas as the modern version of the second Boer War (1899–1902) or the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). At the same time, attention is drawn to the fact that in these conflicts the latest methods of confrontation were also used. Sometimes the events in the Donbas are called the “First World War with new technologies” [14]. There is logic in these statements: after all, in the Donbas, in parallel with the “hybrid war” (this term is not legal, but political), according to the senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations in Prague M. Galeotti, the “political war” continues. This term was first used in 1949 by the famous American diplomat D. Kennan [15].

Western scholars (as well as domestic ones) note a certain uniqueness of the Donbas region (although there is no complete identity between the Luhansk and Donetsk regions), many citizens have stable stereotypes of thinking and behavior that do not coincide with the mentality of citizens of other regions. It is enough to give a typical example: until 1991 there was Ukrainian society in Moscow, which included natives of all regions of Ukraine –except for Donetsk, because they had a separate society. It is no accident that Moscow Mayor Yu. Luzhkov donated the Tsar Cannon to Donetsk. The cultural isolation of Donbas was, as A. Osipian (Vanderbilt University) writes, was a consequence of both economic and political isolation. A. Portnov noted that since the 90s. XX century Ukrainian intellectuals considered the opposition of Lviv to Donetsk as a statement of two poles of Ukraine: “pro-European” and “Ukrainian” and “Soviet”, “pro-Russian” [16, 17].

That Ukraine was mentally split more culturally, historically, civilizationally than linguistically is not a phenomenon, points out Professor D. Sherr (Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain). After all, such states as England, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Canada are split, however, in 2015, only 20 % of Ukrainian considered the events in the Donbas a civil war. In January 2015, the UN stated: during 1992-2014. There were no ethnic, religious or linguistic conflicts recorded in Ukraine, and Russia from May 31, 1997 to February 22, 2014 did not file complaints about the persecution in Ukraine of national minorities, especially Russians. On the other hand, in 2014, 67 % of residents of Eastern Ukraine did not trust the authorities in Kyiv, but in May only 27 % of citizens agreed with the withdrawal of the Donbas from the state [18].

Professor-emeritus of History of Eastern Europe, University of Alberta J-P. Himka noted: it is difficult to determine to what extent separatism in the Donbas was formed internally, and what significance was external incitement. In any case, the disapproval by the inhabitants of the East of the events on the Maidan took place with the support of local authorities, certain incentives, as well as the influence of Russian information. It is enough to give an example when the tragic events in Odesa in May 2014 were broadcast by Russian television against the backdrop of the Lviv pogrom in July 1941 [19].

Analyzing the process of alienation of the Donbas from Kyiv after 2013, E. Giuliano wrote: many residents of Donbas did not like the charges from the central government for the Berkut fighters, because many of them were from Donbas. Irritation caused the decision of the Verkhovna Rada to repeal the law on the regional status of the Russian language, Russian propaganda actively used. It was this decision, although it was annulled, that helped the Kremlin create an atmosphere of fear and mass discontent in the Donbas. The name of the military operations on the part of Kyiv as “anti-terrorist operation” looked dubious, because the entire population fell under the “one comb” [9, 10]. Due to the use of the slogans of the OUN(b) on Maidan (although they were patriotic in nature – as a protest against the actions of Moscow), the Freedom party, as it was written by C. Carpinelli (University of Milan), seemed ideological The basis of the protests of 2013–2014 became “nationalist and racist extremism” [20].

To a large extent, the population of Donbas was political and passive, therefore, a key role in separatist actions, the American political scientist S. Kudelia is sure, was played by local elites

and some of the most active population engaged with an appropriate worldview. In addition, the government lost the monopoly on the use of force during the end of 2013 – the beginning of 2014, public opinion was polarized and counter-mobilization took place among the opposition forces. Members of law enforcement agencies in the Donbas recognized the new government as illegal and supported the separatists. The oligarchs also decided to deal with new authorities. Government support allowed the separatist movements to consolidate, and the unlimited use of force by government forces increased their support for the population [21].

But without Russian intervention, the separatists would in no case have been able to create their own republics and stay afloat. In fact, they became the organ of Russia, which the Kremlin instructed to wage war against Ukraine, concluded J. Hauter from the University College London [22]. Similarly, the professor of Ukrainian studies at the School of Slavic and East European Studies at the University College London A. Wilson argues without Russian sponsorship, the role of local elites, especially from the Yanukovych family, the creation of quasi-republics would be impossible [23]. Finally, one must not forget the intense information war on the part of Russia, which also brought distorted reports of mass violence, the suffering of the population of Donbas from the actions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, showed the Russians the victims of the “criminal regime” of Kyiv. There were attempts at virtual legitimization of non-existent objects – “the people of Donbas”, “Novorossiia”, the image of the “enemy” – “Ukrainian fascism” was created [24].

The prospects for resolving the conflict, according to S. Adrianopoli (Italy), are illusory, because for Russia, the retreat from the Crimea and Donbas will be interpreted as the second geopolitical catastrophe (the first – the collapse of the Soviet Union). The power in the Kremlin may vary, but the attitude to Ukraine from the point of view of geopolitics gives too little hope for any cardinal shifts [25].

#### **4. Result**

The analysis of the latest foreign literature indicates that the Ukraine-Russian conflict in the Donbas is analyzed by many scientists in Western Europe, the USA, and Canada. They note the extreme diversity of the situation, does not fit into linear dimensions, and not only from the civilizational rift in Ukrainian society. According to Western analysts, military operations in the Donbas are explained by the complex interweaving of internal and external factors, the ratio of which does not coincide among representatives of different methodological schools. The article notes that foreign scientists see a key role in the aggravation of the conflict in the separatist actions of local elites and Russian intervention. Indeed, most of the population of Donbas was apolitical, although it retained pro-Soviet stereotypes.

#### **5. Discussion**

The issue of displaced persons remained outside the research. It requires a separate analysis, since the very choice of a state for a temporary stay indicates a certain differentiation among residents depending on political and ideological preferences. It is also advisable to analyze the difference in views regarding the further genesis of Ukrainian-Russian relations between the population of Donbas (Ukraine) and is under the omophorion of Kyiv and the authorities of the DPR and LPR. It is advisable to consider the views of Western experts regarding the prospects for resolving the conflict in the distant or closer future.

#### **6. Conclusions**

Events in the Donbas are a conglomerate of geopolitical, economic, ideological, historical factors associated with changes in world and regional politics, ignoring the experience of the Cold War.

The mentality of the population of Donbas had its own specifics, having a more regional than the all-Ukrainian mentality, to a certain extent, made it easier for separatist leaders to instill a mood of estrangement from the new government in Kyiv.

To a large extent, the elements of separatism in the Donbas until 2014 were not scientifically investigated, because, unlike Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine after 1991, it was able to prevent a violent conflict and collapse.



In the conditions of the so-called “hybrid war”, with the predominance of non-military methods, the role of the information factor has significantly increased. It was, according to scientists, significantly contributed to the Kremlin’s intentions in mass disinformation of the population regarding the intentions of the new Kyiv authorities.

Given the polarity of the positions of Kyiv and Moscow, neo-imperialist rhetoric and Kremlin actions, the prospects for resolving the conflict remain problematic.

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