



**A Digital Open Source Investigation of  
How War Begins:  
Ukraine's Donbas in 2014**

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Declaration

I, Jakob Emanuel Hauter, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

This thesis incorporates previously published research from three academic articles and from one edited volume chapter (Hauter 2019; 2021a; 2021c; 2021d), which I wrote and published as part of my PhD project. I have adapted all incorporated sections so that they form an integral part of the thesis, as required by paragraph 5.1.2, point 2 of the UCL Research Degree Regulations (Chapter 5, Part A of the 2020-2021 UCL Academic Manual). The table below outlines which sections of my previous publications have been adapted and incorporated into which thesis sections.

<b>Incorporated Previous Publication</b>	<b>Thesis Section</b>
Hauter (2019, 91-96)	2.5.
Hauter (2019, 96-97)	1.4.1., 1.4.3., and 1.4.4.
Hauter (2019, 99-100)	10.2.
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Hauter (2021a, 13-14)	1.4.2.
Hauter (2021c, 136)	1.3.
Hauter (2021c, 137-139)	2.1.
Hauter (2021c, 140-143)	1.4.5.2., 1.4.5.3., and 1.4.5.6.
Hauter (2021c, 143-160)	2.2.-2.4. and 4.2.
Hauter (2021c, 161-163)	10.1. and 10.4.
Hauter (2021d, 1-2)	1.
Hauter (2021d, 2-6)	1.4.1. and 3.1.-3.4.
Hauter (2021d, 6-14)	5.
Hauter (2021d, 14-15)	10.3.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation demonstrates the usefulness of digital open source information (DOSI) for academic research on the causes of war through an in-depth case study of the conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donets Basin (Donbas). It argues that the current social science literature is in need of theoretical and methodological innovation to operate in the abundant but murky information environment that surrounds the Donbas war and other conflicts of the social media age. The result is a deep divide in the academic literature between scholars who emphasize domestic causes of the Donbas war and those who emphasize Russian involvement. To address this shortcoming, my dissertation develops new theoretical and methodological frameworks. My theoretical framework combines conflict escalation theory with the historical institutionalist concept of critical junctures. Based on this framework, I develop an escalation sequence model of the Donbas conflict which divides the formative phase of the war into six critical junctures. Moreover, my theoretical framework draws attention to intervention and delegation as two distinct modes of external actor involvement in these critical junctures. My methodological framework combines process tracing with the journalistic practice of DOSI analysis to shift the methodological focus towards source criticism and probabilistic reasoning. I argue that this shift towards digital forensic process tracing is essential to make social science methodology fit for the social media age. The six empirical chapters of my dissertation apply digital forensic process tracing to the six critical junctures of the Donbas war's escalation sequence. For each critical juncture, they assess the available open source evidence of domestic causes and Russian interference. I argue that there is convincing evidence that Russian involvement was the primary cause of four of the six critical junctures. For this reason, my dissertation concludes that the Donbas war is primarily an interstate war between Russia and Ukraine.

## **Impact Statement**

Both the framework and the findings of my dissertation have the potential to benefit academic researchers, policymakers, and the general public. In terms of benefits within academia, the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed in my thesis are blueprints that can be used to address a wide variety of research questions. The concept of delegated interstate war could be used for a reassessment of the nature of various armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Escalation sequence models could not only be created for any other war but also for conflict situations that do not involve any state actors or militarized violence. Digital forensic process tracing could be used for any research project aiming to use DOSI to investigate causality. My empirical findings, on the other hand, can benefit future comparative research efforts by providing guidance on the appropriate classification of the Donbas war. During my research on this dissertation project, I have already achieved a certain degree of academic impact by publishing three academic articles on the key aspects of my theoretical and methodological framework in peer-reviewed journals. This impact could be increased further by turning the present dissertation into a monograph.

In terms of benefits outside academia, the empirical findings of my dissertation have concrete policy implications. The identification of Russia as the primary conflict party suggests that the key to conflict resolution can be found in Moscow rather than in the conflict region itself. Policymakers involved in the peace process should adjust their strategies accordingly. Moreover, my dissertation suggests that ongoing Russian troop movements in occupied Crimea and along the Ukrainian border are reasons for concern. The experience of 2014 shows that Ukraine and the West need to be prepared for another escalation of violence no matter how unlikely such a scenario may seem. Moreover, my research can benefit the general public by providing a nuanced yet accessible analysis of the Donbas war and its causes. My dissertation provides a structured step-by-step analysis of events that are subject to frequent misrepresentations in the media and the political debate. At the same time, my methodological framework addresses questions of causality in a way that can improve a non-expert reader's understanding of the underlying philosophical debates. To maximise the impact of my research beyond academia, I have chosen to publish the three academic

articles incorporated in this dissertation open access – one via an open access journal and two via journals that have transformative agreements with UCL. As a result, my research is available to the general public without subscription. Moreover, I have published a plain-language summary of my dissertation's theoretical framework and its policy implications in *The Conversation*. I have also presented my research in both English and German at two online events which were recorded and are openly available on YouTube. I could increase the impact of my research further through additional non-academic publications and presentations around the time my dissertation is published as a monograph.

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## Transliteration of Ukrainian

I transliterate Ukrainian according to the BGN/PCGN 2019 system (see also [bit.ly/UkrainianBGN-PCGN2019](http://bit.ly/UkrainianBGN-PCGN2019)):

Ukrainian	Romanization
А а	a
Б б	b
В в	v
Г г	h (the character sequence зг is transliterated zgh)
Ґ ґ	g
Д д	d
Е е	e
Є є	ye initially, ie elsewhere
Ж ж	zh
З з	z
И и	y
І і	i
Ї ї	yi initially, i elsewhere
Й й	yi initially, i elsewhere
К к	k
Л л	l
М м	m
Н н	n
О о	o
П п	p
Р р	r
С с	s
Т т	t
У у	u
Ф ф	f
Х х	kh
Ц ц	ts
Ч ч	ch
Ш ш	sh
Щ щ	shch
Ю ю	yu initially, iu elsewhere
Я я	ya initially, ia elsewhere
Ь ь	not transliterated
’	not transliterated

## Transliteration of Russian

I transliterate Russian according to a simplified version of the BGN/PCGN 1947 System (see [bit.ly/RussianBGN-PCGN1947](http://bit.ly/RussianBGN-PCGN1947)). I diverge from the system by not transliterating soft signs or hard signs instead of using apostrophes and by transliterating the Russian letter ye phonetically as yo instead of ë.

<b>Russian</b>	<b>Romanization</b>
А а	a
Б б	b
В в	v
Г г	g
Д д	d
Е е	ye initially, after vowel characters, and after й, ъ, and ь. e in all other instances
Ё ё	yo
Ж ж	zh
З з	z
И и	i
Й й	y
К к	k
Л л	l
М м	m
Н н	n
О о	o
П п	p
Р р	r
С с	s
Т т	t
У у	u
Ф ф	f
Х х	kh
Ц ц	ts
Ч ч	ch
Ш ш	sh
Щ щ	shch
Ъ ъ	not transliterated
Ы ы	y
Ь ь	not transliterated
Э э	e
Ю ю	yu
Я я	ya

## List of Acronyms

COW	Correlates of War project
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
DOSI	digital open source information
DR	Donetsk Republic
ESM	Eurasian Youth Movement
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russian domestic intelligence service)
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian military intelligence service)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
JIT	Joint Investigation Committee (for the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the Donbas)
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
MID	military interstate disputes
NVO	Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye (Russian weekly newspaper focusing on military affairs)
OSINT	open source intelligence
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program

## 1. Introduction

Wars have caused and continue to cause unimaginable destruction and suffering around the world. The key to changing this – to ending wars and to preventing their occurrence in the first place – is knowledge about the causes of war. For this reason, investigating why war occurs is an important objective of social science research.

Modern information technology is a blessing and a curse for this search of the causes of war. On the one hand, the Internet provides unprecedented access to information from conflict zones. On the other hand, the prevalence of disinformation makes it difficult to use this information in a way that is both transparent and convincing. As a result, the Internet has the potential to affect the search for the causes of war in two contradicting ways. It can either shed additional light on these causes, or it can further obscure them. Academic research so far has mainly focused on the problem of obfuscation by studying how conflict parties and their supporters have turned the Internet into a propaganda battleground (see, for example, Bradshaw and Howard 2017; Chernobrov and Briant 2020; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2015; Koltsova and Pashakhin 2020; Kozachenko 2019; Nikolayenko 2019; Siapera, Hunt, and Lynn 2015). My dissertation will do the opposite. I will show how the social science methodology of process tracing can be used for an analysis of online media that increases clarity rather than confusion about the causes of war.

My dissertation will demonstrate the usefulness of online media for academic research on the causes of war through an in-depth investigation of the escalation of the war in eastern Ukraine’s Donets Basin (Donbas).<sup>1</sup> This war was one of the first armed conflicts<sup>2</sup> of the social media age. As a result, a large amount of

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this dissertation, I use the term Donbas to refer to two administrative Regions (*oblasti*) of modern Ukraine – Donetsk Region and Luhansk Region. This is the most common definition used today. However, it is important to note that the area which first became known as the Donbas in imperial Russia overlaps but does not completely align with these two contemporary administrative units. For an excellent regional history of the Donbas, see Kuromiya (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Social science research sometimes differentiates between war and armed conflict and only labels an armed conflict as a war if it exceeds a certain threshold of casualties. However, this distinction is not central to my dissertation, which is why I will use the terms war, armed conflict, and conflict interchangeably.

primary information from the conflict zone is available online. At the same time, the academic literature on the causes of this war remains divided. While scholars agree that the war was caused by a combination of domestic and external factors, they disagree on the relative importance of these factors. One side emphasises the internal dimension and portrays the conflict as a civil war, in which Russian intervention occurred but played a secondary role. The other side does the exact opposite. It emphasises the external dimension and portrays the war as a Russian invasion in disguise, to which local factors contributed as secondary causes. Neither side, however, has provided a study that uses the abundance of available online information to analyse the war's causes in a way that is methodologically and conceptually sound. My dissertation will fill this gap in the literature and shed additional light on the causes of the Donbas war. It will argue that the available evidence clearly indicates that the conflict was primarily the result of Russia's actions rather than a domestic phenomenon. It will do so in a more structured and transparent way than earlier contributions, which will make it easier for other scholars to identify points of agreement and disagreement with my assessment. As a result, my dissertation will provide an innovative framework for future case-study research on other conflicts.

My dissertation is divided into ten chapters. The remainder of this introduction will elaborate the research puzzle and justify the choice of the Donbas war as a case study. Chapter two will develop a theoretical framework for the study of the war's causes. It combines conflict escalation theory with the historical institutionalist concept of critical junctures to create an escalation sequence model of the Donbas war. According to this model, the Donbas war's formative phase covered the period between early April and late August 2014 and consisted of six critical junctures. Following the development of the model, the chapter develops the concept of delegated interstate war to enable a more nuanced assessment of foreign involvement in the conflict's critical junctures. Chapter three will introduce process tracing as the methodology of choice for the study of the proposed escalation sequence and the causes of war in murky information environments in general. It will argue that process tracing can be made fit for the Internet age by incorporating the practice of digital open source information (DOSI) analysis. This research technique is not yet part of the social sciences' methodological toolbox, even though it is widely used by governments, activists, and journalists.

Chapters four to nine apply the developed methodology and feature a digital forensic process tracing analysis of each critical juncture in the escalation sequence model. Each chapter assesses the available open source evidence against the contradicting hypotheses that divide the existing literature on the war's causes and investigates whether the causes of each critical juncture were primarily domestic or foreign. Two of these chapters find that the critical juncture they investigate was caused primarily by domestic factors. Four of them identify Russia's actions as the primary cause. On this basis, chapter ten concludes that it is appropriate to label the Donbas conflict as a delegated interstate war between Russia and Ukraine. It points out the implications of this finding for future policymaking and academic research on the Donbas and discusses the potential of this dissertation's methodological and theoretical framework for further research on the causes of war in general.

The remainder of this introduction will proceed in four steps. Firstly, I will discuss the ontological and epistemological assumptions that form the basis of this dissertation. Secondly, I will provide a high-level overview of the academic literature on the types and causes of war. Thirdly, I will argue that case-study research on individual conflicts is an indispensable supplement to quantitative research, especially in the social media age. Fourthly, I will introduce the case of the Donbas and the divide between proponents of internal and external causes that characterizes the academic debate on the causes of this particular conflict. I will outline the implications of this divide for policymaking and further research, which justify my selection of the Donbas as a case study. Then, I will carry out an in-depth review of the existing academic literature on the causes of the Donbas war. I will argue that studies on either side of the divide currently feature theoretical and methodological shortcomings, which the subsequent chapters of this dissertation will address.

### ***1.1. Ontological and Epistemological Foundations***

While few academics would disagree that gathering knowledge about war is important, there are considerable disagreements regarding the nature of this knowledge and how it can be gained. These ontological and epistemological disagreements relate to complex and multifaceted debates among philosophers. A useful simplified summary of these debates is Furlong and Marsh's (2002)



three-way typology of positivism, realism, and interpretivism. Positivist researchers assume that reality exists independently of our perception. Hence, it is possible to observe this reality and draw conclusions regarding cause and effect from these observations. Interpretivists, on the other hand, argue that reality is socially constructed and that it is impossible to separate cause and effect from an observer's perception of them. Realists try to take a middle way, arguing that reality and causation exist independently from our perception while acknowledging that social context can influence this reality and our observations. Della Porta and Keating (2008, 23–25) provide a slightly different typology consisting of positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, and humanism. In this typology, post-positivism is similar to Furlong and Marsh's definition of realism. Interpretivism and humanism are similar to Furlong and Marsh's definition of interpretivism, with humanism being a more radical version that rejects the idea of objective knowledge entirely.

Both typologies suggest that researchers on the interpretivist side of the ontological/epistemological spectrum would dismiss the idea of separating a war's actual causes from people's perception of these causes. They would argue that contradicting answers to the question why a war occurred are equally valid depending on the social context in which the war is perceived. This dissertation will not consider perspectives of this kind. While I agree with the view that social context inevitably influences a researcher's perception of reality, I subscribe to the realist/post-positivist aim to describe an independently existing reality as accurately as contextual limitations permit. This approach does not deny the importance of studying the perception and interpretation of armed conflict by human society. However, it rests on the assumption that studying war as a phenomenon with observable causes and effects, which destroys and kills regardless of an observer's perception, can improve knowledge and aid conflict resolution and prevention.

### ***1.2. Typologies and Causes of War***

Differentiating between different types of wars is a useful first step towards a better understanding of the causes of war. War typologies benefit research on the realist side of the ontological/epistemological spectrum in two ways. Firstly, they explain differences between certain wars by arguing that these wars belong

to distinct groups of phenomena. Secondly, they stipulate scope conditions for mid-level theories. Midlarsky (1990, 171–72) argues that “the road to an empirically valid general theory of the causes of war likely will take us through detours and bypasses that will necessitate more specific mid-range theories of the causes of specific types of war.” In other words, typologies of war work on the assumption that common causes and remedies are easier to identify among wars which share certain characteristics. Midlarsky (1990, 173) goes on to propose a distinction between systemic wars and dyadic wars, which differ “with respect to extensity and depth of participation.” Unlike a dyadic war, a systemic war involves “all major powers within the system” and “reaches into the depths of society to involve nearly all civilians”. He names World War I and II as the two most recent examples. Midlarsky (1990, 176–77) then divides systemic wars into two subcategories – structural wars and mobilization wars. Structural wars emerge out of a “long time period of gestation,” involving “the emergence of inequalities, envies consequent upon them, alliance formations, alliance memories, overlaps in conflict structures, and changes in the balance of power.” In the case of mobilization wars, “it is the mobilizing leader [...] who makes the key decisions regarding war or peace within a relatively short time period”. According to Midlarsky, World War I falls into the former and World War II into the latter subcategory.

Although Midlarsky’s justification of the general usefulness of typologies is convincing, it is not surprising that his specific typology proposal has received relatively little attention in the recent academic literature. Dyadic wars remain a common occurrence while the end of the Cold War removed the imminent possibility of another systemic war. A more widely used typology with greater significance for contemporary armed conflict is the differentiation between regular and irregular wars. Kalyvas (2006, 66–70) defines irregular war as war that does not play by the traditional rules of the battlefield, in particular regarding the distinction between combatants and civilians. According to Smith (2012, 615–16), the concept of irregular war represents the “belief that an analytical separation can be made between those conflicts in which outright force-on-force clashes take place on battlefronts, and those that do not [feature such clashes].” As a result, “irregular warfare becomes a synonym for many other terms that are felt to denote warfare without battles and battlefronts: insurgencies, low intensity

wars, guerrilla wars, and so on.” The most common and universally accepted typology of war, however, is the differentiation between civil and interstate war. According to Kalyvas (2006, 18–19), this distinction between internal or civil war on the one hand and external or foreign wars on the other has been made throughout European history and was used by thinkers like Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Grotius, and Hobbes. Today, most research on the causes of war accepts this distinction and the causal factors of civil and interstate war have been discussed in separate academic debates.

A review by Cederman and Vogt (2017, 1995) finds that the literature on civil war is dominated by three explanatory logics: grievances, greed, and opportunities.

*Grievance*-based accounts view internal conflict as a reaction to socioeconomic and/or political injustice. In contrast, explanations centring on *greed* make sense of civil war in terms of individuals’ desire to maximize their profits, primarily in a narrowly materialist sense. Arguing that motives are less important, a third logic seeks the causes of civil war in the *opportunities* that enable actors to engage in violent mobilization.

Research on the causes of interstate war, on the other hand, is mainly anchored in realist international relations theory. It focuses on power balances between states and the decision-making strategies of their leaders. Vasquez’s (1993) steps-to-war theory, for example, argues that interstate war is the result of arms races and alliance formations – which usually take place between neighbours over territorial disputes – combined with the dominance of hawks over accommodationist decisionmakers at the domestic level. Proponents of offense-defence theory argue that “war is more likely when conquest is easy” (van Evera 1999, 117). Johnson and Tierney (2011, 7) propose a “Rubicon theory of war,” according to which decisionmakers switch from a “‘deliberative’ to an ‘implemental’ mindset” once they “believe they have crossed a psychological Rubicon and perceive war to be imminent.” They argue that this switching of mindsets makes war more likely. Fearon (1995), on the other hand, argues that incomplete information and commitment problems are the two key factors that make rational actors choose war over peace.

This list of proposed explanations for civil and interstate war is by no means exhaustive. Various reviews of the academic literature on this topic have pointed

out the diversity of approaches and findings (see, for example, Dixon 2009; Levy 1998; Levy and Thompson 2010; Sambanis 2002; Smith 2004; Suganami 1996, 43–113). To this day, there is little agreement on the relative importance of the various typologies and causes of war proposed by different scholars or the way they interact with each other. Neither is there agreement on the methods by which such an agreement could be reached.

### **1.3. The Importance of Case-Study Analysis**

Quantitative methods play a central role in the ongoing search for the causes of war. Scholars code characteristics of wars as numbers and run regression analyses to identify correlations. The popularity of this approach has led to the creation of large conflict databases. The most prominent ones are the Correlates of War Project (Sarkees and Wayman 2010; Dixon and Sarkees 2015; Palmer et al. 2021; Maoz et al. 2019) and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Pettersson and Öberg 2020; Gleditsch et al. 2002). An early criticism of this frequentist approach comes from Dessler (1991). He argues that an exclusive focus on correlation leads to a fragmentation of knowledge because of the large variety of ways in which different factors may interact. To tackle this equifinality challenge, Dessler calls for a “causal theory of war,” which focuses on the mechanisms that underlie the correlations observed in datasets. Dessler’s critique is metatheoretical and does not specify what a causal theory of war should look like in practice. However, his critique of correlation analysis and his reference to causal mechanisms suggests that such a theory would have to be created through the detailed analysis of the causal processes that lead to specific instances of war. The more recent social science methodology literature defines this in-depth study of causality in individual cases as process tracing, which is this dissertation’s methodology of choice and will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

Twenty years after Dessler’s article, the divide between proponents and critics of frequentist causal inference persists. Quantitative social science research on war has continued to flourish. In-depth research on individual cases exists alongside it but is often left to historians and area studies specialists. This would not be a problem if two conditions were met. Firstly, historians and area studies specialists who write about war would have to pay attention to methodology and consider

how their research can inform and guide comparative researchers who want to focus on the bigger picture. Secondly, quantitative conflict studies researchers would have to take findings from case studies seriously and take them into account in their coding efforts. In practice, these conditions are rarely met. Scholars like Mahoney (2008) and Seawright (2016) have pointed out compatible aspects and synergy effects of quantitative and qualitative methods. Nevertheless, a lack of interaction between the two continues to be a problem, not only in the context of research on armed conflict but in the social sciences in general. Quantitative research often dismisses the need to study individual cases in depth. Qualitative case-study research, on the other hand, often dismisses the need to look beyond the nuances of the individual case, which results in a lack of conceptual and methodological rigour.

A closer look at the quantitative conflict studies literature and the potential ambiguities surrounding a conflict's most basic parameters clearly illustrates the need for high-quality case studies and quantitative-qualitative dialogue. An example is a conflict's start date. Defining the beginning of a war can be a difficult task – sometimes even in cases with a seemingly obvious start date, such as a formal declaration of war or the landing of an invasion force. Violence may predate such events, or it may only erupt with a significant delay. In other cases, there may not be an obvious start date at all. Violence may simply creep in as tensions rise. Nevertheless, scholars engaging in quantitative research need a transparent and precise definition of its beginning. This definition has to apply to all conflicts to justify large-n comparisons. Complex coding rules are the result. Sambanis (2004, 829–30), for example, proposes to define the start date of a civil war in the following way:

The start year of the war is the first year that the conflict causes at least 500 to 1,000 deaths. If the conflict has not caused 500 deaths or more in the first year, the war is coded as having started in that year only if cumulative deaths in the next three years reach 1,000.

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is more precise. It records the day of the first battle-related death as the first start date of an armed conflict. The day when the total number of battle-related deaths exceeds 25 is recorded as the second start date. An armed conflict is retroactively categorised as a war if the total number of battle-related deaths exceeds 1,000 in a given year (Pettersson 2020, 5–6). Under these coding rules, the start date of a war is contingent on

three decisions by the researchers who do the coding. Firstly, they have to choose data sources which, according to the researchers' assessment, supply accurate casualty figures. Secondly, they have to check that these casualties were battle-related and not, for example, the result of an atrocity that only involved armed violence from one side. Thirdly and most importantly, they have to decide how to handle instances in which different sources provide contradictory information. The complexity of these decisions depends on the information environment in which the conflict takes place. The higher the number of available sources and the greater the conflict parties' efforts to distort the information leaving the conflict zone, the more complex the coding decisions become.

There may be cases of particularly contradictory information environments, in which the complexity of these coding decisions reaches a level that can no longer be dealt with sufficiently in a methodological annex or a codebook. Such cases would require a separate qualitative inquiry to justify coding decisions. In the context of casualty figures, such an inquiry would not need an elaborate theoretical and methodological framework. It would mainly have to be based on extensive source criticism, which is traditionally the domain of historians. Coding decisions, however, do not only concern the wars of the past but also contemporary or near-contemporary conflict. At the same time, it is still considered unusual for a traditional historian to focus on events that took place within the previous one or two decades. Moreover, within these last two decades, modern information technology has fundamentally changed the source environment in which war takes place. The Internet has increased both the availability and the complexity of information coming out of conflict zones. Consequently, quantitative conflict studies researchers can only make accurate coding decisions through a dialogue with not only historians but also area studies specialists who can contribute case study research based on their expertise in contemporary regional developments. Unfortunately, however, such a dialogue does not appear to be part of the current coding practices of the UCDP or the Correlates of War Project (COW). This is particularly problematic because some coding decisions do not only require regional expertise and source criticism but also case-specific theories and methodologies. The reason for this is that coding challenges are not limited to comparatively straightforward units like the exact

start date of a war or the exact number of casualties. They may also concern more fundamental and complex parameters, such as the conflict's type or the role of actors participating in it. Categorizing a war and establishing the role of the actors involved requires more conceptual and methodological groundwork than the counting of battle-related deaths. It requires a closer look at questions of cause and effect and at the definitions and rationales behind conflict typologies.

#### **1.4. The Donbas Conflict as a Case Study**

A prime example of a war in need of an in-depth qualitative case study with a focus on causality is the war in eastern Ukraine's Donbas. The abundant but murky information environment in which this conflict unfolded and the political and academic controversies surrounding its nature and causes make it an extreme case (Gerring 2007, 101–5) regarding the complexity of coding decisions. However, this extreme may well become the new normal as the Internet increasingly shapes knowledge about contemporary conflict. This would turn the Donbas conflict into a typical case (Gerring 2007, 91–97) of a war fought in the age of modern information technology. Either way, the case of the Donbas is ideal to illustrate how comparative research on the causes of war can benefit from regional expertise and the in-depth study of individual cases. At the same time, it is also an ideal case to illustrate how case-study research can benefit from conceptual rigour and innovative social science methodology.

##### *1.4.1. Opposing Narratives: Civil War or Invasion*

The political messaging surrounding the outbreak of militarized violence in the Donbas is characterized by fundamental disagreements about the conflict's nature and causes. The Ukrainian authorities have portrayed the war as a Russian act of aggression from its very beginning. When Ukraine's then Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov announced on 13 April 2014 that his administration had initiated a military operation in the east of the country, he said that this decision had been made after "terrorist units coordinated by the Russian Federation" occupied several administrative buildings in Donetsk Region (Turchynov 2014b). Ever since, Kyiv's line has remained the same: Ukraine is defending itself against Russia, which attacked Ukraine's southeast with special forces operatives as well as regular armed forces. Locals fighting against forces loyal to Kyiv are "terrorists" or "mercenaries" in Moscow's service. The Russian

authorities, on the other hand, have consistently denied any involvement in the conflict beyond humanitarian aid for suffering civilians. They have admitted the presence of some volunteers with Russian citizenship among the separatist<sup>3</sup> forces but claim that these volunteers joined the conflict on their own private initiative and have no links whatsoever to the Russian state. According to Moscow, the conflict is a civil war and an internal Ukrainian matter. Russia is a mediator – an advocate for civilians affected by Kyiv’s military operation – but by no means a conflict party (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015; n.d.). These two diametrically opposed narratives have shaped the way in which the conflict is discussed and analysed in politics and media. Supporters of either side try to give credence to their narrative and discredit the narrative of their opponents.

Propaganda battles of this kind are not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the ease with which both information and disinformation about a war can be created and disseminated. The war in the Donbas was subject to an unprecedented level of attention from news outlets as well as local residents and freelance conflict analysts posting on social media. This has dramatically increased the diversity of source material available to researchers. Hence, academic research on the Donbas war has to operate in an information environment that is murky on the one hand but abundant on the other. In previous cases of information murkiness, researchers could point out that there was a lack of reliable information and wait for the archives to open. In the case of the Donbas, however, a lack of reliable information is not the problem. On the contrary, the volume of valuable primary information from the conflict zone is larger than ever before. This means that separating facts from fiction becomes a challenge worth tackling. Waiting for the archives to open would mean foregoing the opportunity to research the conflict in a timely manner and in an innovative way. It would also run the risk of losing important pieces of information that are deleted from the Internet without making it into an archive.

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term separatists throughout this dissertation to describe the people fighting against Ukraine’s central government and its supporters in the Donbas. I use this term as a descriptive and neutral label. Be they Russian or local and be their actions right or wrong, it is undisputed that the people in question want to separate the Donbas from the rest of Ukraine as long as Ukraine is governed by pro-Western politicians.



So far, academic research on the Donbas conflict has tackled the challenge posed by the war's information environment with limited success. Of course, the academic debate on the causes of the war is more nuanced than the positions of Kyiv and Moscow. Most scholars accept that the conflict was caused by an interplay between domestic and foreign factors. They reject the idea that the Kremlin was entirely uninvolved and unaware while also rejecting the idea that the war played out according to a masterplan devised and implemented by Vladimir Putin in person. They acknowledge that a variety of actors within Russia interacted with a variety of actors within Ukraine in a rapidly evolving crisis situation. However, concerning the relative importance of these actors and the role of the Russian state as a fragmented yet collective entity, the academic debate shows a divide that is similar to the divide in the political discourse. This divide in the academic literature leaves a knowledge gap that should be addressed for several reasons.

#### *1.4.2. Civil War or Invasion: Relevance and Implications*

From the perspective of an area studies scholar, the relevance of the relative importance of domestic factors and foreign interference in the genesis of the Donbas conflict does not require justification. The war in the Donbas is the most devastating armed conflict on European soil in the early 21st century. As such, its causes are an important research topic in their own right. If scholarly assessments diverge significantly, further research is needed. However, the relevance of the relationship between domestic dynamics and Russian involvement in the onset of the Donbas conflict is not limited to area studies.

**1.4.2.1. Quantitative Research on the Causes of War.** As discussed above, the UCDP and the COW are currently the key data sources for many scholars engaging in quantitative comparative analyses of armed conflict. This means that the correct classification of the Donbas conflict by these databases is an issue of data quality. Because quantitative research can only be as good as the data it is based on, the correct coding of an individual conflict in datasets that form the basis of further comparative research into the causes of war is extremely important. At the same time, the differentiation between civil war and interstate war is firmly established in the field. Labelling the Donbas conflict as one or the other will therefore predetermine which other wars it will be subsequently

compared to. Recently, some scholars have questioned this divide and called for more comparative research across the civil-interstate war boundary (Cunningham and Lemke 2013; Regan 2009; Vinci 2008). However, proving the argument that civil and interstate war are not that different still requires a clear distinction between the two as a starting point. And regardless of how typological boundaries are drawn, establishing who the primary conflict parties are remains extremely important when coding a case in a dataset for further comparative research.

**1.4.2.2. Comparative Research on Ukrainian State-Building.** For qualitative comparative researchers, the question whether domestic or foreign factors were decisive for the onset of the Donbas conflict presents a fork at the beginning of a reversed causal chain. Depending on which answer is chosen, scholars who seek to understand the deeper roots of the conflict will be pointed along different pathways. Primacy of domestic factors would suggest that scholars searching for the deeper roots of the conflict should focus primarily on sociological, political, and economic studies of Ukraine. It would support calls for more research on the role of protest movements in Ukrainian politics and on the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural cleavages within Ukrainian society. This, in turn, would strengthen the case of scholars who analyse Ukraine as a divided nation with potential similarities to failed states which descended into violence because of their internal contradictions. Primacy of foreign factors, on the contrary, would point scholars searching the conflict's deeper roots primarily towards the international relations literature and the determinants of Russian foreign policymaking. It would strengthen the case of those who want to compare Ukraine to other nation states facing an existential external threat from neighbouring countries.

**1.4.2.3. Russian Foreign Policy Analysis.** Different assessments of the Donbas conflict's causes also lead to different assessments of Russia's foreign and neighbourhood policy. As D'Anieri (2019, 104) points out:

Assessments of Russia's intentions run along a spectrum from those who see Russia as completely defensive, seeking only to protect a most basic conception of its security, to those who see Russia as aspiring both to reassert itself in Europe and to reorder the global system away from the central role of the US.

A good illustration of how the Donbas war can affect such assessments is the work of Tsygankov (2015, 297), who argues that the Kremlin acts on the basis of what he calls a “values/interests nexus.” He argues that Moscow’s foreign policy is based on geostrategic interests in its near abroad but also on the fact that “Russians consider Ukrainian people to be ‘brotherly’ and are resentful of what they view as the Western nations’ attempts to challenge the established cultural bond or to convert Ukraine into their own system of values” (Tsygankov 2015, 288). According to Tsygankov (2015, 287), these values include “an authentic concept of spiritual freedom inspired by Eastern Christianity and the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad.” Tsygankov (2015, 294–97) moves on to discuss and reject four other proposed explanations of Russia’s Ukraine policy: imperialist power aspirations, consolidation of domestic authority, divergent national identities between the two countries, and Putin’s emotional state. Tsygankov’s portrayal of Russia as a rational, moderate actor pursuing a foreign policy guided by interests and values is compatible with Russia offering limited support to a rebel movement in Ukraine to force domestic conflict parties to the negotiating table. It is much less compatible with the targeted military destabilization of a neighbouring country facing a domestic crisis. Primacy of foreign factors in the genesis of the Donbas war would be better suited to support the four alternative explanations that Tsygankov rejects. It would strengthen the case of those who see Russia as an aggressive actor in its near abroad and as a potential threat for European security.

**1.4.2.4. Policy and Legal Implications.** The question of Russia’s involvement in the Donbas has important implications for the prospects of conflict regulation. Primacy of domestic factors would suggest that there is some truth in Moscow’s insistence that it is not a conflict party. It would justify Moscow’s demand that Kyiv negotiate directly with the leaders of the self-proclaimed separatist republics in the Donbas. At the same time, it would suggest that additional international pressure on Russia is not the most effective way to solve the conflict. Primacy of domestic causes implies that solutions should be primarily domestic as well. Proponents of foreign factor primacy, on the other hand, are more likely to argue that it is the Kremlin that holds the key to conflict regulation and that corresponding diplomatic efforts must focus primarily on Moscow. Moreover,

defining Russia's actions as the conflict's primary cause would give lawyers a powerful argument for Russian state liability in cases of violations of international law in the Donbas. A number of clauses in international treaties could potentially apply, such as the UN Charter's ban on armed aggression, the laws of military occupation laid out in the Geneva Conventions, human rights obligations from the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN human rights treaties, and even individual criminal responsibility of state and military leaders under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

#### *1.4.3. The Civil War Hypothesis and Its Proponents*

The majority of Western academic research on the causes of the Donbas conflict is closer to Moscow's narrative than to Kyiv's. It supports what I call the civil war hypothesis – the claim that, despite a certain degree of Russian meddling, the war in the Donbas is primarily a homegrown phenomenon and an internal Ukrainian conflict (see Table 1). The UCDP and the COW – the most comprehensive, most elaborate, and most frequently cited armed conflict data projects at the time of writing – both categorize the Donbas war as a primarily domestic phenomenon. The UCDP codes the war as a group of three intrastate conflicts (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). Up to September 2014, the UCDP lists two parallel conflicts – one between the Ukrainian Government and the Donetsk People's Republic and another one between the Ukrainian Government and the Luhansk People's Republic. According to the UCDP, these two conflicts merged into one after the two separatist republics allegedly merged their armed forces into the “United Armed Forces of Novorossiia” on 16 September 2014. The UCDP acknowledges Russian support for the separatist forces and defines all three conflicts as “internationalized.” However, it does not categorize Russia as a primary conflict party but as a secondary external actor who is supporting one side in an internal Ukrainian conflict. Similarly, the Donbas war appears in version 5.1 of the COW's intrastate war data, with Russia appearing as a secondary conflict party supporting local rebels (Dixon and Sarkees 2020b). Accordingly, the latest update of the COW's Military Interstate Disputes (MID) dataset, which covers 2014, records no interstate war between Russia and Ukraine and no casualties resulting from armed clashes between the two countries' troops (Palmer et al. 2020).

**Table 1: Contradicting Hypotheses on the Causes of the Donbas War**

Civil war hypothesis	Despite a certain degree of Russian meddling, the war in the Donbas is primarily a homegrown phenomenon and an internal Ukrainian conflict.
Invasion hypothesis	Although domestic factors play an important auxiliary role, the war in the Donbas is primarily a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Neither the UCDP nor the COW base their coding decisions on secondary literature. Instead, they rely on news reports gathered via the Factiva and LexisNexis databases. Nevertheless, their classification seems to be in line with the majority opinion in the Western academic literature. This assessment is based on a keyword search for peer-reviewed, English-language academic journal articles in three major databases – the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, the Web of Science Social Sciences Citation Index, and the EBSCOhost collections. I searched for articles published between 2014 and mid-October 2021 that mentioned “Ukraine” and at least one of three other terms – “war,” “armed conflict,” or “crisis” – in title, abstract, or keywords. I downloaded all titles and abstracts from the databases’ search result lists into a spreadsheet and manually selected all articles that appeared to focus on the Donbas war. I then accessed these articles and assessed their content. I selected all those that devoted a substantial part of their empirical analysis to the war’s causes. I also selected all articles whose research design or key findings depended on the categorization of the Donbas war as either internal or interstate. These selection criteria returned 63 academic articles with 75 authors (see Appendix 1).<sup>4</sup> Thirty-eight of these articles were published by area studies journals. Twelve come from interdisciplinary journals focusing on different dimensions of political violence and security. Five come from international relations journals and four from political science journals. Two come from economics journals and one from a journalism studies journal and a law journal respectively. Thirty-one articles (35 authors) implicitly or explicitly support the civil war hypothesis. Only 19 articles (24

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<sup>4</sup> Naturally, my quantification of the literature review is only indicative. It is not possible to guarantee that the list of articles is exhaustive. Considering potential inconsistencies in the selection and indexing of journal articles by databases and potential human error in the manual screening process, it cannot be ruled out that some articles were omitted.

authors) support the invasion hypothesis. Thirteen articles (16 authors) remain neutral: They highlight the equal importance of internal and external factors, state that their investigation of certain causes does not imply primacy of these causes, or evade the question while pursuing a research design that is compatible with both hypotheses.

Those articles that support the civil war hypothesis can be divided into three subgroups. The first subgroup consists of 13 articles which focus on the outbreak of the Donbas war and emphasize that its primary causes were domestic: Kudelia (2016, 5) writes that “although many blame Moscow for starting the war in the region, the key role was played by processes that took place within Ukraine.” Katchanovski (2016, 483) argues that his analysis of the developments in the Donbas “points to the origins of this conflict as a civil war.” Sakwa (2017b, 11) identifies a “Ukraine syndrome,” consisting of “unresolved and often suppressed questions of national coherence and state integration” and “tension between monist and pluralist interpretations of Ukrainian national identity,” as the war’s root cause. According to Matveeva (2016, 35–36), the Donbas conflict was “leaderless and not spearheaded by [an] elite,” which is why “Moscow’s role was not the key variable.” Matsuzato (2017, 176) warns of neglecting local dynamics and viewing Donbas separatist leaders as “no more than Russia’s subordinates.” Tsygankov (2015, 285) states that Kyiv’s “attempt to carry out ‘anti-terrorist’ operations against the [separatist] protestors heightened mistrust in the government and exacerbated tensions to the point of civil war.” Loshkariov and Sushentsov (2016, 85) claim that “three months of hostilities passed before Moscow decided to provide limited support to the rebels.” Davies (2016, 737) describes the war as a clash between the Kyiv authorities and “opposition” forces, over which Russia had no “broad and consistent degree of control.” Robinson (2016, 506) writes that “far from instigating the rebellion in Donbas [...], Moscow has largely been reacting to events and trying to gain some control of a process which was originally almost entirely outside of its control.” Nitsova (2021, 5) concludes that, in the context of the conflict’s initial stages, there is “no reason to believe that Russian efforts to stir tensions in Donbas were different from those in Kharkiv.” The last three articles of this subgroup make similar arguments in a more implicit way by highlighting the role of domestic factors without addressing their relative importance or explicitly dismissing Russia’s role. Giuliano (2018,

158) and Sotiriou (2016, 61) portray the conflict as originating from a local secessionist movement to justify their research focus on regional public sentiment and national identity within Ukraine. Strasheim (2016, 26) acknowledges that “conflict is not a monocausal phenomenon” but points out that domestic causes of the Donbas war have been “sidelined” by the academic literature and then devotes the remainder of her study to “commitment problems” of local political actors as causes of the conflict.

The second subgroup consists of five articles whose key findings depend on the civil war hypothesis. Sambanis et al. (2020) use the case of “Ukraine’s civil war” to illustrate the feasibility of their mathematical modelling of the relations between a government, a local separatist group, and either side’s external sponsors. Their model tries to show that external intervention can be an important factor in ethnic intrastate conflict. Hence, their feasibility study would not be fit for purpose if the Donbas war were defined as a Russian attack rather than a primarily ethnic intrastate conflict with some Russian support for the rebels. Schram (2021) uses the case of the Donbas to illustrate how states use limited military force to settle conflicts without going to war. He assumes that “Russia and Ukraine are not at war” and that there is a difference between Russia’s “hassling” in the Donbas in 2014 and Russia’s “war” in Georgia in 2008 (Schram 2021, 304–5). The suitability of the Donbas as a case study illustrating his theory rests on this assumption. Boyd-Barrett (2017) compares the coverage of the Donbas conflict by Western “mainstream” and “alternative” media and accuses the former of engaging in “propaganda” by exaggerating Russia’s role. Similarly, Barthel and Bürkner (2020) identify an anti-Russian “bias” in German media coverage of events in the Donbas. Both articles’ media critique only make sense if it is assumed that the causes of the conflict are primarily domestic. If Russia’s actions were the main cause of the conflict, extensive media coverage of this aspect would not be a sign of bias or propaganda but a reflection of reality. Finally, Rauta (2016, 103–4) compares the cases of Crimea and the Donbas. He argues that the contrast between Russia’s direct involvement in the former and its “empowerment of local rebel forces” in the latter indicate different foreign policy objectives. This argument rests on the assumption that the relationship between paramilitary fighters and the Russian state in the Donbas was less close than it had been the case in Crimea.

The third and final subgroup consists of 13 articles which express support for the civil war hypothesis in passing while contextualising their research on specific aspects of the Donbas war's origins, even though their key findings do not depend on it. Aliyev (2019; 2020a; 2020b; 2021), Kudelia (2019, 279, 300), Malyarenko and Galbreath (2016), and Zhukov (2016, 2–4) portray their work on paramilitary mobilization in the Donbas as case-study research that can inform the wider academic discourse on the causes of civil war. The same is the case for Kudelia and van Zyl's (2019) and Pechenkina et al.'s (2018) studies on local support for separatist fighters in the Donbas and for San-Akca et al.'s (2020) study on the role of natural gas resources. Other articles do not explicitly discuss the wider civil war literature but still use the label to frame their research on the genesis of the Donbas war. Matsuzato's (2018, 1010, 1024) comparison of the economic and societal structures in two frontline cities mentions a high degree of "rebels' autonomy from Russia" in some parts of the Donbas and labels the conflict as a "civil war" in his article's endnotes. Malyarenko and Wolff's (2018, 196, 199) study of international peace agreement brokerage during the conflict and Donaldson's (2017, 48) study of NATO's influence on events in Ukraine also speak of a "civil war."

In addition to peer-reviewed articles, several books and edited volume contributions also support the civil war hypothesis.<sup>5</sup> Platonova (2021) explains the outbreak of war through a comparative analysis of domestic pro-Russian protest movements in Donetsk and Kharkiv Regions. She analyses the conflict against the backdrop of the civil war literature and argues that "internationalised civil war," as defined by Rauta (2016), is "[t]he best definition of this war that has been offered in the academic literature" (Platonova 2021, 77). In his two books, Sakwa (2015; 2017a) expands on the idea that the key cause of the conflict was the unwillingness of Ukrainian nationalist "monists" to accept a "pluralist" society

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<sup>5</sup> A quantitative review of books and edited volume contributions analogous to this chapter's review of journal articles would be difficult and time consuming and not worth the added value. The full text of most books is not available online, the dividing line between academic and non-academic books is difficult to draw, and often it remains unclear to what extent books undergo academic peer review. For this reason, my literature review only highlights selected examples of books discovered in article citations and through a keyword search of "Ukraine AND (war OR 'armed conflict' OR crisis)" in the UCL library catalogue and the WorldCat international library catalogue.



that includes pro-Russian sentiment in the country's east. He argues that Russia's influence on the events in the Donbas has been overstated in the West and that Russia's role in the conflict was characterized by restraint rather than aggression (Sakwa 2015, 153–57; 2017a, 157–60). Matveeva (2018, 3) also uses her book to expand on the argument that events in the Donbas were a "leaderless uprising." Schneckener (2021, 46–47) suggests that the war developed an internal momentum that led to a "fragmentation of violent actors" who, at least for some time, escaped Russian control. Kranich (2021, 62) argues that a "critical mass" of the local population in the Donbas accepted the Russian media narrative that nationalists from western Ukraine posed an existential threat. According to Kranich (2021, 82), this belief led to collective violence in the region before any direct Russian intervention occurred. McDermott (2016, 87) claims that "the bulk of the 'forces' facing the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2014–15 were homegrown. Whether Western governments, Kyiv or analysts of the conflict choose to acknowledge it or not, the results had the hallmarks of a civil war." Yurchenko (2018, 171–75) also emphasizes the war's domestic causes. She argues that Russian intervention only became a decisive factor after Petro Poroshenko was inaugurated as Ukraine's new president in June 2014 and a "Poroshenko-led oligarchy launched a military offensive on the self-proclaimed republics" (Yurchenko 2018, 183). Finally, van der Pijl (2018, 115) not only speaks of a civil war but disputes even the most well-documented instance of Russian interference in the conflict – the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the conflict zone. Instead, he claims that "the details surrounding the flight and the downing tend to cast the greatest suspicion on Kiev."

#### *1.4.4. The Invasion Hypothesis and Its Proponents*

A smaller set of articles disagrees with the categorization of the Donbas war as a primarily domestic phenomenon. Like the articles supporting the civil war hypothesis, this set can also be split into three subgroups. The first subgroup consists of nine articles that explicitly discuss the interplay of domestic and foreign factors and argue for a predominance of the latter. Wilson (2016, 631) argues that "all the key triggers that produced all-out war were provided by Russia and by local elites." Wilson describes Russia as the most proactive and influential provider of these triggers – an "active player, trying different sparks until one caught light" (Wilson 2016, 647). He concludes that "the war that began in 2014

was not a civil war with foreign intervention but a process catalysed and escalated by local elites and by Russia, with local foot-soldiers” (Wilson 2016, 649). Laryš and Suleimanov (2021) also argue that Russia played the dominating role and took agency away from local elites as the conflict unfolded. They claim that the self-proclaimed separatist republics are under Russia’s “direct political control” and “completely subordinated to Moscow” (Laryš and Souleimanov 2021, 8). According to Kuromiya (2019, 255), “[n]o evidence exists that either independent-mindedness or a Russified culture in the Donbas per se was responsible for its occupation by separatists and Russian forces.” He argues that, on the contrary, “Russia’s military intervention” was “forced upon an unwelcoming population.” Galeotti (2016, 285) writes that “having essentially engineered a local insurrection by Russophones alarmed at the new regime in Kyiv, Moscow set up proxy regimes.” The militias of these proxy regimes “included genuine volunteers, from nationalists and Cossacks to mercenaries – largely recruited, armed, and brought into the country by Russian government structures – as well as serving military personnel.” Furthermore, Galeotti (2016, 286) argues that Russia’s GRU military intelligence service played a crucial role in the Donbas:

The GRU [...] appears not just to be providing its own Spetsnaz special forces, but also to be a primary agency providing and coordinating auxiliary units. Its operation in the nearby Russian city of Rostov-on-Don has been identified as the main routing station for volunteers heading to and from the war.

Bowen (2019, 313) portrays the war in Donbas as a Russian “coercive diplomacy” operation with the aim to “negate any further Ukrainian drift toward the West and ensure that it retained veto power over any future negotiations.” This operation involved “non-state actors, including organised crime figures, supported and directed by Moscow to give the appearance of a local rebellion” as well as “limited direct injections of Russian units and troops” (Bowen 2019, 314). Like Galeotti, Bowen (2019, 319–20) defines the separatist forces in the Donbas as Russian proxy actors. Kuzio (2019, 298) criticizes that “[s]ome Western scholars have excessively focused on Ukraine as a ‘fragile’ and regionally divided state suffering from a ‘civil war’ [...]” He argues that this focus is misleading. Instead, he portrays the war in the Donbas as one component of a larger Kremlin project aimed at the secession of large areas of southeast Ukraine. He claims that this project failed because Ukraine proved more resilient than Russia expected. Melnyk (2020, 37) writes that “the security crisis, which escalated into a full-scale war in the Donbas,

had many underlying causes. Of these, the most important one was the Russian government's systematic effort to reverse the status quo established by the victory of the Euromaidan in February 2014." Mykhnenko (2020, 530) summarizes the findings of his study into the "economic geography" of the Donbas as follows:

[T]he region's economic and material circumstances in the early 2010s had generated neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a locally rooted, internally driven armed conflict. The role of the Kremlin's covert military intervention, aided by its local proxies, remains paramount, necessary and sufficient for the continuation of hostilities.

Finally, Hosaka (2019) argues that leaked emails from an account belonging to former Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov show that the war in the Donbas was primarily a Kremlin project. He identifies Surkov as the Kremlin's chief puppeteer, who had the task "to compromise the Ukrainian government and to disguise the Russian aggression [...] as 'a civil war'" (Hosaka 2019, 765).

The second subgroup consists of six articles whose key findings depend on the invasion hypothesis. D'Anieri (2019) and Kleinschmidt's (2019) discussions of the merits and shortcomings of realist international relations theory as an explanation of the Donbas conflict rest on the assumption that the conflict is interstate. Both the approaches they criticize and those they endorse would lose most of their explanatory power in the context of a domestic conflict. Similarly, Landwehr's (2019) and Sanders and Tuck's (2020) studies on the prospects of conflict resolution in the Donbas assume that the two parties that have to come to an agreement are Ukraine and Russia. This contradicts the conflict resolution strategy advocated by many supporters of the civil war hypothesis, who argue that the key to peace can be found within Ukraine. Osiichuk and Shepotylo (2020, 1–2) use household survey data to investigate "how the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war affected the financial well-being and health of people in both countries." This research design would make little sense if Russia were not a primary conflict party. Finally, Gentile (2020, 3) also uses the assumption that the conflict is interstate in his survey design. He argues that the number of respondents who do not place the blame for the war primarily on Russia can be used to indicate the success of Russian disinformation campaigns. If Russia were not a primary conflict party, however, those who do not blame Moscow would have to be regarded as well-informed and not as victims of disinformation.

The third and final subgroup consists of four articles that express support for the invasion hypothesis in passing while contextualising their research on specific aspects of the Donbas conflict's origins, even though their key findings do not depend on it. In their study of the destruction of healthcare infrastructure in the Donbas during the war, Buckley et al. (2019, 62) state that they "take it for granted that hostilities commenced between Russia and Ukraine and continue." Bukkvoll (2016, 267) argues that Russia used military force "with varying degrees of intensity to initiate, build up and maintain an armed uprising" in the Donbas. He then identifies possible rationales for Russia's actions. Kuzyk (2019, 725) speaks of a "Russian-Ukrainian conflict" and denounces "the depiction of the Donbas conflict as a civil strife" while presenting his findings on shifting geographical identity cleavages within Ukraine. And Umland (2019, 108) describes the conflict as a "pseudo-civil war in Eastern Ukraine triggered by Russia's covert intervention since 2014" in his study on the formation of the radical nationalist Azov Battalion.

In addition to peer-reviewed articles, some books and edited volume contributions also support the invasion hypothesis. Several authors mentioned above expand on the arguments made in their journal articles (Galeotti 2019; Kuzio 2017; Wilson 2014). Toal (2017, 238–39) warns of "framing traps and forced binary contrasts between 'domestic sources' and 'outside interference.'" Nevertheless, the "three starting observations" that he proposes, as well as the general framing of his book, emphasize Russia's role to an extent that many proponents of the civil war hypothesis would disagree with. Hosaka (2021) argues that the Donbas war should be categorized as interstate not only because the Donbas separatists are "spurious non-state actors" but also because the Russian Armed Forces were responsible for "the bulk of the fighting." And Wynnyckyj (2019) already clarifies in his book's title that, in his view, the events in the Donbas were, first and foremost, "Russia's war" against Ukraine.

#### *1.4.5. Civil War or Invasion – The Evidence and Its Shortcomings*

Currently, the literature on both sides of the civil war-invasion divide suffers from a number of theoretical and methodological shortcomings. These shortcomings affect the power of either side's argument. They can be divided into six categories. The first three concern conceptual and theoretical framing while the last three concern methodology.

**1.4.5.1. Defining Civil and Interstate War.** Research on the Donbas conflict often supports or rejects the use of the civil or interstate war label without a clear definition of either. Many contributions to the literature argue or imply that either domestic or foreign factors played the primary role without specifying the criteria they used to reach this conclusion. They describe certain dynamics but do not make clear why the highlighted aspects are defining features. This is insufficient because an invasion can involve local collaboration and a civil war can involve foreign intervention. Hence, a study that highlights instances of domestic mobilization or foreign intervention cannot make a compelling argument regarding the conflict's character without specifying why the described events are compatible with the definition of one conflict type but not the other. Works which try to develop transparent criteria of this kind include Kudelia (2016) and Katchanovski (2016), who argue that the nationality of combatants is key to the character of a war. Katchanovski (2016, 483) writes:

The predominant involvement of local separatists at the start of the conflict, along with the prevalence of local residents along with residents of other Ukrainian regions among the leadership and in the armed formations points to the origins of this conflict as a civil war.

While Katchanovski does not cite evidence to support his claim that most combatants were locals, Kudelia (2016, 19) points out that, "according to various journalists, Donbas natives made up the majority of the militias from the start of the fighting." As evidence, he cites the work of five Western journalists who visited the conflict zone in spring-summer 2014. However, this focus on the nationality of combatants is problematic in two ways. Firstly, separatist groups were trying to portray their movement as a local insurgency and hence had an incentive to hide the presence of Russian nationals in the conflict zone. Secondly and more importantly, it remains questionable whether the citizenship status of combatants is sufficient to define a conflict as primarily internal. Accepting combatant citizenship as the decisive indicator would imply that any invasion will turn into a

civil war if enough local collaborators join the invader. Similarly problematic is the COW's definition of interstate war. Both the COW Typology of War (Sarkees 2010) and the MID Incident Coding Manual (Palmer et al. 2020) stress that an interstate war must involve the "regular" forces of two states. This raises the question how covert military operations that involve, for example, mercenaries acting on behalf of a state should be treated. Page two of the MID Incident Coding Manual acknowledges this problem but does not offer a coherent solution. In contrast, the UCDP's coding manual does not feature a regular forces requirement. It simply notes that, in an interstate conflict, "both sides are states" (Pettersson 2020, 5). However, it does not feature guidance on how to differentiate between state and non-state actors.

**1.4.5.2. Historical Determinism.** Another theoretical framing problem is the fact that many works on the Donbas war prioritize structural conditions over proximate causes. They do not focus their analysis on the investigation of causal relationships between variables in the conflict zone at the time of conflict escalation. Instead, they focus on a broader historical or geopolitical narrative and then present the Donbas conflict as an episode which blends into that narrative. This prioritization of the macro-level may lead to historical determinism in the sense that the presented historical narrative affects the interpretation of the facts of the case. Loshkariov and Sushentsov (2016), Sakwa (2015; 2017b), and Sotiriou (2016), for example, emphasize longstanding identity cleavages in post-Soviet Ukraine. This focus in the choice of historical narrative inevitably sets the scene for a stronger focus on domestic conflict dynamics when it comes to the analysis of the conflict itself. The same is the case for Tsygankov's (2015) portrayal of Russia as a moderate foreign policy actor during the decade preceding the war. In the work of scholars like Wilson (2014) or Kuzio (2017) on the other hand, an emphasis on nationalist and irredentist tendencies in Russia's recent history implicitly supports an interpretation of the conflict that focuses more on Russia's actions. The same is the case for Kuromiya's (2019) otherwise convincing rebuttal of the claim that the Donbas was post-Soviet Ukraine's stronghold of pro-Russian separatism. Kuromiya's historical narrative, which highlights high levels of support for Ukrainian independence in the Donbas, sets the scene for a stronger focus on Russia's role in the events of 2014. Of course, studies of how historical developments did or did not affect the Donbas conflict

are very important. However, they are more effective after the immediate causes of the conflict have been established through a more inductive analysis. A deductive framework that a priori integrates the conflict into a wider historical narrative increases the risk of overlooking or mischaracterizing causal processes at the micro-level during the outbreak of the conflict itself.

**1.4.5.3. Restrictive Analytical Framing.** Other works feature a related type of determinism in the form of an analytical framework that explicitly preselects certain aspects of the conflict and thereby predetermines an emphasis on either domestic or foreign causes. Matveeva (2016, 25) writes that her article “acknowledges the Russian government’s role to be a big issue, but abstains from examining it, concentrating on [the] internal dynamic [of the conflict] instead.” Hence, she arrives at her conclusion that the Donbas conflict “was leaderless and not spearheaded by [the] elite” within a framework of analysis that explicitly excludes Russia’s actions a priori. Similarly, Matveeva’s book is set up as a “bottom-up story of the rebellion [...] concentrating on its internal dynamic [...]” (Matveeva 2018, xv). While it mentions instances of Russian involvement on numerous occasions (Matveeva 2018, 106, 127, 151, 163–66), the book’s very design assigns a secondary role to them. In contrast, Bowen’s (2019) framework of “coercive diplomacy,” Galeotti’s (2016) focus on Russian military operations, Hosaka’s (2019) focus on Kremlin adviser Surkov, and Laryš and Suleimanov’s (2021) theory of “strategic entrapment” a priori emphasize Russia’s role as the key actor. Other articles restrict their analytical framework in different ways. Melnyk’s (2020) insightful study of the conflict’s causes is constrained by the fact that it only covers the run-up to the conflict but does not investigate the actual outbreak and escalation of militarized violence. Similarly, Platonova’s (2021) work is a study of protest rather than war and ends before the outbreak of militarized violence in April. Mykhnenko’s (2020) theoretical approach a priori defines economic factors as the only possible domestic explanation for the war, which means that disproving economic explanations becomes sufficient proof of the primacy of Russia’s role. Yurchenko’s (2018) Marxist framing of the conflict, on the other hand, a priori defines Ukraine’s post-Soviet transformation by Western capitalism as the primary cause of the war and turns Russian intervention into a subordinate factor. Nevertheless, Yurchenko still provides a nuanced discussion of Russian intervention. Van der Pijl’s (2018) Marxist

framework, however, seems to leave no room at all for any culprits other than the collective West. For example, he claims that the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 primarily benefited the West and insinuates that U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies may have played a role in it (van der Pijl 2018, 115). Thus, he dismisses a well-proven fact that contradicts his framing of the conflict by resorting to anti-Western and antisemitic conspiracy myths.<sup>6</sup>

**1.4.5.4. Lack of Regional Expertise.** An important methodological problem are the coding procedures of the two major armed conflict data projects. These procedures are inadequate for the categorization of a war in the context of the abundant but murky information environment surrounding events in the Donbas. The UCDP bases its coding decisions on media reporting data from all over the world as aggregated by the Factiva database. In addition, the project draws on NGO reports and a number of area-specific sources not included by Factiva. The data is filtered by “a string of search terms designed to produce all news articles reporting the use of violence.” The results are then manually read and coded (Sundberg, Eck, and Kreutz 2012, 354–55). The question that arises here is whether the UCDP had the time, resources, and expertise to adjust its data gathering to the specific information environment of the Donbas and then analyse the gathered data in a way that leads to transparent results. The UCDP’s writing on the conflict suggests that this is not the case. It does not represent the in-depth qualitative inquiry that would be required to justify coding decisions in a complex case like the Donbas. The reports lack references, provide a rather high-level overview of events, and appear to take certain contentious claims made in the media – such as the supposed unification of separatist forces into the “United Armed Forces of Novorossiia” – at face value, without examining whether they had any impact on the actual course of the conflict (UCDP n.d.a; n.d.b; n.d.c; see also Brik 2021, 203–4, 209–14). A dataset of the source material used to analyse the initial phase of the Donbas conflict can be downloaded from the UCDP’s website. It includes 152 events covering the time between 13 April and 16 September 2014. The event catalogue is based exclusively on reporting from

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<sup>6</sup> Normally, a book that denies well-proven facts and peddles antisemitic conspiracy myths would not deserve any attention in a review of the academic debate on the causes of a war. However, van der Pijl’s book was published by Manchester University Press – a renowned academic publisher – and was subsequently digitalized by the JSTOR and Project Muse academic databases.



English-language sources. Most of these sources are major news agencies. Only one of them is based in Ukraine and none of them focuses specifically on the Donbas or is known for their region-specific insights. Similarly, most of the LexisNexis sources used by the coders of the COW's MID dataset are also major international English-language news agencies and newspaper websites (Palmer et al. 2021, 3). The resulting "dispute narrative" for interstate tensions between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 (dispute No. 4682) is even shorter than the UCDP's description (Palmer et al. 2020). Moreover, the MID narrative omits any claim of Russian military operations in Ukraine that is denied by the Kremlin. This results in an incoherent account of events that is incompatible with any of the conflict narratives proposed in the academic literature focusing on the Donbas war.

**1.4.5.5. Taking Correlation for Causation.** Another methodological problem consists of a conflation of correlation and causation resulting from an overreliance on public opinion poll data. Kudelia (2016), Katchanovski (2016), and Giuliano (2018) cite opinion polls as evidence that separatist sentiment among the Donbas population was an important factor in the outbreak of the war. Kudelia (2016, 9–12) and Giuliano (2018) both cite an opinion poll conducted between 8 and 16 April 2014 by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS 2014a), which suggests that separatist sentiment was more widespread in the Donbas than in other regions of Ukraine. However, as Giuliano (2018, 158) points out, only a minority of respondents supported separatist views according to this survey. Katchanovski (2016, 484), on the other hand, argues that another opinion poll commissioned by him and conducted by the same polling institute in April-May 2014 (KIIS 2014b), showed that "the majority of Donbas residents backed various forms of separatism." Discrepancies of this kind are not surprising. The wording of the questions differs between the two surveys, and they were conducted almost a month apart. At the time, conflict escalation in the Donbas was already underway, and it is possible that rising tensions were leaving a mark on public opinion. In other words, while separatist sentiment may cause conflict, conflict may also increase separatist sentiment. Moreover, even if separatist ideas are widespread, this does not necessarily mean that people will act on these ideas. And the reverse is true as well: Armed conflict can be triggered by a small group of fanatics who do not enjoy wide public support, as long as there is a lack of resistance against their actions. Finally, it also seems reasonable to assume that

Russia, if it were planning an invasion, would choose Ukraine's most pro-Russian regions as a first point of attack. All this does not mean that public opinion is unimportant. The fact that separatist ideas appeared to be more popular in the Donbas than in other parts of Ukraine in April 2014 needs to be considered in any assessment of the conflict's causes. On its own, however, this correlation between separatist sentiment and war does not have much causal significance because it leaves the most important question open: What were the processes that connected separatist sentiment to mobilization, militarization, and the outbreak of war?

**1.4.5.6. *Insufficient Source Criticism.*** The most important shortcoming of academic research on either side of the civil-interstate war divide, however, is a lack of transparency and attention to detail in the discussion of sources and the evidence they provide. Most of the existing literature treats sources as an affirmatory afterthought to a narrative rather than treating them as the data that creates this narrative in the first place. Hardly any works engage in explicit source criticism. Bowen (2019, 325–33), for example, uses a selection of investigative online news articles to support his narrative. However, a critical appraisal of this source material is not a central part of his study. This approach is problematic. Investigative journalism is an indispensable source of evidence in the context of covert military activity. However, the claims of online news sources must not be taken at face value. They have to be critically assessed according to four questions: What evidence do they provide? Is this evidence convincing? How does this evidence prove their claims? And how does this evidence disprove claims to the contrary? If an author fails to discuss these questions, their analysis inevitably becomes more susceptible to attacks from critics, who can simply question the quality of the cited source material. Moreover, an explicit and transparent appraisal of the available evidence also forces a researcher to reflect more on the credibility of their sources and thereby lowers the risk of cherry picking and unconscious bias. The same is the case for more traditional sources of academic research. Matsuzato (2017, 190–200), for example, relies on his personal visits to the self-proclaimed separatist republics and his interviews with separatist leaders. Matveeva (2018, 301–3) also relies on interviews with separatist leaders and fighters, Donbas residents, and Russian and Ukrainian experts. However, neither of them includes a critical assessment of their sources'

reliability in their empirical narrative, even though Matveeva (2018, 307–8) discusses some limitations of interview-based research in a brief methodological annex. This absence of source criticism from the empirical narrative is a problem. A critical reflection on the credibility of gathered interview data is crucial in a conflict situation, in which various actors may have instructions or personal motives to misrepresent certain facts. Just because a separatist denies links to the Russian state, it cannot be assumed that they do not exist. Just because a visitor to Donetsk cannot see Kremlin interference on first sight, it cannot be assumed that there was no Russian presence. And just because a local expert voices an opinion, it cannot be assumed that this opinion is grounded in facts. Davies (2016, 733–43) and Robinson (2016, 509–12) face a similar problem. They use official statements by Russia’s leadership to show the Kremlin’s desire to regulate the conflict and highlight discrepancies between Moscow’s rhetoric and separatist actions to demonstrate lack of control. However, it is problematic to rely on a literal reading of official statements from Moscow to reach conclusions about the conflict. Considering the Kremlin’s official line, which still denies any involvement in the Donbas conflict whatsoever, it is not only possible but even very likely that Moscow’s statements in relation to the war may be diametrically opposed to its capabilities, intentions, and actions. A lack of source criticism becomes even more problematic when there are multiple steps to the primary source. As Brik (2021, 198) correctly points out, such referencing chains create the risk that “pieces of low-quality information from media reports could undergo a transformation into unquestioned common knowledge after a few circles of cross-referencing.” For example, an important source cited by several supporters of the invasion hypothesis (Bowen 2019, 324; Mykhnenko 2020, 529; Wilson 2016, 647–49) is a briefing paper produced by Igor Sutyagin (2015) for the Royal United Services Institute. This paper provides very detailed figures of Russian troop numbers in Ukraine and the specific units involved. However, the paper’s sourcing is patchy. The only sources cited are a Ukrainian news website article, an interview with an unnamed Ukrainian Armed Forces official and some statements by U.S. military officials. Another key source that is frequently cited to emphasise Russia’s role (Gentile 2020, 14; Kuromiya 2019, 258; Mykhnenko 2020, 529; Wilson 2016, 647–49) is a study by Mitrokhin (2015). This study, in turn, relies on a selection of investigative online news articles and social media posts but lacks source criticism (Hauter 2021b, 222). It is, of course, possible that

Sutyagin possesses additional insider information from sources that cannot be named for confidentiality reasons and that the sources cited by Mitrokhin are useful and reliable. However, when secondary sources are used to support an argument, the sources of these sources – or their lack of sources – need to be discussed. As far as possible, referencing chains should be avoided. Evidence should be traced back and attributed to its primary source and the credibility of this source should be addressed explicitly. As I will discuss further in chapter three, this type of source criticism is a key component of process tracing methodology and DOSI analysis. Nevertheless, it is virtually absent from the academic literature on the Donbas conflict and from the wider academic literature on the causes of war.

### **1.5. Chapter Conclusion**

This introductory chapter has provided an overview over the academic debate on the causes of armed conflict and explained the choice of the Donbas war as a case study. I have argued that the Donbas war is the ideal case to show how social science research can adapt to the abundant but murky information environments that characterize war in the social media age. I have then provided a review of the academic literature on the causes of the Donbas war and shown that it features a clear divide between proponents of domestic and external causes. Finally, I have outlined why research on either side of the civil war-invasion divide suffers from a lack of theoretical and methodological rigour.

The persisting divide in the literature on the Donbas war has the potential to create two self-reinforcing echo chambers in the academic discourse. A recent indicator of this is Nitsova's (2021, 3–5) analysis of Russia's role in the Donbas. Her argument that Russia's actions were not the primary determinant of the outbreak of violence in the Donbas is largely based on the findings of several other civil war hypothesis proponents discussed in this chapter. My dissertation aims to counter this trend of echo chamber formation by providing a transparent analysis based on openly available primary information from the conflict zone. At the same time, my dissertation will address the theoretical and methodological deficits which I identified on either side of the current divide in the academic discourse. The following two chapters will develop a theoretical and methodological framework for this purpose.

## **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Conflict Escalation, Critical Junctures, and the Intervention-Delegation Divide**

This chapter will develop a theoretical and conceptual framework that addresses the shortcomings of the academic literature discussed in chapter one and provides the further empirical investigation of the conflict's causes with strong foundations. I will proceed in five steps. Firstly, I will identify previous theoretical work on conflict escalation as a useful point of departure for the development of my framework. Secondly, I will use conflict escalation theory to develop an escalation ladder for the Donbas conflict. Thirdly, I will add a second dimension to the ladder model to account for the fact that different escalation steps took place in different parts of the conflict zone at different points in time. Fourthly, I will bring causation into the model by combining conflict escalation theory with the historical institutionalist concept of critical junctures. I will identify six such junctures in my Donbas conflict escalation sequence model. Fifthly and finally, I will prepare the further empirical investigation of these critical junctures by specifying the research question. I will argue that the answer to the question whether conflict escalation was primarily due to internal or external factors depends on the exact relationship between Russia and the Donbas separatists. For each critical juncture, it has to be investigated whether the armed formations that opposed the Ukrainian state can be considered an organ of the Russian state fighting a delegated war on Russia's behalf.

### ***2.1. Conflict Escalation Theory***

A case-study analysis of the Donbas war's causes has to be based on a theoretical framework which specifies the events and the timeframe of the study while avoiding the different forms of determinism that chapter one identified in the existing literature. Rather than highlighting the structural conditions preceding the outbreak of violence, the framework should facilitate an inductive approach that focuses on events on the ground. In other words, it should follow Dessler's (1991) call for a "causal theory of war" and focus on the processes that defined the transition of the Donbas from a state of peace to a state of war.

A useful starting point for the development of such a framework is the work of scholars who see war as a process of escalating violence. An early theorist of war and escalation is 19th century Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz. In the

first chapter of his famous work *On War*, Clausewitz postulates that war has an innate dynamic that drives it to extremes. This dynamic is based on three factors: the fact that war is a reciprocal act of violence without any theoretical limits; the fact that the only way to avert the possibility of defeat is complete victory; and the fact that both sides have to commit ever-increasing resources and willpower in the attempt to overthrow each other (Clausewitz 2010, 3–6). In reality, however, this innate dynamic towards extremes is moderated by the fact that war is subject to politics. According to Clausewitz, war is a tool that politicians use to achieve certain objectives. For this purpose, decisionmakers divert war from its natural course towards extremes and impose a certain degree of constraint (Clausewitz 2010, 15–17).

Escalation became a prominent topic of strategic studies research during the Cold War. Scholars studied escalation processes to assess the likelihood of nuclear war between the two superpowers and to find ways to prevent it. Work on escalation dynamics became more explicit and practice oriented. Kahn (1965, 39–40), for example, suggests that possible scenarios of an armed conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union can be conceptualized through an “escalation ladder” consisting of 44 steps. The ladder starts with the exchange of diplomatic notes and ends with the indiscriminate use of all available nuclear firepower. The steps are grouped into seven units, which are divided by thresholds. These thresholds signify “very sharp changes in the character of the escalation” (Kahn 1965, 40). An obvious key threshold is the use of nuclear weapons, but examples of other thresholds are attacks on the adversary’s home territory or the deliberate targeting of civilians. Whereas Kahn only defines escalation in terms of examples, analogies, and conditions, Smoke (1977) develops a precise definition. This definition draws on Schelling’s (1966) work on “limited war” – conflict that is characterised by limits to the use of force which the conflict parties choose not to exceed. Schelling argues that limited war became an important concept in the age of nuclear weapons but acknowledges that even in the two World Wars, where “the use of force was substantially unbounded,” certain limits still applied. He gives the example of World War II with its “reciprocal avoidance of gas” and “some restraint in the selection of strategic bombing targets early in the war” (Schelling 1966, 129). Smoke (1977, 4) goes a step further and argues that “virtually all the wars we know of, even those that have

escalated almost as much as possible, have included some aspect of restraint throughout.” His interpretation of Schelling’s work is that virtually all wars are restrained by certain limits which are “objective, hence noticeable by all parties in the situation” and “in some fashion discrete or discontinuous” (Smoke 1977, 32). He calls these war-restraining limits “saliencies.” On this basis, Smoke (1977, 35) defines escalation as “an action that crosses a saliency which defines the current limits of a war.”

The body of literature that tries to use this theoretical work on escalation as a potential framework for the analysis of post-Cold War armed conflict is relatively small. Malyarenko (2016) explicitly refers to conflict escalation in the Donbas. However, she does not provide a theoretical discussion or definition of the concept. In contrast, Angstrom and Petersson’s (2019) recent investigation of the strategic rationales of weaker parties that escalate armed conflict with stronger opponents remains largely theoretical and does not focus on one particular case. Nevertheless, it provides a good example of how qualitative research on escalation can create a new line of inquiry for further research on the causes of war, both qualitative and quantitative. However, its specific focus on escalation by weaker parties limits the study’s usefulness in cases like the Donbas, where it is not completely clear what the power balance was and who initiated the escalation. Kähkö (2021) uses a combination of escalation theory and ethnographic methods to explain why the conflict parties practiced restraint in relation to civilians at various points during the Donbas war. However, his research does not focus on the causes of the war as a whole or its overarching escalation sequence. Fitzsimmons (2019), on the other hand, focuses on a higher level of analysis and studies escalation between the West and Russia within a grand strategy framework that does not look into the details of individual conflicts. Another important contribution is a 2012 *Journal of Strategic Studies* special issue titled “The Escalation and De-escalation of Irregular War.” In her introduction to this special issue, Duyvesteyn (2012b) follows Smoke’s definition of escalation and cites his work extensively. She argues that escalation remains an important concept that can be applied to more recent, smaller armed conflicts.<sup>7</sup> The following contributions in the special issue, however, do not use the work of

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<sup>7</sup> See also Duyvesteyn’s (2021) recent book on escalation and non-state rebel groups.

Smoke, Kahn, or other Cold War theorists. Instead, they base their conceptualizations of escalation on the more general work of Clausewitz. Smith (2012) uses the cases of guerrilla warfare in Argentina and Northern Ireland to illustrate how escalation dynamics may work in modern asymmetrical conflict but claims that it is problematic to make generalizations. Stone (2012) argues that the analysis of the 21st century “war on terror” requires a new conceptualization of escalation. Angstrom and Honig (2012) analyse differences in the use of escalation as a strategic instrument by different, small Western countries participating in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Betz (2012) looks at the relationship between escalation and cyber warfare.<sup>8</sup> And Kitzen (2012) does not discuss escalation theory but evaluates the de-escalation strategy used by Dutch forces in Afghanistan’s Uruzgan province. All these contributions address important topics and they all touch on escalation in the context of their specific cases. However, their underlying conceptualization of escalation is too broad to produce a common theoretical framework that could connect their work and draw a bigger picture. The result is a fragmented array of findings that is prone to attacks from opponents of case study research, who could argue that there is no contribution to a more general understanding of war. Only in the conclusion to the special issue does Duyvesteyn (2012a, 740–41) recall Smoke’s definition that “escalation can be described as raising the level of violence in conflict by crossing salencies.” She then calls for further research on the topic, in particular for “more case study material with a specific focus on escalation.”

My dissertation will follow this call by using an adapted combination of Smoke’s (1977) definition of escalation, Kahn’s (1965) ladder analogy, and the historical institutionalist concept of critical junctures to analyse the early stages of the Donbas conflict. The resulting framework will provide a structured escalation sequence model of the outbreak of violence in eastern Ukraine. It is the purpose of this model to provide not only a basis for further process tracing analysis in the context of my specific research question but also a more general blueprint that can be adapted for the investigation of different conflicts.

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<sup>8</sup> Another, more recent study of escalation and cyber warfare by Borghard and Lonergan (2019, 124) mentions the work of Smoke and Kahn but chooses a different definition of escalation based on the perception of conflict parties. Talmadge (2019) uses a similar definition for her study of emerging technologies and intra-war escalation risk.



## **2.2. A Donbas Conflict Escalation Ladder**

As a first step towards a case-specific conflict escalation framework, I created an escalation ladder for the Donbas war (Table 1). For simplicity's sake, I omitted Kahn's (1965) subdivision into steps and units of escalation. Instead, my ladder consists only of steps. Each of these steps represents a development which crossed a threshold beyond the limits that previously defined the conflict, which is in line with Smoke's (1977, 35) definition of escalation.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, I followed Angstrom and Petersson's (2019, 287) suggestion that Smoke's definition of escalation should be extended to include actions "both within and outside war." Their proposal is sensible because it enables the inclusion of escalatory dynamics that precede the first armed clashes.

The creation of a conflict-specific escalation ladder has to be an inductive process. It cannot draw on predefined thresholds because Smoke's (1977, 32) conceptualization "dispenses with any attempt to find an a priori, non-contextual size for escalations." This allows context-specific analysis, but it also requires a context-specific justification of each step. For each step, it has to be specified what threshold was crossed and why this threshold consisted of noticeable and discrete limits which previously defined the conflict. This is what differentiates an escalation ladder from a simple event timeline. The ladder only includes events which crossed limits that previously defined the conflict. Events that do not meet this criterion are excluded even if they appear important on first sight and received attention in the political debate and academic literature. I discuss some of these excluded non-thresholds in further detail below.

In order to maximize transparency and avoid the theoretical preconceptions affecting the academic literature on the Donbas war, I refrained from using secondary academic sources as the escalation ladder's empirical foundation. Instead, I rely on a dataset of online media reports that were published at the time of the events. Unlike secondary sources, these media reports consist of real-time information that has not been subject to selection and interpretation in light of

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<sup>9</sup> Considering that the term "saliency," which Smoke uses, is not very intuitive, I follow Kahn's terminology and used the term "threshold" to describe the war-restraining limits that are crossed by escalatory steps.

subsequent developments. Naturally, a problem that remains is the potential political bias of media outlets and potential gaps in media coverage (Althaus et al. 2011; Gladun 2020). The impact of this, however, can be mitigated through a diverse sample of region-specific media sources that represent the views of all major conflict actors. Moreover, the events on the ladder can subsequently be checked against the academic literature to further minimise the risk of omissions.

I created a first draft of the ladder based on the manual review of a dataset containing 6,430 media reports from the Ukrainian news website *Ukrainska Pravda* and the Russian state news agency *TASS*. These two sources represent the view of a high-profile Ukrainian news outlet with pro-Western views as well as the view of the Russian state. I gathered the dataset using Python programming language code (see Appendix 2), which downloaded all articles about the Donbas<sup>10</sup> published on the two websites between the sudden regime change in Kyiv on 22 February and the First Minsk Ceasefire Agreement on 5 September 2014.

To test whether the steps on the first draft ladder really crossed noticeable and discrete limits which previously defined the conflict, I created a set of keywords relating to each step (see Appendix 3). I then searched for these keywords in an extended dataset containing 58,003 media reports. This led to the merger and reordering of some parts of the first draft ladder and produced the refined Donbas escalation ladder shown in Table 1 below. For example, the first draft of the ladder had included the emergence of “self-defence units” in the Donbas as a separate escalation step. The extended dataset search then revealed that such units were already present in the immediate aftermath of the regime change in Kyiv. For this reason, I moved them to the baseline section of the refined escalation ladder.

The extended dataset includes Donbas-focused reporting from eight news websites representing a broad spectrum of affiliations and ideological viewpoints.

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<sup>10</sup> My search terms included the Russian-language terms for Donetsk, Luhansk, Donetsk Region, and Luhansk Region, as well as the acronyms of the two self-proclaimed separatist republics (DNR and LNR). The setup of the *Ukrainska Pravda* website allowed a stemmed full-text search of all articles published during the specified timeframe. For the *TASS* website, I had to rely on the website’s internal search algorithm to process the search terms and select relevant articles for the specified timeframe.

In addition to the initial small dataset, it includes all reports published between 22 February and 5 September 2014 on the local Donbas news websites *Novosti Donbassa*, *Ostrov*, *Novorosinform.org*, and *Novorossia.su*, and on the Donbas sections of the Ukrainian national newspaper websites *Vesti* and *Segodnya*. *Novosti Donbassa* and *Ostrov* support a united, pro-European Ukraine. *Novorosinform.org* and *Novorossia.su* cover events from the perspective of Russian imperialism, which provided an ideological framework for separatism in the Donbas. Because these two news websites only started working properly in late May 2014, I also included *Vesti* and *Segodnya* to represent reporting on the earliest stages of unrest in the region from sources critical of the new Kyiv authorities. Both *Vesti* and *Segodnya* are linked to oligarchs who had been allies of the replaced President Viktor Yanukovich.

### *2.2.1. Steps and Thresholds*

The result is the refined Donbas escalation ladder shown in Table 1. It cites reports from the extended dataset. In cases where the dataset contains numerous reports on one event, the report containing the most information is cited. Multiple reports are cited when there is no single report that covers all key aspects of an event. When a report consists exclusively of information that was copied from another source outside the dataset and the original source could be easily located, this original source is cited. When a report cites YouTube videos, or when a YouTube search produced videos that provide a better overview over an event than a report from the dataset, these videos are cited instead of the report.

The escalation ladder and the subsequent escalation sequence model are supposed to act as a theoretical framework for more in-depth research on the war's causes. They are not supposed to predetermine the result of such research. For this reason, they remain focused on observable events that are not disputed within the media dataset or the academic literature. As far as possible, they remain agnostic about contentious issues regarding the drivers of these events. An in-depth investigation of specific events and their causes, which will follow later in this dissertation, will require a more elaborate methodology. However, for the identification of general escalation trends and the selection of cases that warrant closer scrutiny, the approach adopted here is sufficient.

**Table 1: Refined Donbas Conflict Escalation Ladder**

<p><b>Baseline:</b> In the immediate aftermath of the replacement of President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014, the situation in the Donbas was characterized by protest activity from both supporters and opponents of the new Kyiv authorities. According to the extended dataset, the largest protest in the last week of February took place in Donetsk on 23 February. According to Segodnya (2014a), about 3,000 Antimaidan activists gathered. However, the pictures accompanying the report as well as video footage from YouTube (2014b) suggest that the number of attendants was smaller. The footage shows scattered groups of protesters without a united message or agenda beyond opposition to the Maidan movement. The most serious altercation during this initial period was a brawl in Luhansk on 22 February which reportedly left two to four people injured (Ostrov 2014a; Ukrainska Pravda 2014a; 0642.ua 2014a). Moreover, there were some reports of Antimaidan activists recruiting people to volunteer “self-defence units” to guarantee public order and defend the region against pro-Maidan radicals (Novosti Donbassa 2014a; Ostrov 2014b; Segodnya 2014b).</p>		
<b>Step</b>	<b>Threshold</b>	<b>Justification</b>
1. Large protest events supporting separatism	No vocal challenge to Ukrainian state sovereignty over the Donbas	The Donbas did not have a previous history of significant separatist activism. Even during the immediate aftermath of President Yanukovich’s departure on 22 February, regional expressions of discontent focused on support for the old regime and fear of unrest spreading from Kyiv. Separatist demands were still limited to individuals or small groups. A large protest event in Donetsk on 1 March was the first large-scale challenge to the status of the region. Protesters shouted pro-Russian slogans and applauded the proclamation of “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev <sup>11</sup> and his intention

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<sup>11</sup> Because Hubariev was a Ukrainian citizen at the time of the events, I use the Ukrainian transliteration of his name, rather than the Russian transliteration Pavel Gubarev.

		to hold a referendum on independence or joining Russia (YouTube 2014i; 2014g). A similar rally with Russian flags and “referendum” slogans was held in Luhansk on the same day (YouTube 2014h; 2014f). This moved separatism from the fringes to the centre of local politics.
2. Occupation of state buildings	No disruption of state institutions’ work or acts of vandalism against them	Opponents of the regime change in Kyiv initially called for public order and were firmly opposed to the idea of Maidan-like unrest in the Donbas. Separatist activists who stormed and temporarily occupied administrative buildings in Luhansk and Donetsk on 2 and 3 March (Vesti 2014a; YouTube 2014j; 2014l; 2014k) removed this limit by showing that some people were prepared to use force and mirror the actions of Kyiv Maidan activists in order to achieve separatist goals.
3. Authorities arrest separatist leaders	Authorities tolerate separatist activity and refrain from interfering	The authorities did not interfere in the protests and the first occupation of buildings. With the arrests of Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev on 6 March (Novosti Donbassa 2014c), the security forces crossed this non-interference threshold and took action to counter separatist activism.
4. Major violence among protesters	No loss of life or more than four people injured at a protest event	During the initial protests and occupations of buildings, violence had been limited to acts of vandalism and occasional minor altercations between protesters. Violence did not exceed the baseline level of four injured activists. Mass brawls between pro-Russian and pro-Kyiv protesters in Luhansk on 9 March and in Donetsk on 13 March crossed this threshold and significantly raised the conflict’s level of

		violence. One anti-separatist activist died and several dozen people were injured (Ostrov 2014g; Ukrainska Pravda 2014c).
5. Appearance of armed groups	Absence of military-grade weaponry	The appearance of separatist armed groups in early to mid-April raised the challenge to state authority to a new level. The groups consisted of armed men in camouflage equipped with military-grade weaponry, who permanently occupied and fortified state buildings (YouTube 2014af; 2014aj). Even at the height of earlier unrest in Kyiv, protesters had never gained access to military-grade weaponry.
6. Ukrainian military deployed	No involvement of the Ukrainian Armed Forces	The mid-April decision to send the Ukrainian Armed Forces to the Donbas (Turchynov 2014b) created the possibility of armed clashes between the military and the armed groups. It crossed another limit that had been firmly in place even at the height of earlier unrest in Kyiv, where President Yanukovich had refrained from involving the armed forces.
7. Armed clashes	No battle-related casualties	The first battle-related casualties in mid-April (Turchynov 2014b; Vesti 2014d) mark the outbreak of armed conflict according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's methodology. Accordingly, these first armed clashes represent a key threshold between war and peace in the Donbas.
8. Use of air force, tanks, or heavy artillery	Neither side uses air force, tanks, or heavy artillery	Airstrikes, tanks, and heavy artillery, first observed in the Donbas between late May and mid-June (Segodnya 2014c; 2014d; 2014e), have a higher destructive potential than light weapons. Their absence from the battlefield is an important sign of restraint

		because their use dramatically increases the number of potential casualties and the likelihood of collateral damage.
9. Artillery fire affecting urban centres	Conflict parties avoid fighting in densely populated areas	Keeping hostilities away from urban centres is another important sign of restraint because fighting in densely populated areas increases the likelihood of civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Artillery fire from or at urban areas in Sloviansk was first reported at the end of May (Vesti 2014i). Regular artillery fire from or at urban areas in Luhansk began in early July (Ostrov 2014s) and in Donetsk in mid-July (YouTube 2014br).
10. Cross-border shelling from Russia (alleged)	No shelling of Ukrainian positions from Russian territory	Shelling from Russian territory, first alleged by Ukrainian forces in mid-July (Ukrainska Pravda 2014p; Segodnya 2014f), would increase the theatre of war across international borders. It would mean that Ukrainian positions came under fire from places that were out of bounds for retaliatory strikes because the Russian leadership, which denies that any cross-border shelling took place, would have portrayed such a strike as an act of aggression.
11. Invasion by regular Russian troops (alleged)	No direct involvement of Russia's regular armed forces	An invasion by regular Russian troops, which allegedly took place in late August (Ostrov 2014t), would have added the firepower and expertise of Russia's regular armed forces to the conflict. This would have removed the limiting effects of the covert nature of manpower and equipment supplies that may have taken place during previous steps.

### 2.2.2. *Non-Thresholds*

A comparison of the escalation ladder with the academic literature does not indicate that the occurrence or the importance of the developments outlined in the ladder are subject to any controversy. However, some scholars highlight other events that are not included in the ladder. At first sight, some of these additional events could be interpreted as escalation threshold crossings. A closer analysis, however, suggests that they were not part of the escalation sequence.

**2.2.2.1. *The Euromaidan Protests.*** When investigating the causes of the Donbas conflict, it makes sense to limit the initial analysis to the time after 22 February 2014. Rather than escalating the conflict in the Donbas, the sudden regime change that happened in Kyiv on that day created a baseline from which the conflict could escalate in the first place. This is an important difference. There were no signs of war in the Donbas on 22 February 2014. Manifestations of public discontent were moderate considering that the country had just experienced a revolution. The crucial question of conflict escalation in the Donbas is how the region transitioned from this post-revolutionary state of tense calm to a state of war. An analysis of the previous violence in Kyiv diverts attention from this question and leads to conceptual overstretch. It dissolves the specific issue of the Donbas conflict in a broader analysis. It is clear that the Euromaidan was a necessary condition for the war – just like, for example, the 2012 re-election of Vladimir Putin or the breakdown of the Soviet Union. However, this does not mean that it is useful to view all these preceding events as part of the Donbas conflict. On the contrary, identifying their place in an overarching explanation of the war is only possible after analysing the transition from peace to war in the region itself.

**2.2.2.2. *The Geneva Agreement.*** On 17 April 2014, representatives of the European Union, the United States, Ukraine, and Russia issued a statement after multilateral talks in Geneva (Ukrainian Foreign Ministry 2014). The statement called for the disarmament of all illegal armed groups, the return of all illegally seized buildings, and an inclusive process of constitutional reform in Ukraine. At first sight, the statement could be perceived as an instance of de-escalation. However, when looking at events in the region at the time, it becomes clear that the statement had no discernible de-escalating impact. Over the following weeks,



the region witnessed unprecedented levels of violence. This suggest that scholars who highlight the Geneva Agreement (Davies 2016, 735–36; Malyarenko and Wolff 2018, 197–99) overestimate its significance for the actual course of events.

**2.2.2.3. The Separatist “Referenda.”** Other scholars draw attention to the 11 May independence “referenda” organised by the leadership of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (Robinson 2016, 511; Matsuzato 2017, 192). Although these “referenda” received significant media attention, their significance in terms of conflict escalation was negligible. The two “republics” had already been proclaimed. Armed men had already occupied buildings in the regional centres and were engaging in armed combat with Ukrainian security forces in Sloviansk and Mariupol. In this context, a symbolic vote in a number of towns across the region did not represent a step that pushed the level of violence across limits that had previously defined the conflict.

**2.2.2.4. Events after the First Minsk Agreement.** August 2014 was the deadliest month of the entire war. It was followed by the 5 September 2014 First Minsk Ceasefire Agreement (OSCE 2014). This Agreement marks the end of the conflict’s initial escalation sequence. Autumn 2014 was a period of relative calm. This was followed by another escalation uptick in early 2015, which led to the Second Minsk Agreement (OSCE 2015). However, fighting did not reach the scale observed in July and August 2014 and, from February 2015 onwards, the war continued to de-escalate.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the First Minsk Agreement of September 2014 marks the highest level of escalation observed in the Donbas. It also marks the emergence of the key features that continue to characterize the armed conflict to the time of writing: hostilities of varying but generally decreasing intensity which are contained along a defined contact line that is not subject to major changes. For this reason, it is reasonable to choose 5 September 2014 as the cut-off point for an analysis of the conflict’s formative phase. Extending the analysis further to include the subsequent de-escalation process is unlikely to provide significant added value regarding the identification of the conflict’s causes.

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<sup>12</sup> Detailed Ukrainian casualty statistics are available from the Memory Book for Ukraine’s Fallen volunteer project (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.a). For a compilation of frontline maps produced by the Ukrainian military, see TSN (2019a).

### **2.3. Escalation Tables**

The one-dimensional escalation ladder shown in Table 1 provides a basic framework for the analysis of the Donbas conflict. However, this framework is still too simplistic to be an adequate model of the escalation of violence in the region. The ladder has to be extended to take account of the fact that the actual escalation sequence in the Donbas was spread unevenly across space and time. Different thresholds were crossed in different places at different points in time with the involvement of different actors. Some thresholds were crossed in close succession while others were further apart. For this reason, I used the extended news reports dataset and the subsets obtained by keyword searches to create a more complex escalation table. This table shows key events relating to each escalation threshold in different parts of the Donbas over time. It shows that the developments in the region are more accurately reflected in two dimensions, with the level of escalation on the imaginary y-axis and the passage of time on the x-axis. For legibility purposes, I split this two-dimensional escalation table into three parts, which are shown as Tables 2-4 below.

With the exception of cross-border shelling and the invasion by regular Russian troops, none of the events included in these tables are controversial in the sense that either side of the conflict, their affiliated media outlets, or any part the academic literature dispute their occurrence. For example, in virtually all cases of fighting, all sides agree that an armed clash occurred. What is disputed are the details of the event – the actors involved, their motivation and the nature, sequence, and consequences of their actions. In most cases, the question of Russian involvement is at the core of such controversies.

**Table 2: Donbas Escalation Table Part 1**

1. Large protest events supporting separatism	1 March: Several thousand people gather at rallies across the region (YouTube 2014g; 2014f; 2014d; 2014e).	<i>Rallies continue throughout March/early April but do not increase in scale.</i>				
2. Activists storm state buildings	2 March: Activists enter Luhansk Regional State Administration building, force deputies to pass resolution declaring Kyiv authorities illegitimate (Vesti 2014a; YouTube 2014j). 3 March: Activists storm Donetsk Regional State Administration building (YouTube 2014l; 2014k).	<i>Further temporary seizures of administrative buildings until mid-March.</i>				
3. Authorities arrest separatist leaders	6 March: Donetsk "People's Governor" Pavlo Hubariiev arrested (Novosti Donbassa 2014c).	11-13 March: Luhansk separatist leaders Arsen Klinchaiev and Oleksandr Kharytonov arrested (Ukrainska Pravda 2014e; TASS 2014a).	5 April: Mariupol "People's Mayor" Dmytro Kuzmenko arrested (Ostrov 2014h).			
4. Major violence among protesters	9 March: Antimaidan protesters attack Maidan activists in Luhansk, several people injured (Ukrainska Pravda 2014c).	13 March: One person dead and many injured in clashes between pro-Russian and pro-European protesters in Donetsk (Ostrov 2014g).				
5. Appearance of armed groups			6-8 April: Activists seize Donetsk Regional State Administration building and Luhansk Security Service building, build barricades, and obtain arms (Ostrov 2014j; YouTube 2014ac; 62.ua 2014; YouTube 2014af).	12 April: Armed men in camouflage seize police stations in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (YouTube 2014aj; 2014al).	<i>Appearance of armed militias in other towns throughout April/May.</i>	
6. Ukrainian military deployed			7 April: Interim President Turchynov threatens separatists with "antiterrorist measures" (Turchynov 2014a). Threat remains unimplemented.	13 April: Interim President Turchynov announces beginning of "antiterrorist operation" involving the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Turchynov 2014b).	14-24 April: Reports of limited Ukrainian Armed Forces activity in the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area (Vesti 2014c; Novosti Donbassa 2014d).	
7. Armed clashes				13 April: Sloviansk separatists attack Security Service vehicles and kill one operative (Turchynov 2014b; LifeNews 2014b). 17 April: Armed men try to seize Mariupol military base, several deaths reported (Vesti 2014d).	24 April: Ukrainian forces report attack on separatist checkpoints near Sloviansk, several people reported dead (Ostrov 2014l; Vesti 2014e). 2 May: Two Ukrainian military helicopters shot down near Sloviansk (Novosti Donbassa 2014e). 5 May: Major armed clashes near Sloviansk (Novosti Donbassa 2014f).	<i>Regular fighting around Sloviansk/Kramatorsk until early July.</i>

Table 3: Donbas Escalation Table Part 2

7. Armed clashes	9 May: Major National Guard operation in Mariupol, several people reported dead (Novosti Donbassa 2014g; Vesti 2014h).	<p>19 May: Unsuccessful separatist attack on Uspenka border checkpoint in Donetsk Region (Novosti Donbassa 2014h).</p> <p>22 May: Ukrainian forces sustain heavy casualties in separatist ambush on Ukrainian forces near Volnovakha, Donetsk Region (Ostrov 2014p).</p> <p>22 May: Fighting breaks out near Rubizhne, Luhansk Region (Ukrainska Pravda 2014n).</p> <p>23 May: Donbas Battalion sustains losses in clashes near Karlivka, Donetsk Region (Novosti Donbassa 2014i).</p>	26 May: Intense fighting around Donetsk Airport. Around 40 people reported dead (TASS 2014b).	2 June: Separatists attack Luhansk Border Force headquarters, several casualties reported (Novosti Donbassa 2014k; TASS 2014c).		<p>13 June: Heavy fighting reported from near Diakove in the south of Luhansk Region (Glavkom 2014).</p> <p>13 June: Separatists lose control over Mariupol (Novorosinform.org 2014d; Liga.Novosti 2014a).</p>
8. Use of air force, tanks, or heavy artillery			<p>26 May: Ukrainian forces use Su-25 and Mig-29 jets as well as helicopters to fight separatists at Donetsk Airport (Segodnya 2014c).</p> <p>28-29 May: First separatist claims of Ukrainian forces using heavy artillery near Sloviansk and Rubizhne (Novorossia.su 2014b; Ostrov 2014q).</p>	2 June: Alleged Ukrainian airstrike on Luhansk Regional State Administration (Novorosinform.org 2014a).	6 June: Ukrainian Armed Forces confirm deployment of tanks in the Sloviansk area (Segodnya 2014d).	<p>12 June: Three tanks spotted on separatist-controlled territory (YouTube 2014az).</p> <p>13 June: Ukrainian forces seize separatist Grad multiple rocket launcher near Dobropillia, Donetsk Region (Segodnya 2014e).</p>
9. Artillery fire affecting urban centres			30 May: Sloviansk city centre shelled, hospital damaged (Vesti 2014i).		9 June: Separatists claim Sloviansk city centre shelled from Grad multiple rocket launchers (Novorosinform.org 2014b; TASS 2014d).	

**Table 4: Donbas Escalation Table Part 3**

7. Armed clashes	5 July: Separatists withdraw from Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area (Novorosinform.org 2014e).	<i>Ukrainian Forces are closing in on Donetsk and Luhansk, attempt to separate and encircle the cities throughout July-August.</i>	
8. Use of air force, tanks, or heavy artillery		14 July: Ukrainian An-26 plane is shot down near Izvaryne over Luhansk Region at an altitude of 6,500 metres – too high for portable anti-aircraft systems (Vesti 2014j). 17 July: Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 is shot down over the conflict zone.	
9. Artillery fire affecting urban centres	4 July: Shelling of residential area reported from Luhansk (Ostrov 2014s).	19 July: Shelling of residential area reported from Donetsk (YouTube 2014br).	<i>Reports of shelling of residential areas in Donetsk and Luhansk continue throughout late July and August.</i>
10. Cross-Border Shelling (alleged)		11 July: Artillery fire, allegedly from the direction of the Russian border, inflicts heavy casualties among Ukrainian forces near Zelenopillia, Luhansk Region (Ukrainska Pravda 2014p). 17 July: Ukrainian forces report further cross-border shelling from Russia (Segodnya 2014f).	<i>Reports of cross-border shelling continue throughout late July and August.</i>
11. Invasion by regular Russian troops (alleged)			24-31 August: Ukrainian forces are defeated at Ilovaisk, Luhansk Airport, and Novoazovsk amid reports of an invasion by regular Russian troops (Ostrov 2014t; Segodnya 2014g).

While the escalation tables provide a structure for further analysis of the conflict, they cannot solve the controversies regarding the actors and actions involved in each event. Neither do they address questions of causality. The inductive sequencing of events into escalatory steps can facilitate causal analysis by structuring a complex process. However, it cannot be assumed that the resulting tables are a causal sequence in which one step causes the next. The causal significance of each step, both for subsequent steps and for the conflict as a whole, remains an open question.

Smoke's (1977) conceptualization of escalation provides little guidance to address these issues. Its treatment of agency and causality is ambiguous. Smoke outlines two different ways to understand escalation. It can either be understood as an *act* – a sequence of “independent and conscious” decisions followed by the “deliberate execution” of these decisions. Or it can be understood as a *phenomenon* – a sequence that, once started, “keeps going on its own, partly outside the control of any participants” (Smoke 1977, 21). Smoke then argues that escalation is in fact a mixture of both. It ultimately depends on the decisions of actors because, “no matter what occurs in a war, someone [...] is giving orders and taking actions.” At the same time, escalation also has an “innate upward dynamic.” For this reason, it is a “confusing problem, both intellectually and in the making of policy” (Smoke 1977, 23).

#### **2.4. Critical Junctures**

This problem leads to the next step towards my theoretical framework – the introduction of the historical institutionalist idea of critical junctures as a helpful concept to analyse escalation in terms of actors and causality. Collier and Munck (2017, 2) define a critical juncture as “a major episode of institutional innovation” which leaves an “enduring legacy.” Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 348) add that a critical juncture is short compared to its legacy and that, during a critical juncture, the choices of actors have a higher impact than during the legacy period.

War is not usually analysed as an institution. However, social scientists often define institutions as rules or constraints that regulate human interactions, which is similar to Schelling's (1966) and Smoke's (1977) definition of limited war. North (1991, 1) describes institutions as “humanly devised constraints that structure

political, economic and social interaction.” According to Hodgson (2006, 18), they are “systems of established and embedded social rules.” And Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, 79) define institutions as “the rules that govern incentives in politics.” Moreover, three of the four criteria that define a critical juncture according to the definition above automatically apply to escalation steps as described by Kahn (1965) and Smoke (1977). Firstly, an escalation step constitutes a major episode of innovation in the context of an armed conflict because any redefinition of the limits of a war represents a major change to the implicit rules that restrain violence. Secondly, choices that cross a threshold which defines the current limits of a war are, by definition, more impactful than choices that stay within these limits. Thirdly, an act of escalation in war can only leave an enduring legacy if this legacy is long compared to the act itself.

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

Hence, in order to qualify as a critical juncture, an escalation step has to leave an enduring legacy. In the context of the present project, this has to be a legacy of armed conflict. This legacy could consist of hostilities that continue for a long period of time or damage that takes a long time to repair. Alternatively or simultaneously, it could consist of further escalation – of making additional critical junctures possible, which then leave a legacy of violence further down the line. Steps that fulfil this criterion are key to answering my research question. It is exactly the further scrutiny of these steps and the identification of the actors who made the relevant choices that can provide answers regarding the role played by domestic and foreign factors in the Donbas war’s formative phase.

The idea that critical junctures leave an “enduring legacy” (Collier and Munck 2017, 2) is closely linked to causality in terms of necessary conditions. Actors’ choices can only leave a legacy on the further course of events if this course of

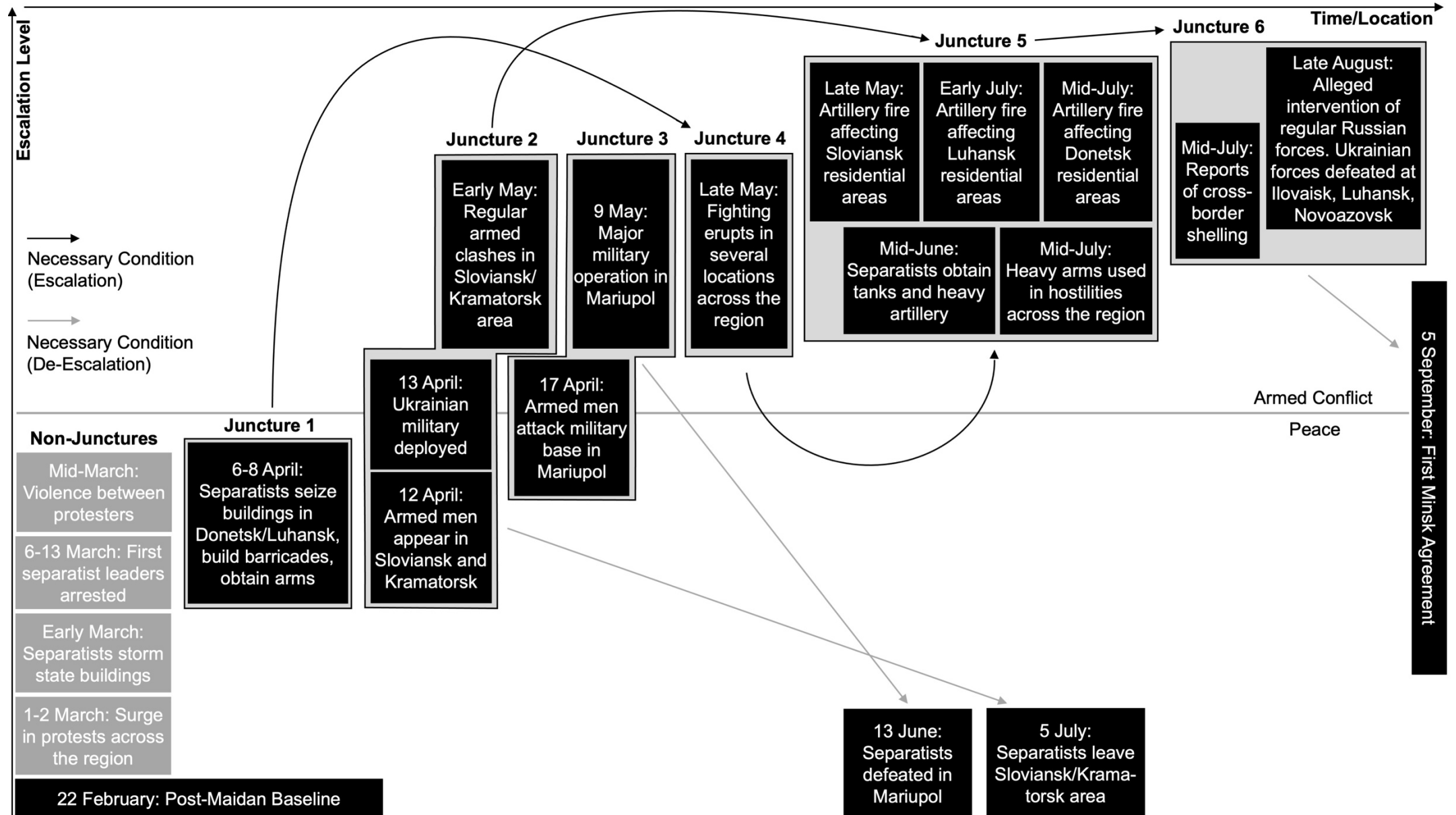
events would not have been the same without their impact. They do not have to be a sufficient condition. Necessity, however, is crucial.

For example, the occupation of the Luhansk regional office of the Security Service of Ukraine on 6 April 2014 by separatist activists and the seizure of arms stored in the building was not a sufficient condition for the violence and destruction that the war inflicted upon the city. This violence and destruction required additional choices on both sides – such as the mobilization of the Ukrainian military in the region and the separatists’ decision to build fortifications and deploy forces across other parts of the city. Arguably, these later decisions were more important causes than those of 6 April, and, ultimately, most of the violence and destruction was primarily the legacy of the decision to use heavy arms in urban areas of the city. However, if the subsequent more direct causes were unlikely to have appeared in the absence of the choices made on 6 April, these early choices would still mark a critical juncture because they left an enduring legacy by enabling further escalation.

As I have pointed out earlier, an escalation sequence is not the same as a causal sequence. It cannot simply be assumed that every escalation step is a necessary cause of the next one, or of any other escalation steps further down the line. Therefore, the identification of critical junctures in the Donbas requires an analysis of the causal dynamics between the events outlined in the Donbas escalation ladder and the escalation tables (see Tables 1-4). This causal analysis results in an escalation sequence model that divides the formative phase of the Donbas war into six critical junctures. The model is illustrated in Figure 1 below and explained in detail in the following sections.



**Figure 1: Donbas Conflict Escalation Sequence**



#### *2.4.1. Non-Junctures: The Protests of March 2014*

The Donbas escalation ladder and the escalation tables (see Tables 1-4) include events that precede the outbreak of hostilities. In order to qualify as critical junctures, however, such pre-conflict escalation steps would have to be necessary conditions either for the start of the armed conflict or for its subsequent further escalation. A closer look at the relevant events suggests that, up to the permanent and armed building occupations of 6 April 2014, none of the developments in the region meet this criterion.

**2.4.1.1. Mass Protests Against the Kyiv Authorities.** On the weekend of 1-2 March 2014, large protest rallies against the new Kyiv authorities took place in several locations across the Donbas. The largest rallies were reported from the regional centres of Donetsk and Luhansk with 10,000 people reported in each city (Ostrov 2014d; 2014e). However, turnout did not increase further. On the contrary, by April, the protest movement had lost rather than gained momentum. This becomes particularly apparent when comparing videos of the crowd that had gathered in front of the Donetsk Regional State Administration on 1 March and 6 April. On the former date, protesters filled the entire square (YouTube 2014c). On the latter date, they constituted a scattered group of people that only occupied a small section of it (YouTube 2014s; 2014t). A calculation of the square's area on Google Earth combined with crowd size models provided by crowd safety expert Keith Still (2013) suggests that 2,000 people is a generous maximum estimate for the 6 April event. Footage from Luhansk from 6 April presents a similar picture. The crowd of protesters was limited to a relatively small area that is unlikely to hold more than 2,000 people (YouTube 2014r; 2014x). Gatherings of this size were not significantly above the baseline of protest activity in the Donbas in the immediate aftermath of the replacement of President Yanukovych in late February. Hence, the protest rallies in March do not qualify as a necessary condition for the conflict's further escalation in April. A core group of radicalized activists could have escalated the conflict in April regardless of the scale of earlier protest activity.

**2.4.1.2. The Occupation of State Buildings.** Initial incidents of protesters storming state buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk in early March were temporary. Activists vacated the occupied buildings after a few hours or days. None of these

attempts had a lasting impact, apart from media attention, the arrest of some separatist leaders, and some damage to property. Moreover, there were no reports of building seizures in Donetsk and Luhansk between 16 March and 6 April. This suggests that the events of 6 April – when people stormed buildings, stayed in these buildings, built barricades, and obtained arms – should be analysed as separate events and not as the consequence of previous building occupations.

**2.4.1.3. The Arrest of Separatist Leaders.** Arresting protest leaders could cause further escalation of a conflict either by radicalizing an initially moderate protest movement or by strengthening a protest movement because new people join to demand freedom for the leaders. Neither was the case in the Donbas. The separatist movement in Donetsk and Luhansk did not begin with a moderate agenda but with temporary building seizures and calls for a complete power transfer to the local level and referenda on independence or joining Russia. These demands and methods, which were completely unacceptable for the Kyiv authorities, remained unchanged after the arrests of early March. There is no reason to assume that the arrested separatist leaders or their supporters would have changed course and become more moderate had the arrests not happened. Neither did the arrests of early March galvanize further public support. As argued above, the protest movement lost rather than gained momentum throughout the course of the month.

**2.4.1.4. Violence Among Protesters.** There is no plausible causal connection between the violence against pro-European activists at protests in mid-March and the appearance of armed groups. Violence among protesters could have caused further escalation either if protesters had obtained arms as a result or if it had resulted in the security forces using violence to stop further protests from taking place. Neither was the case in the Donbas. The first arms appeared not at protest events but in occupied buildings and at no point did the security forces use violence against protesters. This means that the first critical juncture of the conflict took place in early April because none of the events of March qualify.

#### *2.4.2. Juncture 1: Donetsk and Luhansk, Early April*

On 6 April 2014, separatist activists stormed the building of the Regional State Administration in Donetsk and the regional headquarters of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in Luhansk. Unlike in previous instances of building seizures in the Donbas, the activists did not vacate the two buildings after a short period of time but started to build barricades around them (Ostrov 2014j; YouTube 2014ac). More importantly, they armed themselves with automatic rifles seized from the SBU (62.ua 2014; YouTube 2014af). This was the first appearance of military-grade equipment in separatist hands in the Donbas. The Ukrainian authorities responded with threats of “antiterrorist measures” (Turchynov 2014a) but did not take any action. Instead, representatives from Kyiv travelled to Donetsk and Luhansk to oversee negotiations with the separatists (Ukrainska Pravda 2014f; 2014h; 2014j; 2014l).

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

#### *2.4.3. Juncture 2: Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Surroundings, Mid-April*

On 12 April, armed men in camouflage seized police stations in the towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the northwest of Donetsk Region (YouTube 2014aj; 2014al). The following morning, a group of these men attacked SBU operatives just outside Sloviansk. One person died and several were injured. On the same day, Ukraine’s Acting President Turchynov announced the launch of an “antiterrorist operation” with the involvement of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Hromadske TV 2014b; LifeNews 2014b; 2014a; Turchynov 2014b). Regular armed clashes between Ukrainian troops and separatist forces commenced in early May, and the area around Sloviansk became the central theatre of armed conflict in the Donbas until the separatists’ withdrawal on 5 July (Novorosinform.org 2014e).

Because this episode of conflict escalation featured the crossing of three escalation thresholds – the appearance of armed groups, the deployment of the military, and armed clashes – in close succession, it makes sense to group these events together in one critical juncture. There can be no doubt that what happened around Sloviansk in mid-April left a lasting legacy of armed conflict. It was in the context of these events that the Ukrainian military was first mobilized, and for over two months the most intense fighting took place around Sloviansk. It was in this area that heavy artillery and tanks were first used in late May and early June (Ostrov 2014q; Segodnya 2014d). Even if the whole armed conflict had been limited to this episode, it would have left a legacy of violence and destruction that was unprecedented in Ukraine since World War II.

#### *2.4.4. Juncture 3: Mariupol – Where Separatism Failed*

After Sloviansk, the southern port city of Mariupol was the first place in the Donbas where tensions crossed the armed conflict threshold (Novosti Donbassa 2014g; Vesti 2014d; 2014h). Like in the Sloviansk area, the appearance of armed groups, the deployment of the security forces, and the first armed clashes happened in close succession. However, the level of violence and separatist control never reached the level observed in other areas of the Donbas and the Kyiv authorities consolidated their control over the city as early as mid-June (Novorosinform.org 2014d; Liga.Novosti 2014a). Nevertheless, the fighting that occurred left a legacy of armed conflict in this city. Moreover, because of its relatively short duration, the escalation of violence in Mariupol is interesting from a comparative perspective. Its analysis may indicate why armed separatism was less successful in Mariupol than in other parts of the Donbas.

#### *2.4.5. Juncture 4: The Fighting Spreads, Late May*

For the first month of armed conflict, fighting in the Donbas was limited to the Sloviansk area and to Mariupol. However, from late May onwards – around the time of the Ukrainian presidential election – hostilities rapidly spread to several other locations across the Donbas. The most important new theatres of violence were Volnovakha (Ostrov 2014p), Karlivka (Novosti Donbassa 2014i), Donetsk Airport (TASS 2014b), parts of Luhansk city (Novosti Donbassa 2014k; TASS 2014c), an urban agglomeration northwest of Luhansk (Ukrainska Pravda

2014n), and rural areas near the Russian-Ukrainian border in the south of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions (Novosti Donbassa 2014h; Glavkom 2014). This sudden increase in the theatre of war not only led to a significant number of casualties, but also paved the way for continuing hostilities in these new hotbeds. Each incident of fighting spreading to a new location could be defined as a separate critical juncture. However, to avoid a fragmentation of the analysis and to emphasize that all these incidents share the legacy of expanding the theatre of war, it makes sense to group them into one juncture. If appropriate, this juncture can later be subdivided.

#### *2.4.6. Juncture 5: Tanks and Heavy Artillery, June-July*

The Ukrainian Armed Forces first used airstrikes during armed clashes at Donetsk Airport on 26 May (Segodnya 2014c). The use of heavy artillery was first reported near Sloviansk on 29 May (Ostrov 2014q), and the combat deployment of Ukrainian tanks in this region was confirmed on 6 June (Segodnya 2014d). In mid-June, first reports of tanks and artillery under separatist control appeared (YouTube 2014az; Segodnya 2014e). Soon, the use of tanks and heavy artillery on both sides became a common occurrence across the battlefield and, simultaneously, began to affect densely populated areas. Heavy arms left a particularly devastating legacy because they were responsible for most of the damage and loss of life in the Donbas during the course of the armed conflict. Again, each instance of heavy arms use in a new location could be defined as a new critical juncture. However, like in the previous case, it makes sense to group all incidents of heavy arms use initially into one critical juncture.

#### *2.4.7. Juncture 6: The Ukrainian Defeat of Late August*

The Ukrainian Armed Forces first voiced allegations of cross-border shelling from Russian territory in mid-July after an attack on Ukrainian positions near the village of Zelenopillia (Ukrainska Pravda 2014p). This attack and subsequent incidents of alleged cross-border shelling may have slowed the advance of the Ukrainian forces, but they were insufficient to turn the tide of the conflict. However, when many Ukrainian soldiers lost their lives while trying to leave an encirclement near Ilovaisk and Ukrainian forces lost control over the areas south of Luhansk and east of Mariupol in late August, Kyiv claimed that a major Russian invasion force was responsible for this sudden defeat (Ostrov 2014t; Segodnya 2014g).

Moscow denies any cross-border shelling and any invasion. However, the question of Russian involvement can be sidestepped at this initial stage. Regardless of Russian involvement, fighting along the border in July and August led to the crossing of escalation thresholds in several additional locations. And, regardless of Russian involvement, the intensity of fighting in the Donbas peaked during the battles that marked the sudden Ukrainian defeat of late August. These battles left an unprecedented legacy of violence in the region and Ukrainian society as a whole. At the same time, the defeat of late August prevented the Ukrainian Armed Forces from regaining control over the whole of the Donbas. Hence, it was a necessary condition for the continuation of the armed conflict at a lower level over the years that followed. For this reason, the Ukrainian defeat of late August 2014 and the intensification of hostilities leading up to it represent a final critical juncture in the initial, formative stage of the war.

### ***2.5. Differentiating Civil and Interstate War***

A further empirical investigation of the six critical junctures highlighted in my escalation sequence model needs to be underpinned by a conceptual framework that can accommodate the two contradictory hypotheses proposed by the academic literature. Proponents of the civil war hypothesis and proponents of the invasion hypothesis both agree that the war was the result of a mixture of domestic and foreign causes. What they disagree on is which aspect was dominant. However, neither side provides a coherent set of benchmarks to clarify under what conditions a war should be categorized as primarily domestic or primarily interstate. As I argued in chapter one, most contributions to the literature do not define civil or interstate war, and the definitions that are proposed are unsuitable for the case of the Donbas, where domestic and foreign factors are closely intertwined.

#### ***2.5.1. Intervention versus Delegation***

A promising starting point to address this lack of clear definitions is Idean Salehyan's criticism of the conflict studies literature's disregard for indirect interstate conflict strategies. According to Salehyan (2010, 494), foreign governments often use rebel organizations "as a substitute for the direct use of force" when states want to avoid engaging their own armies in "costly military

campaigns.” Excluding such cases of conflict delegation from studies of interstate violence “can lead empirical analyses to significantly inflate the amount of peace in the international system” (Salehyan 2010, 500). Based on this consideration, Salehyan (2010, 500–501) distinguishes two different relationships between foreign states and rebel groups – intervention and delegation. Intervention, he argues, “suggests that the civil war has domestic roots; foreign governments are tangential to the onset of the war and become involved once fighting is underway.” The foreign state has “little direct control or influence over war aims and strategies.” Rebel forces “preserve their organizational autonomy.” Delegation, on the other hand, “indicates that external actors play an important role in shaping the insurgency” and “are critical to the organization’s viability and structure.” At the same time, “delegation requires some degree of agenda control over agents – patrons influence the aims, strategies, and tactics of the rebel group.”

This distinction is missing from the literature on proxy war – a term which is widely used to describe a variety of third-party involvement in armed conflicts (Rauta 2021). In the context of the Cold War, scholars use the concept of proxy war to label conflicts in which the opposing sides acted in the interest of the two superpowers. These Cold War proxies could be states, like Cuba during its 1975 operation in Angola, or non-state actors, like the Afghan Communist Party which seized power in Kabul in 1978 (Marshall 2016, 185). The nature of the superpower-proxy relationship and the degree of direct superpower involvement also varied considerably. The Soviet Union, for example, sent a large number of its own troops to Afghanistan while the United States provided more indirect support to the Mujahidin. In Vietnam, the situation was reversed. After the end of the Cold War, scholars continued to apply the proxy war label to a broad spectrum of conflicts. The literature does not specify how close the links between proxy and sponsor must be. Hence, proxy wars can take place on either side of the intervention-delegation divide. Rauta (2016, 97–99) uses the term proxy war to describe what Salehyan defines as intervention, while Vinci (2008, 299) speaks of proxies to describe what Salehyan defines as delegation. And Fox’s (2019) proposed theory of proxy warfare encompasses both intervention and delegation.



Neither does the distinction between intervention and delegation feature in the literature on hybrid war – a label that is frequently used to describe Russia’s actions in Ukraine (Dzutsati 2021; Lanoszka 2016; Renz 2016, 284–86; Schneckener 2021, 43–45). Hybrid war is generally understood as the simultaneous utilization of military and non-military means as well as regular and irregular modes of warfare by a conflict party. The term was coined by Hoffman (2007) to describe a new challenge for U.S. military strategy in the 21st century (see also Schroefl and Kaufman 2014). In the context of the Donbas war, however, this label is of limited use. As Schneckener (2021, 45–46) points out, the combination of different means of warfare is common practice in any armed conflict and it remains unclear what the “pure,” non-hybrid alternative to hybrid war would be. Renz (2016, 287–88) also questions the novelty of the concept and warns that the framing of events in Ukraine as a case of hybrid warfare “obscures more than it can explain.” In any case, with its focus on multidimensionality and complexity, the concept of hybrid war is unable to differentiate between intervention and delegation and could be used to describe both civil and interstate war.

International law, however, draws a dividing line between internal and interstate conflict that is similar to Salehyan’s distinction between intervention and delegation. It distinguishes between support for rebel forces on the one hand and control over them on the other. A 1986 landmark decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) – the judgement in the case *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua* – assesses this topic in detail. The court argued that the scale of support that the United States provided to Nicaraguan rebel forces was not sufficient to conclude that all of the rebels’ actions were actions of the United States under international law (ICJ 1986, paragraphs 102–116). At the same time, the court outlined the criteria, which this particular case failed to meet. The court said that it had had to determine whether the relationship between the United States and the rebels “was so much one of dependence on the one side and control on the other that it would be right to equate the *contras* [rebels], for legal purposes, with an organ of the United States Government, or as acting on behalf of that Government” (ICJ 1986, paragraph 109).

Salehyan's concepts of intervention and delegation can be merged with this legal principle of state control to create definitions that are more precise. According to these definitions, delegation occurs if a foreign state controls a rebel force to a degree comparable to a state organ. Foreign support that falls below this threshold is intervention.

Drawing the dividing line between civil and interstate war according to these criteria remains a challenging task. Salehyan (2010, 501) acknowledges that distinguishing between intervention and delegation can be difficult in practice because the foreign state may lose control over rebels that it used for delegation or increase control over rebels after engaging in intervention. Moreover, the ICJ itself noted that the facts of the Nicaragua case were difficult to establish because of the secretive nature of the operations in question (ICJ 1986, paragraph 57) – a problem that probably applies to most cases of foreign powers interacting with rebels. At the same time, international law experts continue to debate the exact extent of state control required to establish state responsibility for the actions of a rebel group. They debate whether state responsibility requires “effective control” over the specific actions that violated international law or merely “overall control” over a rebel group's general military activity. The ICJ's Nicaragua judgement applies the former standard, but the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia developed the latter (Heinsch 2015, 340–52).

These difficulties are, perhaps, the reason why subsequent studies on foreign sponsorship of rebel forces have not acted on Salehyan's suggestion to distinguish between intervention and delegation. Neither do they pay attention to the differentiation between support and effective control in international law. Instead, they keep these concepts merged within a single variable, which they use for their research on civil war. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) investigate which factors determine whether rebel groups receive foreign support. Moore (2012) shows that the transfer of arms to rebels from external sources prolongs civil wars and increases their deadliness. Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) argue that foreign sponsorship of rebel forces increases the likelihood of crimes against civilians. Reeder (2014) finds that foreign interference in civil wars is an important factor that increases the risk or the severity of subsequent interstate conflict. Tamm (2016) investigates under what conditions foreign

sponsorship increases or decreases internal cohesion of rebel groups. Popovic (2017) finds that rebel forces without a centralized organizational structure are more difficult to control than centralized ones. He also finds that foreign sponsorship increases the chances of alliance formation between different rebel groups (Popovic 2018). Grauer and Tierney (2018) argue that the overall likelihood of rebel forces receiving foreign support has increased over time. And Waldman (2019) analyses the “strategic narratives” which the United States uses to justify its support of rebel forces. All these works address important issues. None of them, however, questions if what it is researching still qualifies as civil war. On the contrary, all of them imply that all forms of foreign involvement blur the boundary between civil and interstate war in the same way – by introducing an interstate element into a civil war. The same is the case for a recent collection of short articles that review the state of the academic literature in the field under the title “Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars” (Karlén et al. 2021). A strict differentiation between delegation and intervention would, in fact, suggest that the very title of this collection is a contradiction in terms because delegation highlights the international nature of a conflict.

### *2.5.2. The Three-Way Typology of Conflict Data Projects*

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Correlates of War project (COW) follow the same logic. The UCDP divides civil war into two separate categories: Internal armed conflict and internationalized internal armed conflict. Conflicts of the latter category feature intervention by other states. In conflicts of the former category, no such intervention takes place (Gleditsch et al. 2002, 619). Similarly, the COW’s Intrastate War Dataset Codebook specifies that an intrastate war can become “‘internationalized’ when an outside state intervenes in the war” (Dixon and Sarkees 2020a, 2; see also Hosaka 2021, 92–95, 100). However, neither the UCDP nor the COW propose an analogous subdivision of interstate conflict. There is no mention of the possibility that interstate conflict may assume forms different from the open clash of two states’ regular armed forces. Just like most of the wider conflict studies literature, the UCDP and the COW do not differentiate between intervention and delegation but place all forms of foreign involvement in the internationalized internal conflict category.

On first sight, this category may appear as the middle ground between an interstate conflict and a purely internal conflict. However, this is a flawed perception. An internationalized internal conflict is always closer to a purely internal conflict than to an interstate conflict. The UCDP's definition of the internationalized internal conflict category specifies a clear hierarchy between the internal and the international dimension. The rebels are always the primary conflict party, and the foreign state is always the secondary party providing support (Pettersson 2020, 1–4). At the same time, cases of internationalized internal conflicts are only part of the COW's Intrastate War Dataset. Researchers using the COW's Military Interstate Disputes Dataset (Palmer et al. 2020; 2021) would not encounter them. Hence, both the UCDP and the COW define internationalized internal conflict in terms of intervention rather than delegation. Consequently, the dichotomous civil-interstate war typology, which dominates academic research and the wider political discourse, will define all internationalized internal conflicts as civil wars rather than as something in between civil and interstate war.

The approach of the UCDP and the COW reflects the fact that foreign involvement in civil wars is a widely acknowledged phenomenon in both academia and politics. However, it also reflects a lack of awareness of how important the difference between intervention and delegation actually is. An attack by undercover special forces or mercenaries of a foreign state is not the same as a local insurrection that receives foreign support. The former scenario is more similar to an interstate war than to the latter scenario. Vice versa, the latter scenario is more similar to a civil war than to the former scenario. Each scenario requires different policy responses and different approaches to conflict resolution. What is more, even if a researcher is aware of the possibility that interstate violence may occur in a covert, delegated way, the current typology simply does not offer a way to reflect this. The current three-way typology categorizes cases that do not resemble the classical interstate war scenario of one country openly attacking another with regular armed forces always as internationalized internal conflicts. This means that the current typology essentially categorizes cases of delegation as civil wars, which they are not. Therefore, ignoring the difference between intervention and delegation increases

the risk of categorization errors, which may lead to flawed academic comparisons and flawed policies.

### 2.5.3. Introducing Delegated Interstate War

A better alternative would be the creation of delegated interstate war as a new subcategory of interstate conflict. This category would include conflicts in which one state engages in armed combat on the territory of another state via irregular militias, which the foreign state controls to such an extent that they effectively act as a state organ. Using this category would create a more symmetrical typology, consisting of interstate, delegated interstate, internationalized internal, and internal armed conflict. This typology would allow comparison according to the civil war-interstate war dichotomy as well as the exclusion and separate study of the mixed categories in between. At the same time, it would increase transparency and reduce the risk of classification errors. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed typology through a simple 2x2 matrix. It is similar to a typology matrix by Nichter (2008, 20), which Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright (2012, 222–23) use as an example in their “template for the rigorous construction of typologies.”

**Figure 2: Categories of State-Based Armed Conflict**

		Is a foreign state participating <i>indirectly</i> – either as a secondary conflict party <i>supporting</i> a primary conflict party or as a primary conflict party <i>controlling</i> a secondary conflict party?	
		Pure conflict: foreign support or control absent	Mixed conflict: foreign support or control present
Is one of the <i>primary</i> conflict parties a rebel group?	Civil war: rebel group present	Internal	Internationalized internal
	Interstate war: rebel group absent	Interstate	Delegated interstate

Unlike the UCDP’s and the COW’s three-way typologies, the four-way typology outlined in Figure 2 is a suitable conceptual foundation which can underpin the academic controversy surrounding the causes of the Donbas war. It captures the

essence of the divide between proponents of the civil war hypothesis and the invasion hypothesis. The former do not deny that Russia played a role but claim that this role was limited to intervention in an internal conflict. The latter, on the other hand, do not claim that the Donbas war was an open invasion of one country by another. They argue that it was an invasion in disguise, carried out by separatist fighters who were not an autonomous rebel force but waged a delegated war on the Russian state's behalf. Moreover, my proposed typology also draws a more coherent dividing line between civil and interstate war. This dividing line does not depend on the nationality of combatants, the territory they fight on, or the insignia they wear on their uniforms. Instead, it depends on the degree to which combatants are state-controlled. A state can intervene in a civil war as a secondary conflict party by supporting local rebels. However, if the ties between the rebels and the patron state are close enough to consider the former an organ of the latter, the war must be categorized as interstate.

Categorizing a conflict according to this typology requires solid methodological foundations. Although my differentiation between internationalized civil war and delegated interstate war is partially based on legal concepts, the methodological toolkit of international law is insufficient for this purpose. International law limits itself to investigating whether the actions of a state breached specific international norms. An international lawyer could, for example, investigate whether Russia's actions during a certain critical juncture in the escalation of the Donbas war violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. They could argue that separatists carried out certain actions under the effective or overall control of the Russian state, which means that Russia bears legal responsibility for the breach of the UN Charter that resulted from these actions. My dissertation, however, is part of an academic debate that focuses on causality in relation to the start of the war in general rather than legal responsibility for specific breaches of international law. As a result, my investigation of whether the Donbas separatists can be considered organs of the Russian state cannot rely primarily on legal considerations. It has to assess whether the actions of the Russian state were the primary cause of the Donbas separatists' actions. Of course, causality and legal responsibility are related, and it is entirely possible that a causal assessment of the Donbas war's critical junctures would come to the same conclusion as a legal assessment. However, this cannot be taken for granted. For this reason, I

will refrain from engaging further with the international law literature. Instead, chapter three of my dissertation will focus on process tracing as a methodology to assess causality in the context of the Donbas war's critical junctures.

## **2.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has developed a theoretical and conceptual framework for the further empirical investigation of the causes of the Donbas war. I have combined conflict escalation theory with the historical institutionalist concept of critical junctures to create an escalation sequence model of the war's initial formative stage. I have argued that this model covers the time period of early April to late August 2014 and comprises six critical junctures.

My escalation sequence model is a benchmark for attempts to explain the outbreak of war in the Donbas. Any convincing explanation of the war must be able to explain the six critical junctures outlined in this chapter. For this reason, my further investigation of the role of domestic and foreign factors in the outbreak of the Donbas war will focus on these critical junctures.

This chapter has provided the basic conceptual underpinnings for this empirical investigation through its differentiation between internationalized civil war and delegated interstate war. This differentiation has specified the research question that the investigation of each critical juncture must answer: Were the separatist formations, which fought against the Ukrainian security forces, organs of the Russian state in the sense that the Russian state's actions were the primary cause of their actions? The following chapter will develop a methodology that will enable me to use the large volume of digital open source information from the conflict zone to answer this question in the subsequent empirical chapters.

### **3. Methodology: Digital Forensic Process Tracing**

This chapter will develop a methodological framework for the further investigation of the six critical junctures that shaped the escalation of the Donbas conflict. It will proceed in four steps. Firstly, it will introduce process tracing as the methodology of choice for the in-depth study of individual cases. I will argue that process tracing can be defined by four benchmarks – separating explanations and evidence, considering alternative explanations, practicing source criticism, and using probabilistic reasoning. Secondly, this chapter will discuss gaps in the current process tracing literature on war. It will argue that existing studies neglect two of the four process tracing benchmarks – source criticism and probabilistic reasoning – and fail to pay sufficient attention to online sources. Thirdly this chapter will introduce digital open source information (DOSI) analysis – a way of doing research that has gained popularity among journalists and NGO activists in recent years. It will highlight the potential of DOSI analysis for the academic study of war and the synergy effects of combining DOSI analysis with process tracing. Finally, I will introduce *digital forensic process tracing* as a form of process tracing that incorporates DOSI analysis. I will discuss the philosophical assumptions that underpin the application of digital forensic process tracing to the critical juncture of the Donbas conflict and discuss limitations and mitigation techniques.

#### **3.1. Four Benchmarks for Good Process Tracing**

Process tracing is a social science methodology which tries to open the black box between cause and effect. In contrast to frequentist approaches to causality, which infer cause and effect from the correlation of variables across multiple cases, process tracing takes a detailed look at individual cases and tries to find evidence of how a cause brings about an outcome.<sup>13</sup> Process tracing relies heavily on the concept of “causal mechanisms” to describe what is inside the black box between cause and effect. Despite the central role of this concept, however, there is no consensus on what a causal mechanism actually is. Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, 51) list as many as nine different definitions, most of which are either very abstract or very general or both at the same time. Beach

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed review of different process tracing definitions and subtypes proposed in the academic literature, see Trampusch and Palier (2016, 437–48).



and Pedersen (2013, 29) draw on some of these definitions and make the concept more concrete and precise. They define a causal mechanism as a set of entities that engage in activities which transmit causal force from a cause to an outcome. They argue that a causal mechanism can be compared to a machine with toothed wheels (the entities), the movement of which (their activities) transmits causal force through the machine. To illustrate this analogy, they use the example of a car engine. They define the motor as the cause and the movement of the car as the outcome. The causal mechanisms are the wheels and the driveshaft, which, through their movement, transmit the motor's impulse into the movement of the car (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 30).

Defined in its broadest sense, process tracing includes any academic writing that underpins a claim about cause and effect with a detailed case-based narrative. According to this definition, the academic literature that uses process tracing for the study of armed conflict is vast. Tannenwald (2015, 222–23), for example, provides a long list of relevant studies but has to acknowledge that it is far from exhaustive. At the same time, some scholars have made attempts to formulate practice-oriented standards that define process tracing in a narrower way. In general terms, this methodological literature develops four benchmarks for methodologically rigorous process tracing research.

### *3.1.1. Separating Explanations and Evidence*

Beach and Pedersen (2013, 33) stress that process tracing has to go beyond a mere empirical narrative. It has to compare the empirical evidence of the particular case to the hypothetical evidence a researcher would expect to see if a particular causal mechanism were at work. This mechanism can be formulated a priori and tested against the empirical evidence, or it can be developed inductively on the basis of this evidence (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 11–22). Either way, the crucial point is that the analysis keeps empirical evidence and theoretical causal mechanism separate and explicitly points out how the former supports the latter. Waldner (2015b, 247–49; 2015a) makes a similar point, arguing that good process tracing should include two graphs – a “causal graph” illustrating a causal mechanism in general terms and an “event-history map” illustrating the matching empirical details of the case.

### 3.1.2. *Considering Alternative Explanations*

Bennet and Checkel's (2015, 23–31) list of best practices for process tracing research places particular emphasis on the importance of investigating alternative hypotheses. They argue that “failing to consider a potentially viable explanation that readily occurs to the readers and critics of a case study can make the process tracing unconvincing” (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 23). An important conceptual tool for the evaluation of evidence in the light of competing hypotheses is a typology of tests devised by Stephen van Evera. Bennet and Checkel (2015, 17), as well as Beach and Pedersen (2013, 100–105) and Mahoney (2015, 207–12) describe this typology as an integral component of the analytical toolkit of process tracing. The typology groups evidence into four categories (van Evera 1997, 31–32):

- i. Evidence which can disprove but not prove a hypothesis. The presence of this evidence does not rule out alternatives to the hypothesis in question, but the absence of this evidence rules out the hypothesis. Van Evera argues that evidence of this kind represents a “hoop test” because the evidence represents a hoop that the hypothesis has to “jump through” in order to “remain viable.”
- ii. Evidence which can prove a hypothesis but not disprove it through its absence. Van Evera calls this a “smoking gun test,” because “a smoking gun seen in a suspect’s hand moments after a shooting is quite conclusive proof of guilt, but a suspect not seen with a smoking gun is not proven innocent.”
- iii. Evidence which can both prove and disprove a hypothesis. Van Evera calls this a “doubly-decisive test.” This evidence presents the hypothesis with a hoop test and a smoking-gun test at once: “passage strongly corroborates an explanation, a flunk kills it.”
- iv. Evidence which can “weigh in the total balance” but is not decisive either way. Van Evera calls this a “straw-in-the-wind test.”

The application of this typology forces researchers to spell out how and to what extent their empirical evidence favours their proposed explanation rather than alternative hypotheses.

### *3.1.3. Practicing Source Criticism*

Process tracing analysts should be wary of taking their sources at face value. Bennet and Checkel's (2015, 24–25) process tracing guidelines urge researchers to “consider the potential biases of evidentiary sources.” Beach and Pedersen (2013, 125–29) argue that, in order to turn observations into evidence, process tracing researchers have to “assess the content” and “evaluate the accuracy” of observations. They also argue that the reliability of different types of sources can depend on a variety of contextual factors which process tracing researchers need to take into account (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 132–43). Fairfield and Charman (2017, 370) go a step further and argue that “testimonial evidence in process tracing is best analysed by including the source in the definition of the evidence.” They suggest that “evidence E should typically take the form ‘source S stated X.’” What this means is that, rather than postulating evidence as a statement of fact that is referenced to a source, process tracing analysts should evaluate the context and background of both the source and the evidence contained in it. In other words, they should follow the example of historians by practicing rigorous source criticism. This benchmark is of particular importance for research on armed conflict and especially for research in the context of the abundant but murky information environment that characterizes the Donbas war. As I have pointed out in chapter one, a lack of source criticism is a key shortcoming of the existing academic literature on this war.

### *3.1.4. Updating Probabilities*

Questioning the accuracy of source material inevitably creates uncertainty, which can be addressed through the use of probabilistic language. For this reason, the same process tracing theorists who advocate source criticism also advocate the use of Bayesian inference (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 83; Bennett and Checkel 2015, 16; Fairfield and Charman 2017). Bayes' Theorem postulates that the probability of a hypothesis being true increases or decreases as pieces of evidence for or against it accumulate. In the words of Bennett (2009, 8), “the more unlikely a piece of evidence [E] is in light of alternatives to explanation H, the more that evidence [E] increases our confidence that H is true if the evidence proves consistent with H.” Bennett (2009, 8) summarises Bayes' theorem with a formula which can be spelled out as follows:

$$\text{Probability that H is true in light of E} = \text{H's prior probability} \times \frac{\text{E's probability in light of H}}{\text{E's prior probability}}$$

Bayes' theorem provides a tool for formal probabilistic reasoning in qualitative case study research. Theoretically, the continued application of the above formula until all available evidence has been considered should lead researchers with divergent starting positions regarding the probability of H to the same final probability (Bennett 2009, 9). Of course, this is unlikely to work in practice because researchers may assign different probabilities to different pieces of evidence. Also, there is a controversy about whether or not there is any benefit in researchers assigning specific numerical probabilities to qualitative evidence (Barrenechea and Mahoney 2019, 453; Beach 2017, 15; Befani and Stedman-Bryce 2017, 52–53; Fairfield and Charman 2017). Nevertheless, applying the general principles of Bayesian inference is another benchmark for process tracing research. Applying these principles either mathematically or verbally forces researchers to spell out the probabilistic reasoning behind their evaluation of evidence, which makes clear where exactly their assessments converge and differ. Moreover, using probabilistic reasoning allows for a more nuanced assessment than the mere use of van Evera's typology of tests (Befani and Stedman-Bryce 2017, 53). This makes Bayesian inference particularly useful in cases where there are major gaps or contradictions in the available evidence, which may result in numerous straw-in-the-wind tests pointing in different directions.

Naturally, these four benchmarks present an ideal type that few if any empirical studies are able to meet. Limits imposed by time, space, research design, and data availability force researchers to prioritize certain benchmarks while neglecting others. For this reason, it is appropriate to define any research that meets at least one of the four benchmarks as process tracing. Nevertheless, this relatively broad definition already reduces the number of studies that use the methodology. Seven out of the 63 Donbas-related academic articles reviewed in chapter one state that they use process tracing methodology. However, only four meet one of the four benchmarks outlined above. Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth (2020) first develop a causal mechanism describing how an interaction of ethnic polarization and external intervention causes civil war and then claim that observations from the Ukrainian case confirm the plausibility of this

mechanism. Similarly, Laryš and Suleimanov (2021) develop a causal mechanism describing how local elites become “entrapped” between an external actor and this actor’s local agents before showing how this mechanism played out in the Donbas. Bukkvoll (2019), on the other hand, derives a causal mechanism from his analysis of pro-government militia activity in the Donbas. And Nitsova (2021) tests competing explanations of the Donbas war against evidence presented within the academic literature. The other three articles (Bowen 2019; Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016; Malyarenko and Wolff 2018), however, do not feature a clear discussion of causal mechanisms or competing hypotheses.

### ***3.2. Process Tracing and War: Methodological Gaps***

The four articles on the Donbas war that engage in process tracing as defined above only meet either the first or the second benchmark. However, this is not sufficient to address the challenges for academic research on war that I outlined in the previous chapters of this dissertation. On the contrary, these chapters suggest that it is the third and fourth benchmark which make process tracing the methodology of choice for research that exploits online media to investigate the facts of a contemporary war like the Donbas conflict. The volume of information available online and the prevalence of disinformation make it essential to explicitly assess the reliability of source material and the probabilistic conclusions that a researcher draws from this assessment. However, it is precisely these two benchmarks that process tracing research on armed conflict tends to neglect.

This neglect is not limited to the case of the Donbas. Recent process tracing research on armed conflict in general has not paid much attention to those aspects of the methodology related to source criticism and probabilistic reasoning. Through a keyword search for “process tracing” and “war” in the UCL Explore academic search engine, I identified 42 peer-reviewed articles published between January 2015 and mid-October 2021 which say that they use process tracing for the analysis of other wars (see Appendix 4). Assessing the content of these articles, I found that 22 of them met the first and/or the second benchmark outlined above, which means that they engaged in the creation of causal mechanisms and/or the testing of competing hypotheses (Atkinson 2021; Barma 2021; Bateson 2017; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015; Codjo 2021; D’Amato and

Del Pantà 2017; Dawson 2021; Eisenman 2019; Ghais 2019; Goodman 2020; Grech-Madin 2021; Hafez 2020; Holtermann 2019b; 2019a; Idler 2020; Jenne 2018; Mendelsohn 2021; Mosinger 2019; Pedersen and Reykers 2020; Schenoni, Braniff, and Battaglino 2020; Schwartz and Straus 2018; Winward 2021). However, only one of them (Winward 2021) featured an appendix with source criticism. None of them focused on source criticism in the main body of the text or practiced Bayesian updating. This is not to say that these studies are careless in their treatment of sources and have not sufficiently considered limitations and potential biases in their data. It simply means that source criticism and Bayesian updating are not key components of their empirical narratives. This may not be necessary within the specific research designs and source environments of these studies. However, source criticism and Bayesian updating are essential for process tracing research that aims to navigate the abundant but murky online information environment that characterizes the Donbas conflict and other wars of the social media age.

Chapter two of my dissertation has already used online information as the empirical basis for the Donbas war's escalation sequence. However, it sidestepped the need for source criticism and Bayesian updating by leaving all controversial questions open. The events included in the escalation sequence model are either not disputed by any conflict party or they are labelled as disputed and requiring further investigation. Neither does the model specify the actors responsible for each critical juncture. While the creation of the model meets some aspects of the first two benchmarks, its process tracing efforts remain incomplete because it omits a causal mechanism's most crucial part – the causes. For this reason, chapter two on its own would not qualify as fully-fledged process tracing research that uses online information to investigate the causes of war.

At present, process tracing research of this kind, which aims to use online information from a conflict zone as the main data source to study a war, is virtually non-existent. Beach and Pedersen's (2013, 132–43) list of "sources of evidence in process tracing" does not mention online media but only "newspapers and other journalistic sources." They argue that these sources can provide "important background information" but claim that they are too unreliable to be used as evidence "unless the observations are triangulated with other types of sources"

(Beach and Pedersen 2013, 143). Lyall's (2015) guide to process tracing research on civil war focuses exclusively on interview data collected in the conflict zone. The examples of recent process tracing research on armed conflict cited above also draw primarily on interview data gathered during fieldwork as well as archival material and secondary literature. Newspaper articles or news agency reports are used by some authors but play a secondary, supplementary role. An exception is Ceccorulli and Coticchia's (2015) study which draws on a dataset of Italian newspaper reports as a key source. However, their research focuses on the statements and decisions of Italy's political elite before the country's military intervention in Libya rather than on primary information from combatants or the conflict zone itself. Another exception is Hafez's (2020) work on the Algerian civil war, which cites three YouTube videos. Two of these videos feature archival footage from the conflict, while the third one features a radio interview with a former rebel leader. In cases of more recent wars like the Donbas conflict, however, the volume of important primary information from conflict zones available on both traditional and social media is much larger. It is therefore crucial that academic process tracing research on armed conflict adapts to modern information technology and treats online media and related qualitative data as an important information source. By doing so, it could make use of a huge repository of primary information that is currently not used according to its full potential. Moreover, a focus on online media would also enable timely research in cases in which it would be unsafe to travel to the conflict zone or in which key participants are unavailable for interviews.

### ***3.3. The Potential of Digital Open Source Information***

Academic process tracing research on armed conflict can be made fit for the Internet age by incorporating digital open source information (DOSI) analysis as an analytic technique. DOSI refers to the vast amount of information that the Internet has made available to the general public in the form of text, picture, and video material posted on news websites or on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube. It also includes the information available in public online databases, such as the flight tracking website Flightradar24, the Internet Archive project, or the annotated satellite imagery platform Wikimapia. DOSI analysis is the analytic technique that is used to identify, structure, and verify this type of data.

Even though DOSI is related to and often used synonymously with open source intelligence (OSINT), it makes sense to differentiate between the two terms. The origins of the term OSINT lie in the work of government intelligence agencies, where it is used to describe information gathered from publicly available sources as opposed to, for example, information received from informants (Gibson 2013). In recent years, OSINT analysis has become a popular term to describe not only the work of government agencies but also investigations by activists and journalists based on openly available information. However, some researchers are uncomfortable with the use of OSINT as a label for work carried out beyond government intelligence agencies. Clem (2017, 608), for example, refers to “public-sourced information” and reserves the term OSINT “to the analysis of public information within intelligence agencies.” Toler (2020b) calls OSINT a “silly term” and voices the suspicion that it is “used by people who want to cosplay as intel[ligence] officers.” He proposes “digital research/investigation” as an alternative. It is understandable that researchers want to draw a clear line between the work of government intelligence officers on the one hand and journalists and NGO activists on the other. Moreover, it makes sense to differentiate between the different purposes for which government intelligence agencies on the one hand and journalist and activists on the other use openly available information. This is made particularly clear in the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (United Nations 2020). This protocol is a set of principles and best practices published by the Human Rights Center of the UC Berkeley School of Law and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It differentiates between DOSI and OSINT in the following way:

Open source intelligence refers to a subcategory of open source information that is collected and used for the specific purpose of aiding policymaking and decision-making, most often in a military or political context [...]. In the context of international criminal and human rights cases, open source intelligence is used as background information for decision-making functions – for example, to inform security-related activities, such as protecting witnesses and team members who go into the field or tracking persons of interest – rather than information-gathering functions related to investigation processes [...].

My dissertation will follow this differentiation and use the term DOSI rather than OSINT to refer to the vast amount of information that the Internet has made available to researchers.



The most famous examples of high-quality DOSI analysis are the publications of the investigative journalist group Bellingcat. Long before an official report came to the same conclusion, Bellingcat succeeded in confirming the Russian origin of the missile launcher that downed Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the Donbas in July 2014. The key source of their investigation was photo and video material of the launcher that was published online around the time of the tragedy (Allen et al. 2014). This success story of DOSI analysis did not go unnoticed in the academic literature. Sienkiewicz (2015) analyses how the Kyiv authorities used the work of Bellingcat and other independent DOSI analysts after the MH17 downing. Clem (2017) argues that DOSI analysis by non-state actors has been more effective in uncovering Russian interference in Ukraine than evidence presented by governments. However, even though DOSI analysis has been the subject of academic work (see also Dyer and Ivens, 2020; Hayes and Cappa, 2018; McDermott et al., 2021; Pastor-Galindo et al., 2020; Senekal and Kotzé, 2019; Wheatley, 2018), its synergy effects with process tracing methodology have remained unnoticed. Naturally, the use of DOSI analysis by journalists and advocacy groups does not focus on academic debates and methodologies. At the same time, there is no academic work so far that explicitly incorporates DOSI analysis into process tracing methodology to answer research questions. My dissertation will fill this gap.

The methodological approach of DOSI analysis mirrors the requirements of the third and fourth process tracing benchmarks outlined in this chapter. Source criticism and the principles behind Bayesian updating are an integral part of any qualitative evaluation of DOSI. The Berkeley Protocol illustrates this. The protocol's "open source investigation cycle" (United Nations 2020, 55–68) includes a "preliminary assessment" stage, at which the investigator should check whether the discovered information appears to be "prima facie" relevant and reliable. This is followed by a "verification" stage, which features an in-depth assessment of a source's content and context. Moreover, the protocol also stresses that analytical reports based on DOSI need to address gaps and uncertainties and include relevant caveats (United Nations 2020, 72).

The added value of DOSI analysis for process tracing lies in its focus on the potential of online sources. In many cases, all it takes to harness this potential is

the skilful use of online search engine algorithms to find primary sources of evidence followed by careful contextual analysis and cross-checking of these sources (Myers 2020; Toler 2020a). In cases where a topic has already received significant attention from secondary sources, DOSI analysis can check whether these secondary sources rely on openly available online material. If they do, DOSI analysis can evaluate and cross-check this material to either validate or refute the conclusions of the secondary source. In some cases, DOSI researchers may also use certain tools to make source discovery and verification more effective. Examples are reverse image search engines like TinEye, satellite imagery tools like GoogleEarth or SunCalc, and the photo and video verification toolkit InVID. A broader overview of available DOSI analysis tools is provided by Bellingcat's (n.d.a) Online Investigation Toolkit database.

### ***3.4. Introducing Digital Forensic Process Tracing***

The incorporation of DOSI analysis enhances process tracing research on the causes of war in two important ways. Firstly, it shifts the empirical focus towards the abundance of primary information from conflict zones that is available on the Internet in general and on social media in particular. Secondly, it shifts the methodological focus to source criticism and Bayesian updating. In other words, the incorporation of DOSI analysis applies the forensic components of process tracing in a digital source environment. According to Casey (2011), “the systematic study of digital data becomes a forensic discipline when it relates to the investigation and prosecution of a crime.” Of course, process tracing in an academic social science context is not focusing exclusively on criminal acts. Neither is it aiming to produce indictments that lead to convictions in court. Nevertheless, several process tracing theorists point out that the investigation and prosecution of a crime is a good analogy for process tracing research. Bennett (2009, 4) argues that the work of a process tracing researcher is “closely analogous to a detective attempting to solve a crime.” Mahoney (2015, 206-7) writes:

The search for decisive clues and the use of other diagnostic evidence makes process tracing somewhat like the method of discovery employed by detectives, the reasoning carried out by juries, and the guidelines used by physicians when diagnosing illnesses.

Similarly, Befani and Stedman-Bryce (2017, 46–47) suggest that process tracing researchers should approach their research as if they were facing a trial in which

they had to present evidence to a jury. Hence, process tracing has a forensic side. It treats a particular outcome as a crime that requires investigation and a hypothetical cause as a suspect whose guilt needs to be proven. However, this analogy only works properly if process tracing researchers pay attention to the third and fourth benchmark of my definition and engage in source criticism and Bayesian updating. It is not sufficient for a detective or prosecutor to theorize how a crime may have unfolded and discuss different hypotheses in general terms. To convince a judge or a jury, they must subject their sources to critical scrutiny and spell out the probabilistic reasoning behind their assessment of the available evidence.

Based on these considerations, I define my proposed methodology as *digital forensic process tracing*. By incorporating DOSI analysis, my approach makes process tracing fit for the digital age. At the same time, my approach enables process tracing to live up to its forensic ambitions by focusing on source criticism and Bayesian updating. The remainder of this chapter will discuss some further specifications and additions to prepare digital forensic process tracing for its application to the critical junctures of the Donbas war.

#### *3.4.1. Philosophical Challenges*

Before attempting to use digital forensic process tracing to study the causes of the Donbas war, it is important to revisit some of the philosophical foundations of process tracing and discuss potential objections to it. For this purpose, it is useful to return to Beach and Pedersen's (2013, 30) analogy, which compares a causal mechanism to a car engine. This car engine analogy is not only a clear, practice-oriented example of how causal mechanisms can be conceptualized; it can also be used to illustrate five key problems associated with any study of causation.

The first problem in need of clarification is the relationship between a causal mechanism and a causal sequence. Beach & Pedersen (2013, 29) acknowledge that their car engine analogy has limits. Causal mechanisms "are not necessarily neutral transmission belts." They "can have effects that cannot merely be reduced to the effect of X [the initial cause]." This raises the question whether there is a qualitative difference between cause and outcome on the one hand and the steps of the causal mechanism connecting them on the other. In other words, is there

any difference between a causal mechanism and an expandable causal sequence? Could what is a step in one causal mechanism become a cause in another, and vice versa, in the context of different research designs?

The second problem is what King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 86) describe as “infinite regress” – the problem that “there always exists in the social sciences an infinity of causal steps between any two links in the chain of causal mechanisms.” What this means is evident even in the relatively straightforward natural science analogy of the car engine. It could be argued that the car is not moved directly by the spinning of the wheels but by the force of static friction between tyres and asphalt. This force, in turn, is the result of molecular adhesion, which takes the causal chain right down to an atomic scale. The number of causal steps might not be literally indefinite, but King, Keohane, and Verba are correct in the sense that it is certainly not feasible to break down complex social science problems into causal steps that happen at the level of particle physics.

The third problem consists of a slightly different form of infinite regress. Rather than analysing ever smaller units of causal force transfers, it is theoretically possible to identify causes further and further back in time. A rather extreme illustration of this is Fearon’s (1991, 190) thought experiment, posing the questions whether “the gene controlling the length of Cleopatra’s nose was a cause of World War I.” According to this causal logic, the shape of Cleopatra’s nose led to Antony’s affection for her which led to the Battle of Actium which then affected the further course of European history. While this specific example is questionable in several ways, it clearly illustrates a problem with causal mechanisms that is also apparent in the car engine analogy. The cause of the car’s movement could be defined as the motor, the turning of the ignition key, the driver’s decision to go for a ride, or even the manufacturing of the car itself.

The fourth problem is what Roberts (1996, 89–90) calls “indiscriminate pluralism.” Roberts argues that “a set of conditions” rather than an event causes an outcome. “Not a lighted match, but a lighted match and a pile of paper and the presence of oxygen causes a fire” (Roberts 1996, 89). Roberts (1996, 90) further argues:

If one allows the absence of certain conditions to be a necessary condition, then the number of conditions that must be enumerated is limited only by a person’s imagination. One might even insist on

including the fact that a comet did not destroy the earth a moment before the fire.

In the context of the car engine analogy, this is illustrated by the fact that it is not only the running motor that makes the car move, but also the release of clutch pedal and parking brake combined with the absence of a wheel clamp.

The fifth and final problem concerns the impact of equifinality on the definition of necessary conditions. In their car engine analogy, Beach and Pedersen's (2013, 30) describe the driveshaft and the wheels as "insufficient but necessary parts of an overall mechanism." Either of these parts on its own is "insufficient to produce an outcome," because "it only functions together with the rest of the machine." The four problems discussed above mainly relate to the definition of sufficiency. They illustrate the challenge of determining the engine's confines and the number of parts included in it. On first sight, necessity seems to be a relatively straightforward concept compared to this challenge. Without a necessary part, the engine won't work. But what about alternative parts? Is a driveshaft strictly necessary if, in theory, it could be replaced by a chain to achieve a similar outcome? Things become even more complicated if parts are divided into multiple components. According to Mahoney (2008, 418), a house can burn down "either because of a short circuit combined with wooden framing or because of a gasoline can combined with a furnace." By no means is this an exhaustive list of scenarios that can cause a fire. Consequently, the question arises whether any condition can ever be a truly necessary part of a causal mechanism if, in theory, this condition, or any of its components, could be replaced by a counterfactual alternative which would lead to the same outcome.

#### *3.4.2. Foundational Assumptions*

All five problems discussed above relate to fundamental questions in the philosophy of science. Answering them on a general theoretical level is, if at all possible, far beyond the scope of my dissertation. However, all five problems must be considered and addressed in the context of my research question before I can use digital forensic process tracing to study the causal mechanisms that led to the war in Ukraine's Donbas region.

Regarding the first problem, my study does not define an inherent qualitative difference between the nature of cause and outcome on the one hand and the nature of the causal mechanism connecting them on the other. In general terms, war is the outcome and local separatist sentiment versus Russian interference are the two hypothetical causes to be tested in the context of this dissertation. In between the outcome and the two possible causes lies a series of events consisting of actors who engage in activities that transmit causal force. However, the two possible causes, as well as the outcome, could also be described in terms of actors engaging in activities. Local separatist sentiment consists of Donbas residents developing a desire to break away from the Ukrainian state. Russian interference consists of Russian state structures deciding that the situation in Ukraine requires them to take action. War consists of clashes of opposing military forces in the Donbas, which affect all actors involved in a variety of ways. It is my study's level of analysis that determines what is defined as cause and effect and what is defined as the mechanism in between. The scope of my research project is the only reason why I define war, local separatism, and Russian interference as generalized concepts rather than as concrete actors engaging in activities. In a research project of a larger scale, these concepts could feature as actors engaging in activities within a causal mechanism that connects different causes and outcomes. In a research project of a smaller scale, events that are components of my causal mechanism could turn into cause and outcome. For this reason, I will follow the approach of Mahoney (2015, 205), who treats "mechanisms in the same way as cause and outcome" and argues that the former differ from the latter only "because of their temporal position." In other words, a causal mechanism is identical to a causal sequence.

The second problem – King, Keohane, and Verba's (1994, 86) interpretation of infinite regress – largely loses its relevance in the context of a practice-oriented approach to the study of armed conflict. It is true that certain parts of a causal sequence can be broken down into smaller steps. In fact, I utilize this in my research by breaking down the Donbas war into a series of critical junctures, each of which will face further subdivision in the empirical chapter devoted to it. However, this procedure of exploring a causal sequence within a step of another causal sequence soon reaches limits. These limits are defined by data availability and disciplinary boundaries as well as common sense. Establishing that a certain

actor made a decision to act in a certain way requires a certain amount of data. A far larger amount of data is required to establish the exact circumstances of the decision-making process. Even more data, as well as psychological expertise, is required to go further and investigate the cognitive processes within the decision-maker's mind at the time. Such data might not be available in the context of an armed conflict, but this is not a problem. It is not necessary to understand every procedural detail of the decision-making process or the inner workings of a decision-maker's mind in order to answer my research question. For example, Russian state responsibility does not depend on the details of decision-making procedures within the Kremlin. As long as the involvement of the Russian state apparatus is evident, it does not matter whether Vladimir Putin personally initiated certain actions, whether he approved someone else's initiative, or whether he was kept out of the decision-making process altogether. On the contrary, going into this kind of depth would require a completely different research design that could no longer focus on the causes of the Donbas war as a whole. To use another example, it might be relatively straightforward to establish that a certain building was destroyed by artillery fire from a certain direction at a certain point in time. However, the exact process of how the building collapsed as a result of the shelling might require data that is not available as well as expertise in structural engineering. At the same time, the fact that the building was destroyed by artillery fire from a certain direction at a certain point in time would be sufficient in the context of my research question. Further details of the collapse process would be superfluous. These examples show that infinite regress to the micro level is not a problem for a process tracing analysis of armed conflict. This is because any study will relatively quickly reach a point where a further zooming in on causal sequences is either no longer feasible or no longer useful, or both at the same time.

The third problem – concerning infinite regress back in time – also loses most of its salience in the context of a specific research question regarding the causes of armed conflict. Even if a solid argument could be made that the shape of Cleopatra's nose was a cause of World War I, this finding would be just as useful as attributing the war to the Big Bang itself. The supposed cause is simply too far removed from the research puzzle to yield any new insights. Fearon (1991, 191) himself relativizes the validity of his thought experiment:

[T]he same theoretical argument holding that the probability of World War I conditional on Cleopatra's nose being shorter was zero implies as well that the probability of World War I conditional on her nose being as it was must have been *almost zero*.

In other words, as the number of influencing factors increases while following a causal chain back in time, the determinative influence of an individual factor decreases, which reduces its explanatory power. Roberts (1996, 111) goes a step further and argues that “analytical philosophers dreamed up the problem of infinite regress.” According to him, historians easily circumvent it by stopping “the backward search for the ultimate cause at the point where the state of affairs, whose alteration they seek to explain, flourished.” To some extent, this choice of words is an oversimplification. Seemingly flourishing peace can be deceptive, and it is very well possible that important reasons for a war predate its outbreak. However, Roberts raises an important point in the sense that there is limited analytical value in attributing the alteration of a state of affairs to factors that are simultaneously causes of the very same state of affairs in the first place. Instead, he says, historians should focus their search for causes on elements of change that disrupt one state of affairs and bring about another. In the context of my dissertation, this means that there is little analytic value in attributing the war in the Donbas, for example, to the collapse of the Soviet Union. While there can be little doubt that this collapse eventually led to the conditions of April 2014, which made war possible, it also led to the conditions of, for example, April 2013, when war seemed extremely unlikely. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union is a precondition for both Ukraine's domestic politics and Russia's foreign policymaking in spring 2014 and is thus unable to indicate which factor played a stronger role in the escalation of violence. As argued in chapter two, the same logic leads to the exclusion of the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv from my study of the war's causes. It is not the purpose of my study to list all historical events that made the war possible. Its purpose is to investigate how the Donbas transitioned from a state of tense calm after the February 2014 regime change in Kyiv to a state of full-scale war six months later.

Concerning the fourth problem – indiscriminate pluralism – Roberts (1996, 96) argues that a focus on “abnormal” events is the mitigation strategy of choice:

The doctrine of abnormalism holds that the ‘more important’ conditions are those that depart more, and the ‘most important condition’ is the one that departs most, from the normal course of events. Thus, the



presence of oxygen is not the most important cause of a fire, because oxygen is normally present. A carelessly thrown match is the most important cause because such an action is abnormal.

On this basis, Roberts argues that a complex web of causal factors can be reduced to a simple causal chain by singling out those factors that were most abnormal and thus most disruptive to the state of affairs that underwent change – a technique that he calls “linear colligation” (Roberts 1996, 109–10). Naturally, the resulting causal sequence will be a simplification of reality. It will not represent all causal factors that contributed to a particular outcome but only the factor that was most disruptive at each stage of the process. The resulting causal sequence is an illustration of what was key rather than a comprehensive depiction of all relevant facets of a historical case. In the context of historical explanation, this degree of simplification prevents an understanding of the complexities of the particular case. For this reason, Roberts (1996, 97) proposes a less radical application of abnormalism that uses a set of abnormal conditions for multicausal explanations while ignoring those conditions that do not depart from the normal course of events. He returns to the example of a fire to illustrate this point:

To leave debris in an alley is more common than throwing lighted matches into alleys, but less common than the presence of oxygen. The historian should probably mention it in an explanation of the fire though not as prominently as the carelessly thrown match.

What follows from this is the construction of more complex causal sequences that include a selection of disruptive factors. These sequences can converge, diverge, or run parallel to each other (Roberts 1996, 112–33). The definition of causal sufficiency in this context depends on the desired level of specificity. From a historian’s point of view, a sufficient explanation should include all factors in the hierarchy of abnormal conditions that illustrate the specifics of the particular historical case. In contrast, the simplicity of linear colligation can be an advantage in political science process tracing. Precisely because of its simplicity, linear colligation is well suited to test competing hypotheses about the relative importance of different causal factors and to categorise phenomena into mutually exclusive typologies. It is exactly this kind of reduction to the most significant causal sequence that is required to investigate the nature of armed conflict at the borderline between civil and interstate war. Hardly anyone denies that both domestic and foreign factors were at work during the escalation of the Donbas conflict. The controversial question is which factors were more important. A

process tracing analysis that uses abnormalism and linear colligation to establish causal sequences has the potential to answer this question.

Regarding the fifth and final problem of equifinality and necessary conditions, a strict definition of necessity would imply that there are no necessary conditions for the war in the Donbas at all. Strictly speaking, any component of the causal sequence that led to the outbreak of violence could be replaced by a hypothetical alternative. Naturally, some counterfactuals of this kind are more plausible than others. In theory, it could be argued that the deployment of the Ukrainian military to the Donbas was not a necessary condition for the war because an intervention of U.S. troops could have led to the same result. Of course, this is a highly implausible scenario, but the same logic has concrete implications for the investigation of my research question. In particular, it could be argued that any identified degree of Russian involvement was not a necessary condition for the war because, in its absence, local separatism could have been stronger and taken its place. This argument works the other way around as well. Russia could have stepped up its engagement if separatist activism had been weaker. What these examples show is that a discussion of necessary causation inevitably requires a discussion of counterfactuals. This is in line with Fearon (1991, 171–75), who argues that the use of counterfactuals is unavoidable and commonplace in both history and political science, despite a widespread reluctance to discuss this explicitly. Inevitably, the use of counterfactuals brings a certain degree of speculation to the analysis, but, as both Fearon (1991) and Levy (2015) convincingly argue, there is no alternative. This suggests that transparency regarding the use of counterfactuals and the assumptions and evidence they are based on is the best available option. For this reason, my definition of causal necessity in the context of the Donbas war will be based on the analysis of counterfactual scenarios that resemble the actual course of events as closely as possible while removing the causal factor in question. If there is no concrete evidence of a replacement factor, which would have been likely to lead to the same outcome in such a counterfactual scenario, I will consider the causal factor in question a necessary one.

### *3.4.3. Additional Limitations and Remedies*

In addition to the philosophical challenges described above, digital forensic process tracing also faces two limitations of a more practical nature. Firstly, there is the issue of gaps, when no data is openly available. Secondly, there is the issue of unconscious bias, when different analysts look at the same data and come to different conclusions. Neither of these issues can be eliminated completely. However, the fact that the use of Bayesian updating forces researchers to spell out uncertainty can mitigate them to some extent. This mitigating effect of Bayesian updating can be further strengthened by two supplementary components. The first component is the contextualization of missing data, which can draw on the philosophical principles of Occam's razor and the Sagan standard. The second component is a clear terminology to facilitate the verbalization of probabilities.

**3.4.3.1. Occam's Razor and the Sagan Standard.** The problem of missing data is an important challenge for process tracing theorists. In a recent study, Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte (2021, 1417–28) propose three remedies through which researchers can address this challenge. The first remedy is the contextualization of the absence of data. Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte (2021, 1417–20) argue that missing data does not disprove a hypothesis if the actors in question had a clear incentive not to create such data. On the other hand, "isolated pieces of evidence may in fact be very reliable and have a high probative value when considered with an eye toward the context" (Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte 2021, 1420). The second remedy is the removal of the causal mechanism from its original context, so that it can be tested at a more abstract level. The third remedy is the possibility that "missing data corresponds to a step that is theoretically overdetermined by the previous step" (Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte 2021, 1425). In other words, the causal mechanism may not actually rely on the step in question. The latter two remedies are of relatively little use in the context of my digital forensic process tracing analysis of the Donbas war. Since I engage in "explaining outcome process tracing" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 18–21) and focus on the causes of one particular conflict, I cannot remove my causal mechanisms from the context of the case. At the same time, the escalation sequence model of the Donbas war from chapter two has been developed in a way that avoids any redundant steps. The first remedy, however, is potentially

useful. It is an important reminder that source criticism and Bayesian analysis must consider not only the context and impact of the existing evidence but also the context and impact of evidence that is missing. However, a contextualization of missing data inherently carries the risk of explaining away a lack of evidence through far-fetched justification narratives. To avoid this risk, process tracers should rely on two philosophical principles.

These two principles are Occam's razor and the Sagan standard. They can regulate the discussion of evidence and its absence in process tracing research. In the words of Pigliucci and Boudry's (2014, 493), "Occam's razor urges us to reject theoretical constructs that are 'superfluous,' in the sense that they are not strictly demanded by the evidence." The second principle is related to Occam's razor and postulates that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." This principle is widely known as the Sagan standard, but Pigliucci and Boudry (2014, 500) argue that it is based on the philosophy of David Hume.

In the absence of evidence, Occam's razor and the Sagan standard require process tracing researchers to choose the most parsimonious and least extraordinary explanation. If they assume the existence of a step in a causal mechanism even though there is no evidence for it, they have to justify why the existence of the step is more parsimonious and less extraordinary than its absence. Using Gonzalez-Ocantos and LaPorte's (2021, 1419–20) example, a researcher has to justify why it is more parsimonious and less extraordinary to assume that a decisionmaker did something without leaving a paper trail than to assume that the decisionmaker did nothing. By default, the most parsimonious and least extraordinary explanation would be that nothing happened. As a result, the claim that someone did something without leaving direct traces would have to rely on circumstantial evidence which makes the assumption that nothing happened extraordinary and complicated to justify.

The application of Occam's razor and the Sagan standard means that complex and extraordinary explanations without clear evidence in their favour will be dismissed. Consequently, a hypothetical top-secret Russian operation in the Donbas that unleashed war through undercover agents without leaving any traces would remain undetected. However, this shortcoming is inevitable

because the only alternative would be a descent into conspiratorial thinking. The benefits of dismissing far-fetched explanations in the absence of evidence clearly outweigh the risk of overlooking an elaborate, well-executed conspiracy.

**3.4.3.2. The PHIA Probability Yardstick and Informal Bayesian Analysis.** The requirement to address the problem of missing data by assessing the degree to which a proposed explanation is parsimonious and unextraordinary reemphasises the problem of unconscious bias. Different researchers may have different ideas of what constitutes an extraordinary claim or a parsimonious explanation. Structuring Bayesian analysis in a concise and accessible way can mitigate this problem to some extent. Doing so cannot prevent disagreements among scholars about the extent to which a certain piece of evidence changes the probability of a hypothesis. However, it forces researchers to spell out the probabilistic weight they attach to certain pieces of evidence or to the absence of evidence. This, in turn, increases transparency and clarifies where exactly assessments converge and differ. It also encourages researchers to reflect on their own biases.

Attempts to calculate exact numerical probabilities would reduce rather than increase the clarity and accessibility of Bayesian analysis in the context of digital forensic process tracing. It would move the focus of analysis away from the discussion of sources towards calculations and the discussion of numbers. As an alternative, I propose following Barrenechea and Mahoney's (2019, 453) suggestion to use "verbal understandings of likelihood" to express the probabilistic impact of different pieces of evidence. As a coherent system of such verbal categories, I suggest the terminology of the Professional Head of Intelligence Analysis (PHIA) Probability Yardstick.<sup>14</sup> This is a scale of probabilistic language widely used by UK intelligence and law enforcement agencies (UK Government 2019). It defines specific terms to describe specific margins of probability. These terms and margins are: *remote chance* ( $\approx 5\%$ ), *highly unlikely* ( $\approx 10\text{-}20\%$ ), *unlikely* ( $\approx 25\text{-}35\%$ ), *realistic possibility* ( $\approx 40\text{-}50\%$ ), *likely* ( $\approx 55\text{-}75\%$ ), *highly likely* ( $\approx 80\text{-}90\%$ ), and *almost certain* ( $\approx 95\%$ ). Using this terminology allows for an explicitly probabilistic analysis and follows the general principles of

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<sup>14</sup> I would like to thank Rupert Culyer for drawing my attention to this particular system.

Bayesian updating without creating a false impression of mathematical accuracy. I call this approach informal Bayesian analysis, in contrast to the formal Bayesian analysis discussed by Fairfield and Charman (2017) and Zaks (2021).

### ***3.5. Digital Forensic Process Tracing in Practice***

The remainder of this dissertation will apply the methodology developed in this chapter to the case of the Donbas conflict. The six remaining empirical chapters will use digital forensic process tracing to investigate the causal mechanisms behind the six critical junctures of the war's escalation sequence. To obtain the results reported in each of the subsequent empirical chapters, I operationalized the principles developed in the present chapter in the following way:

The starting point of my research on each empirical chapter were the media reports on the respective critical junctures which I obtained from the extended media dataset and which I cited in chapter two. These reports provided a variety of keywords and keyword combinations to search the Internet for further information on the events in question. In turn, this search for further information provided even more keywords. My primary tools for source discovery were the search engines of Google, Yandex, and YouTube and the different search operators they provide, such as date-specific search, domain-specific search, image search, or reverse image search. In most cases, it was possible to reduce the initial multitude of search results to a relatively small set of primary sources that contained the original information about the event. Most other sources could be discarded because they merely cited or interpreted these primary sources. I then assessed the credibility of each source and the information contained within it. For written sources, I checked whether it is clear who the author was and how the author obtained the information provided. I also checked the track record of the author and the publication for potential biases and a potential tendency to publish disinformation of a certain kind. For example, a report by a correspondent of a local news outlet, which makes clear what the correspondent witnessed and what additional information they received from other local sources, is more trustworthy than a statement from a military spokesperson. Finally, I checked whether other sources confirm or dispute the information provided. For audio-visual sources, I made extensive use of Google Earth Pro to verify the location of photos and videos. I also checked whether the material showed any signs of

editing and whether the timing and the context of its publication make manipulation more or less likely. For example, if a video appeared immediately after an event, it is less likely to be edited than if it appeared weeks later. Similarly, a video published by a pro-separatist source is less likely to contain fabricated evidence of Russian involvement than a video published by the Ukrainian military.

I stopped the source discovery process when multiple rounds of additional keyword searches did not yield any new events, new aspects of events, or new evidence. This approach is in line with the concept of data saturation which is widely used in qualitative research to justify the number of interviews or focus groups that a researcher conducts (Braun and Clarke 2021, 202–6). To maximize traceability and minimize the risk of data loss in relation to the selected primary sources, I cited the archived record of websites in the Internet Archive and archive.today repositories whenever this was feasible.

For each chapter, I separated this data gathering and analysis process into two parts. The first round focused on hypothesis building. I concentrated on singling out those aspects of the critical juncture that are key for the relative importance of internal and external causes. For example, while there was hardly ever disagreement among sources that a certain armed clash had taken place, it was often controversial who had fired the first shot and how many people had died. While these controversies are important, they are secondary in the context of my research question. For the purpose of this dissertation, it made sense to concentrate additional source discovery and analysis efforts on the relative importance of internal and external causal factors. Hence, I developed competing hypotheses and causal mechanisms that explain the critical juncture in question with a focus on these aspects. I then used Occam's razor and the Sagan standard to define which hypothesis should be the default assumption. On this basis, I carried out a second round of data gathering and analysis. I searched for evidence that could either further strengthen or weaken the default hypothesis, assessed the credibility of this evidence, and updated probabilities according to the result of this assessment and the principles of informal Bayesian analysis.

### **3.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has developed digital forensic process tracing as the methodology of choice for the further investigation of causality in the context of the six critical junctures that characterize the Donbas war's formative escalation sequence. The key characteristics of this methodology are:

- i. A focus on primary information from the conflict zone published by openly available online sources.
- ii. An explicit discussion of the reliability of evidence, which takes into account the source of any evidence and the context in which it was published.
- iii. A prioritization of causal factors according to the principle of abnormalism.
- iv. A probabilistic evaluation of the available evidence using the principles of Occam's razor and the Sagan standard as well as the terminology of the PHIA Probability Yardstick for informal Bayesian analysis.

Digital forensic process tracing enables a more transparent analysis of the role of domestic factors on the one hand and Russian involvement on the other in the escalation of the Donbas war. I will use the following six chapters of my dissertation to demonstrate this. These chapters will use digital forensic process tracing to investigate the war's six critical junctures. This application of the methodology developed in the present chapter to the events of chapter two's escalation sequence will provide important insights into the domestic and external causal dynamics within each critical juncture. In turn, the sum of these causal dynamics will provide a compelling explanation of the war as a whole.



#### **4. Of Arms and Barricades: Donetsk and Luhansk in Early April**

This chapter will use digital forensic process tracing to investigate the causes of the first critical juncture of the Donbas conflict – the building occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk in early April. I will start by providing an overview over the events and develop three hypotheses regarding their causes. The first hypothesis defines the events as the result of a local grassroots movement. The second hypothesis defines them as an elite-controlled insurrection. The third hypothesis defines them as the result of Russian interference. I will then discuss the available digital open source evidence in relation to each hypothesis. I will conclude that there is convincing evidence that the actions of both local elites and Russia were important auxiliary factors. However, this evidence is not sufficient to overturn the default assumption that the events in question were primarily a bottom-up uprising of local pro-Russian fringe activists.

##### ***4.1. Events Overview and Hypotheses***

On 6 April 2014, a crowd of pro-Russian protesters gathered on Lenin Square in the centre of Donetsk. Similar rallies had been held in the same location on every weekend since 1 March. Like on previous occasions, this rally was followed by a march along Artem Street and Shevchenko Boulevard to the building of the Donetsk Regional State Administration – the local representation of the Kyiv authorities in Donetsk Region. Like on previous occasions, a number of activists entered the building after local riot police refrained from using force to protect it. Unlike on previous occasions, however, they did not leave again. During the night of 6-7 April, a group of several dozen men also stormed the Donetsk branch of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and started searching for weapons (YouTube 2016a; 2014ad). On 7 April, a news website reported first rumours that boxes with firearms had been brought to the State Administration (Ostrov 2014i; Vesti 2014b). On the same day, a meeting inside the State Administration proclaimed the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) (YouTube 2014aa). By 8 April, the separatists had vacated the SBU building again (Ukrainska Pravda 2014i), but the State Administration remained under their control, and they had erected barricades around the entrance (YouTube 2014ac). Inside, separatist leaders held a meeting and appointed a "Provisional Government" (YouTube 2014ab). Moreover, a source in the SBU confirmed that firearms had been removed from the SBU building during its brief occupation and

brought into the State Administration (62.ua 2014). Because the Kyiv authorities refrained from any attempt to liberate the State Administration by force, these firearms were not used for the time being. Nevertheless, they turned the Donetsk State Administration building into the first armed and barricaded foothold of the separatist movement in Donetsk Region – a foothold that has not come back under Kyiv’s control at the time of writing.

Simultaneously, a second permanent and armed building seizure took place in Luhansk. On 6 April, a group of people stormed the local SBU headquarters, opened the armoury, and started to erect barricades around the building (YouTube 2014r; 2014x; 2014af; Ostrov 2014j). The occupants of the building called themselves the “Army of the Southeast.” They demanded an amnesty for all security forces accused of violence against Maidan protesters in Kyiv, the cancellation of the Ukrainian presidential election, and an unspecified referendum for Ukraine’s Southeast (Relke and Bolotov 2014). Like in Donetsk, they established a first armed foothold that Ukraine’s central authorities never regained control over.

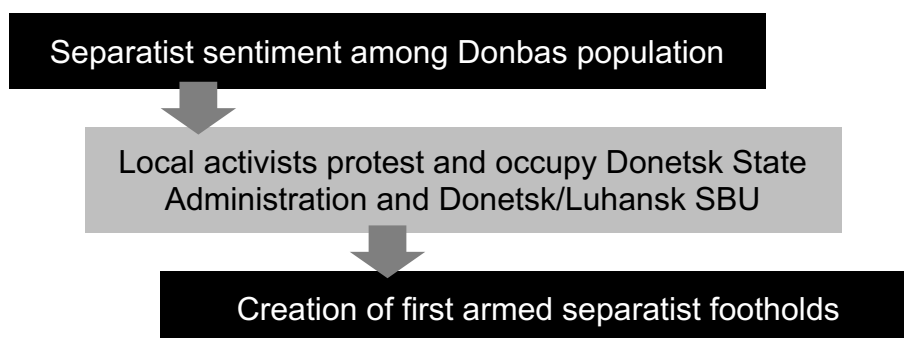
It is clear that the central component of the causal mechanism at work within this critical juncture are the actors who occupied the buildings and their corresponding actions. It is also clear that the outcome of this mechanism was an escalation of the conflict. What is contentious, however, is whether a one-part mechanism is sufficient to explain this outcome or whether additional “entities engaging in activities” (Beach 2017, 6), other than the people storming the buildings, need to be considered. It is the answer to this question that determines the primary cause of this episode of conflict escalation. Matveeva’s (2016, 35) claim that the separatist movement in the Donbas “was leaderless and not spearheaded by elite” suggests that the activists in question acted primarily of their own accord. It suggests that the causal mechanism consists only of a single component that links local sentiment in the form of grassroots activists’ individual motives as a cause to the escalation of the conflict as a result. Wilson’s (2016, 649) claim that the Donbas conflict was “a process catalysed and escalated by local elites and by Russia, with local foot-soldiers,” on the other hand, implies that the causal mechanism leading to conflict escalation needs to include an additional step. In the context of the present critical juncture, this step would consist of either Russia

or local elites organizing and instructing the actors that occupied the buildings. In this scenario, the primary cause of the escalation are not the individual motives of those occupying the buildings but the desire of Russia or local elites to destabilize the situation and put pressure on the Kyiv authorities.

There are three hypotheses that can be derived from these arguments to explain the escalation of the conflict in early April 2014. Each hypothesis corresponds to a specific causal mechanism. The first hypothesis is linked to the simple one-part mechanism that defines grassroots activism as the primary cause of the present instance of conflict escalation. The second and third mechanism consist of two parts and place the emphasis on the actions of local elites and Russia. Together, these three causal mechanisms and the hypotheses associated with them reflect the divide in the academic debate on the causes of the Donbas conflict. The first and second hypotheses are compatible with the argument that the Donbas conflict is primarily a homegrown phenomenon while the third hypothesis is in line with the idea of covert Russian aggression.

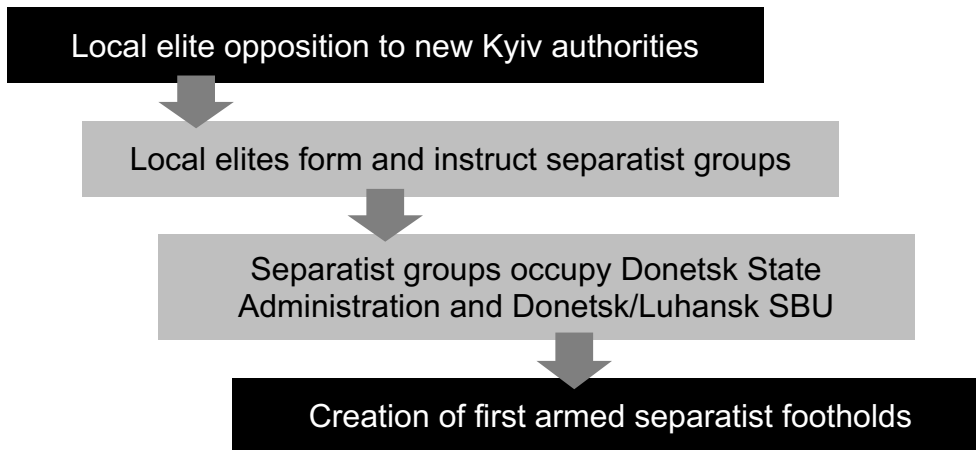
H1: The building occupations of early April 2014 were carried out by a leaderless grassroots movement.

**Figure 1: Causal Mechanism of a Grassroots Insurrection**



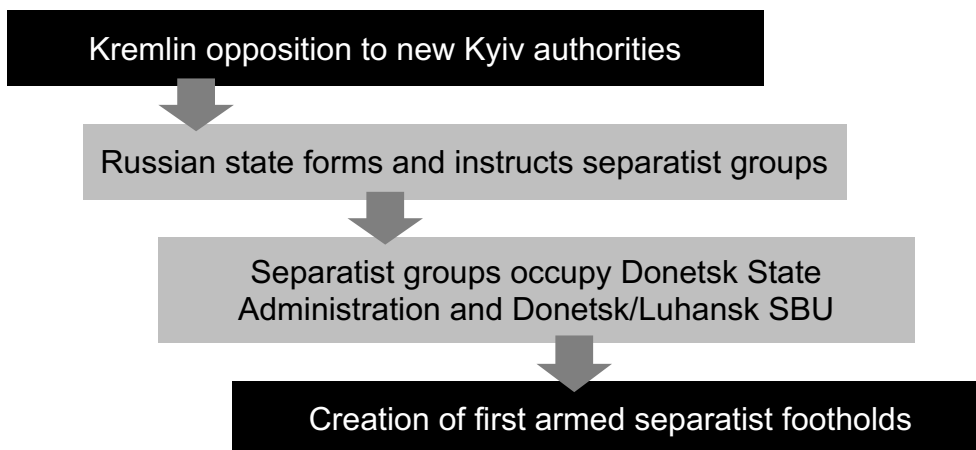
H2: The building occupations of early April 2014 were carried out by agents of local elites.

**Figure 2: Causal Mechanism of an Elite-Controlled Insurrection**



H3: The building occupations of early April 2014 were carried out by agents of the Russian state.

**Figure 3: Causal Mechanism of a Covert Russian Invasion**



Naturally, all three mechanisms are simplified ideal types. In reality, they are not mutually exclusive. A hypothetical grassroots movement could receive some support from local elites or Russia. Agents of local elites or Russia could, to some extent, pursue an agenda of their own. Local elites could conspire with Russia or pursue a parallel agenda. While these nuances have to be taken into account, it is conducive to analytic clarity to analyse the three mechanisms separately before attempting to combine them. Doing so enables a more transparent assessment of their relative weight. A discussion of caveats and combinations should follow after each hypothesis has been tested against the available digital open source evidence.

#### **4.2. Evidence of Grassroots Activism**

An obvious *smoking-gun* (van Evera 1997, 31–32) in support of H1 would be evidence that the building occupations emanated from a mass movement which was too big, too complex, and too dynamic to be subject to top-down control. In line with the principles of Bayesian inference, such evidence would increase the probability of H1 considerably while decreasing the probability of H2 and H3. However, evidence of this kind is absent in the present case. As I have argued in chapter two, the events in question were not the result of a rise in general protest sentiment. On the contrary, by early April, the pro-Russian protest movement in the Donbas had lost momentum. This becomes particularly apparent when comparing videos of the crowd that had gathered in front of the Donetsk Regional State Administration on 1 March and 6 April while activists stormed the building. On the former date, protesters filled the entire square (YouTube 2014c). On the latter date, they constituted a scattered group of people that only occupied a small section of it (YouTube 2014s; 2014t). A calculation of the square's area on Google Earth combined with the crowd size models provided by Still (2013) suggests that 2,000 people is a generous maximum estimate for the 6 April event. Moreover, footage of the activists breaking through the police cordon into the building suggests that most people were passive bystanders. Only a group of several dozen men are actually attacking the police and forcing their way into the building (YouTube 2014z). Finally, another video shows that most of the crowd had dispersed once it got dark (YouTube 2014w). Footage from Luhansk from 6 April presents a similar picture. While the SBU building was being stormed, cars and buses were still able to pass on one lane of the road in front of it. The crowd of protesters was limited to a relatively small area around the building's entrance that is *highly unlikely* to hold more than 2,000 people. Like in Donetsk, most people were passive bystanders (YouTube 2014r; 2014x). The crowd still featured in a video taken later on the same day (YouTube 2014y) but dispersed completely by the following morning, when the building was photographed with only a few dozen people in front of it (Ostrov 2014j). Hence, rather than being carried by a mass protest movement, the building seizures resulted from the actions of two relatively small groups of activists at a time when general protest turnout was decreasing.

#### 4.2.1. *The Burden of Proof*

This finding does not automatically imply that the groups in question were acting on someone else's behalf. As van Evera (1997, 31–32) emphasises, the absence of a *smoking gun* does not disprove a hypothesis. It remains entirely plausible that a small core of separatist activists radicalized, increased organizational cohesion, and decided to resort to more extreme measures as general protest sentiment faded. In fact, Pigliucci and Boudry's (2014) deliberations on the burden of proof in the philosophy of science suggest that this version of H1 should be given a head start against the other two hypotheses in terms of a priori probability. In the absence of convincing evidence to the contrary, Occam's razor and the Sagan standard suggest that H1 should be considered the most likely hypothesis. As discussed in chapter three, Occam's razor favours parsimonious explanations. In the present case, a principal-agent-relationship between the people occupying the buildings and a leadership directing them from elsewhere clearly adds an additional layer of complexity to the proposed explanation. According to Occam's razor, this additional complexity should be rejected unless the simpler explanation that the people occupying the building acted of their own accord is incompatible with the available evidence. At the same time, the Sagan standard also suggests an imbalance of a priori probability in favour of H1. A covert operation orchestrated by local elites or Russia is a more extraordinary event than two small groups of radical protesters occupying buildings. As a result, the starting point for informal Bayesian analysis should be that H1 is *likely* while H2 and H3 are *highly unlikely*.

#### 4.2.2. *The Chaotic Birth of the Donetsk People's Republic*

In the case of Donetsk, H1 does not rely on Occam's razor and the Sagan standard alone. Two observations provide additional evidence in its favour and further increase its probability to some extent. Firstly, the degree of organization and coordination among the State Administration's occupants was not above a level that could be expected from a self-organizing group of fringe activist. The situation inside the occupied building featured elements of chaos and confusion. Video footage taken on 6 April soon after the building was seized shows a variety of people coming and going, walking around, filming, shouting slogans, or arguing. Discipline and leadership are weak. A police officer counters a separatist leader's request to vacate the building with the proposal to "wait for the guy who

was here earlier and said he was another organizer” (YouTube 2014q at 2:23:00). Three other police officers ask a group of separatists for a point of contact and whether anyone is in charge of the activists surrounding them (YouTube 2014q at 2:33:00). One person claiming to be in charge has to shout through a megaphone to urge a group of others not to use violence against the police (YouTube 2014t). Another separatist suddenly barges in on an improvised press conference to voice an appeal to “mother Russia” (YouTube 2014q at 2:43:50). A high degree of improvisation is also visible during the first session of the DNR’s “Provisional Government” on 8 April. Some of the new “republic’s” leaders do not even appear to know each other’s names (YouTube 2014ab).

Secondly, the available digital open source information about the people trying to take charge of the situation points at a random array of men from different backgrounds. Some have a previous history of pro-Russian activism but as members of different marginal organizations. Others appear to be new to politics. There are no obvious links between Donetsk’s separatist leaders at this early stage of the conflict, apart from the fact that they are Donetsk Region residents or natives and share pro-Russian, anti-Western views. Their profiles are entirely consistent with the type of leadership group that a fringe grassroots coalition, which emerged from the ideological core of a protest movement, would be expected to have:

- **Volodymyr Makovych** was filmed announcing the formation of a “coordination council” (YouTube 2014v) and negotiating with the police (YouTube 2014u) in the State Administration building on 6 April. He also read out the proclamation of the DNR on 7 April (YouTube 2014aa) and participated in the meeting that appointed its “Provisional Government” on the following day (YouTube 2014ab). According to Ukraine’s NGO register, he created an organization called Young Patriots’ Movement in Donetsk after the Orange Revolution in 2005 (Bezsonova 2015; Holovnov 2014).
- **Vadym Cherniakov** was filmed together with Makovych while negotiating with the police. He is also the person telling activists through a megaphone not to use force against the police (YouTube 2014t). He then chaired the proclamation session and the formation of the “Provisional Government.” In

November 2012, he appeared in a local news report covering the demolition of a metallurgical plant in Horlivka. He was interviewed as the “technical director” of AVAKO – the construction company in charge of the demolition (06242.ua 2012). According to a CV that Cherniakov uploaded to a Ukrainian job website in February 2012, he had been working for AVAKO since 2009 and was based in Donetsk (Cherniakov 2012).

- **Denys Pushylin** also tried to coordinate events inside the occupied State Administration building on 6 April. He then co-chaired the proclamation session and the formation of the “Provisional Government” together with Cherniakov. Before, he was coordinating the latest Ukrainian iteration of the notorious Russian MMM Ponzi scheme (OTB TV 2013). On websites associated with the scheme, Pushylin (2013a; 2013b) described himself as an MMM “consultant” from Makiivka. In the December 2013 parliamentary byelection in a Kyiv Region constituency, he was the candidate of a political party founded by MMM and gained 72 votes (Pushylin 2014; Central Electoral Commission of Ukraine 2014).
- **Mykola Solntsev** interrupted Makovych’s, Cherniakov’s, and Pushylin’s press conference after the seizure of the building (YouTube 2014q at 2:43:50). He was also eager to draw attention to himself during the “Provisional Government” meeting. Solntsev was one of the leaders of a pro-Russian organization called Eastern Front and had spoken to journalists as early as 23 February. He said that he worked as an auditor in a Donetsk company (Smyrnova 2014). In another interview from early March, Solntsev said that his organization was opposed to Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev (Solntsev and Okopov 2014).
- **Myroslav Rudenko**, on the other hand, who can be seen standing next to Solntsev during the DNR proclamation and who was appointed to its “Provisional Government,” was an early follower of Hubariev. On 2 March, he was filmed agitating against the Kyiv authorities outside Hubariev’s apartment (Matsuka 2014). In his memoirs, Hubariev (2016, 45) describes Rudenko as an old friend from university. Rudenko describes himself as a “historian and writer,” who was born in the Donetsk Region town of Debaltseve and had lived



in Donetsk since the year 2000 (Alternatio.org n.d.; Rudenko 2010). In 2010, he was a Party of Regions candidate for the Donetsk City Council (Novosti Donbassa 2010).

- **Viacheslav Ponomarov**, who told a Russian news agency that he was a key organizer of the seizure of the Donetsk SBU building during the night of 6-7 April (Ponomarov 2014), would later in April become famous as the “People’s Mayor” of Sloviansk. Local residents told Wall Street Journal correspondent Philip Shishkin (2014), who visited Sloviansk in late April, that Ponomarov was the manager of a local soap factory. Ponomarov also showed his soap factory to British pro-Russian activist Graham Phillips (2014). According to Shishkin’s sources, Ponomarov had previously run a sewing factory, managed supplies for a military hospital, and traded cars. According to Ponomarov (2014), his group decided not to stay in the SBU building and went to the State Administration with the weapons they had seized. However, he said that his group was so appalled by the chaos and lack of leadership in the State Administration building that they decided to go home after a short time.

Naturally this evidence remains patchy. Only certain moments of the relevant events have been captured on camera, there is no guarantee that all relevant actors have been recorded, and the biographies of those identified may include aspects that have not been documented in publicly available sources. Neither is it possible to verify all of Ponomarov’s claims. Nevertheless, the signs of chaos and confusion in the occupied State Administration and the heterogeneity of the separatist leaders’ profiles are *straw-in-the-wind* (van Evera 1997, 31–32) evidence for a grassroots movement, which affects the balance of probabilities. According to the principles of Bayesian inference, the discussed evidence increases the probability of H1. Since the evidence for H1 remains relatively weak, it does not change the balance of probabilities fundamentally, and H1 should still be considered a *likely* explanation for the events in Donetsk. However, to tilt the balance of probabilities against H1, evidence for H2 and H3 would have to outweigh both the *straw-in-the-wind* evidence in H1’s favour and H1’s higher initial probability due to Occam’s razor and the Sagan standard.

#### 4.2.3. *Partisans from Stakhanov? The “Army of the Southeast” in Luhansk*

The evidence for grassroots activism observed in Donetsk is absent in Luhansk. The “Army of the Southeast,” which occupied the Luhansk SBU building, differed from the nascent DNR in four important aspects. Firstly, there is evidence that the group had access to weapons before storming the building and had been preparing for a militarization of the situation at least since mid-March. On 7 April, two of its leaders, Alexej Relke and Valerii Bolotov (2014) spoke to a journalist inside the occupied building. During this interview, Relke confirmed that their group was behind a series of anonymous YouTube video messages that had gained media attention over the previous month. The first of these messages was posted on 16 March and shows three masked men (YouTube 2014n). The eyes and the voice of the person speaking match Bolotov. The eyes and the body shape of the man to his right match Relke. The men pose with five automatic rifles and a grenade launcher. They claim that they have more people under their command than the Ukrainian Armed Forces and threaten the Kyiv authorities that any actions against separatist demonstrations would be seen as a “declaration of war.” The text accompanying the video features a call for donations with a link to the social media profile of Ida Relke, who later confirmed that she was Alexej Relke’s mother (Ostermann and Relke 2014). On 22 March, Russian state-controlled TV channel *Rossiya 24* and Russian pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published reports on the video. Both reports feature an interview with one of the masked men, whose eyes and body size match Relke (Podubnyy 2014; Kots and Steshin 2014a; 2014b). On 1 April, the same three men published another video in which they call themselves the “United Command of the Southeast” (YouTube 2014p). They demand the “cancellation of the presidential election and a concrete date for a referendum on the Southeast.” Otherwise, “the People’s Army of the Southeast will be mobilized on 6 April.” They urge any resident of the Southeast “who is ready to make a stand for their right to life and freedom” to come to the central square of their town “on 6 April between 10-12am” and bring “a form of personal ID, water for a day, and any available weapons or protective equipment.”

Secondly, the available open source evidence indicates that the “Army of the Southeast” was a hierarchical paramilitary structure that was better organized than the activists who stormed buildings in Donetsk. Luhansk investigative

journalist Andrii Dikhtiarenko was allowed to visit the occupied SBU building on 11 April. He noted a “strict hierarchy,” not only between the protest camp in front of the building and the inside, but even within the building itself. “Not only do few people have the right to enter, only a very small number is allowed into the inner sanctum of the command unit” (Dikhtiarenko 2014). This observation is consistent with Valerii Bolotov’s claim during a 9 April press conference that his group included many people with a military background – former members of the Ukrainian security forces, reserve officers, Afghan war veterans, and Cossacks (YouTube 2014ag, at 2:55).

Thirdly, there is evidence that the “Army of the Southeast” had its origin in the town of Stakhanov,<sup>15</sup> fifty kilometres west of Luhansk. Relke’s mother told a journalist that her son emigrated with her to Germany in 1990 but struggled to fit in and returned to the family’s hometown of Stakhanov in 2006 (Ostermann and Relke 2014). At the same time, one of the few undisputed facts on Bolotov’s background is that he grew up in Stakhanov. According to a separatist news agency, there are plans to rename the town’s School No. 18, which he attended, in his memory (Novorosinform.org 2020). Moreover, Dikhtiarenko (2014) writes that a third separatist leader he talked to in the occupied SBU building, Oleksii Kariakin, was from Stakhanov as well. Finally, Stakhanov is the hometown of Pavlo Dromov, who later became a prominent separatist militia commander (Khrypun 2015; Kazanskyi 2015b; Dromov and Akhmedova 2014). In a June 2014 interview, he confirmed that he was from Stakhanov and had participated in the seizure of the SBU building (Dromov, Lavin, and Veselovskiy 2014 at 13:45). According to Alexej Relke, Dromov was part of a group of people who later left the occupied SBU building in Luhansk and returned to Stakhanov after disagreements with Bolotov (Lugansk 1 TV 2017).

Fourthly, none of the people leading the occupation of the SBU building had a public profile predating the events of April. Information about their life before the “Army of the Southeast” is limited and most of it is based on their own claims.

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<sup>15</sup> Until 1937 the town had been known as Kadiivka. The Ukrainian authorities reinstated this name as part of the 2016 decommunization reform. However, the separatist forces that continue to control the town still refer to it as Stakhanov. My dissertation uses the name Stakhanov because it was the town’s official name in 2014 and used by all sides of the conflict at the time.

According to his mother, Relke was planning to set up a wellness salon (Ostermann and Relke 2014). Bolotov (2014) says that he was the chairman of the Association of Luhansk Region Airborne Forces Veterans but there is no openly available documentation of any activity on his part in this function. When an investigative journalist analysed Kariakin's social media profile, all she found was that he "had an active interest in the airborne forces and regularly took part in historical re-enactments" (Krykun 2014). Dromov said that he used to be a bricklayer, a factory worker, an agricultural worker, a "bandit," and a migrant worker in Russia (Dromov and Akhmedova 2014). Two other separatist representatives who gave a press conference with Bolotov on 9 April (YouTube 2014ag) had not featured in openly available sources either and described themselves as low-profile businessmen. Serhii Korsunskyi said in an interview with a Ukrainian website that he used to own mines in Luhansk Region (Korsunskyi and Stanko 2016). Pavlo Strubchevskyi told a Russian website that he was an entrepreneur from the Luhansk Region town of Severodonetsk, who self-identified as a Don Cossack (Strubchevskyi and Kotkalo 2015; Kuzmina 2019).

The "Army of the Southeast's" armed underground activity, its military hierarchy, its epicentre in Stakhanov, and the lack of information on its leadership's backgrounds could be seen as evidence for the group acting on somebody else's behalf. However, this evidence remains relatively weak and is unable to shift the balance of probabilities far enough to overcome the initial burden of proof. It remains plausible that a small group of previously unknown people formed a well-organized underground organization in Stakhanov, obtained a small number of arms on the black market, and carried out the seizure of SBU building on their own initiative. In light of Occam's razor and the Sagan standard, this explanation still has to be considered *likely* in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary. At the same time, the burden of proof for H2 and H3 is somewhat lower than in the case of Donetsk.

#### **4.3. The Role of Local Elites**

The previous sections of this chapter have shown that H1 is the most probable explanation for the occupation of government buildings in both Donetsk and Luhansk in the absence of compelling evidence for H2 or H3. Such evidence

would need to be stronger in the case of Donetsk than Luhansk because the former case features stronger evidence for H1. On this basis, the present section will proceed to examine H2.

#### *4.3.1. The Yanukovych “Family”*

A prime suspect of orchestrating the separatist movement in the Donbas is former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. The Ukrainian authorities and Ukrainian journalists claim that the so-called “Family” – the business network surrounding Viktor Yanukovich, his son Oleksandr, and their closest associates – is behind the separatist movement in the Donbas. However, although it is plausible that Yanukovich and his close associates supported separatist activities to some extent, there is no strong evidence for “Family” control over the separatist movement.

Sources linked to the new Kyiv authorities have accused the Yanukovich “Family” of directly financing separatist activities in the Donbas from their Russian exile. In June 2014, journalist Oleksandr Paskhover published an article summarizing such claims. Andrii Parubii, then head of Ukraine’s National Security Council, claimed that Yanukovich and his associates had set up a headquarters in Russia’s Rostov-on-Don, from where they were financing the separatist movement. Ukrainian conflict analyst and activist Dmytro Tymchuk said that the SBU had intercepted several corresponding money transfers from Russia to Donetsk. Viktor Chumak, then head of the Ukrainian parliament’s Committee for the Fight against Corruption and Organized Crime, added that Yanukovich had accumulated significant cash reserves which he was now spending on separatism in the Donbas (Paskhover 2014). Yehor Firsov, a prominent pro-European activist from Donetsk also said in a May 2014 interview that Yanukovich was among those who financed separatism in the Donbas (Firsov and Ivanov 2014). In mid-April 2014, then Donetsk Region Governor Serhii Taruta said in an interview that the separatists were “not even hiding the presence of hired people around the State Administration building.” The journalist interviewing Taruta replied that he had information that these people received their remunerations from the Yanukovich “Family.” In response, Taruta said that he had heard the same allegation but that he did not have hard evidence for it.

He also claimed that not all separatist activists were being paid (Taruta and Shlinchak 2014).

While none of the cited officials and journalists present evidence to support their claims, three pieces of circumstantial evidence give them some degree of credibility. Firstly, Yanukovich had a clear motive to finance separatism, namely revenge against those who replaced him. Secondly, Yanukovich had the capacity to provide covert financial support to separatism through the maze of his Donbas business network. Research by investigative journalist Serhii Shcherbyna (2014a; 2014c) in Ukrainian company registers illustrates the complexity and reach of this network and even discovered links to the pre-conflict business activities of Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev. Thirdly, the use of middlemen and shell companies can make financial support difficult to prove, which makes the absence of concrete evidence for the above claims less surprising. These considerations suggest that, even in the absence of more direct evidence, it is *likely* that the Yanukovich “Family” provided some degree of financial support for separatism in the Donbas around the time of the April 2014 building occupations. It is *likely* that some of this money ended up supporting activists present in the occupied Donetsk State Administration building. In Luhansk, where the SBU was occupied by a less heterogenous, more confined group and where the “Family’s” business network was less developed, this is only a *realistic possibility*.

However, the *likely* presence of financial support does not suggest that the Yanukovich “Family’s” activities were the key determinant of separatist activities in the Donbas at the time in question. There is no evidence to suggest that the separatist activists were dependent on Yanukovich’s money. On the contrary, the following sections will show that the “Family” was far from the only potential source of financial support. However, even a hypothetical financial dependency on Yanukovich could hardly qualify as the dominant cause of separatist actions according to the principle of *abnormalism* (Roberts 1996, 96–99). The fact that a group of local people was willing to self-organize, obtain arms, and barricade buildings would remain the factor that is most *disruptive* to the normal course of events even if this group depended on Yanukovich’s money. Regardless of the degree of dependence, Yanukovich’s potential use of some of his immense

wealth to support separatist activities from the safety of his exile should be considered less *abnormal* than the separatists' activities themselves. To become the factor that is most *disruptive* to the normal course of events, the "Family" would have to be more directly involved in the organization of separatist activities. However, the only concrete evidence in this direction – Shcherbyna's (2014a; 2014c) investigation of business relationships between Yanukovich associates and Pavlo Hubariev – is rather weak. Hubariev was not directly involved in the events of April 2014 because he was imprisoned in Kyiv at the time. Moreover, given the size of Yanukovich's business network, it is not surprising that Hubariev or other separatist leaders used to work for or cooperate with companies associated with it. Past business links of this kind are, at best, weak evidence for a principal-agent relationship. Only evidence of direct employment or a close business relationship with the "Family" during the time leading up to the events of April 2014 could be considered a *smoking gun* in this regard. Such evidence is currently absent for any of the separatist leaders involved in the building occupations of early April. The *likely* presence of some financial support and the alleged business links between Pavlo Hubariev and the "Family" are not sufficient to suggest that the actions of the Yanukovich "Family" were the primary cause of the building occupations in either Donetsk or Luhansk. As a result, the balance of probabilities between H1 and H2 remains unaltered.

#### 4.3.2. Rinat Akhmetov

Another key suspect of orchestrating the building occupations in Donetsk is Rinat Akhmetov – Ukraine's richest man, owner of another large business network in Donetsk Region, and former ally of Viktor Yanukovich. Several journalists have suggested that Akhmetov was the key person behind the events of early April 2014. However, these allegations are also based on weak evidence. Moreover, an audio recording of Akhmetov's attempts to negotiate with the separatists and his subsequent failure to act as a mediator suggest that he is even less likely to have been in control of the separatist movement than Yanukovich.

Russian journalist Yuliya Latynina (2014) concluded after a visit to Donetsk in late April that separatist leader Denys Pushylin followed Rinat Akhmetov's orders. Latynina based this conclusion on her observation that Pushylin changed his mind about meeting former Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy – supposedly

after Akhmetov intervened. However, even if Latynina is correct and Akhmetov managed to convince Pushylin to meet Khodorkovskiy, this is only weak evidence for Akhmetov controlling Pushylin or other separatist figures. Ukrainian journalist and anti-corruption activist Serhii Leshchenko (2014) posted on his Facebook page on 7 April that a “trustworthy source” had told him that Akhmetov had met Vladimir Putin in Moscow in March or April 2014. “As far as I understand, the result is what we are seeing on the streets of Donetsk today,” Leshchenko said. However, even if Leshchenko’s source is, indeed, trustworthy, the fact that Akhmetov had met with Putin is no evidence for Akhmetov controlling the events. Such a meeting could have had many different purposes and outcomes. Other journalists link Akhmetov to Oleksandr Zakharchenko, who became leader of the DNR on 8 August 2014. In the early days of the conflict, Zakharchenko was the leader of Oplot, a group of activists that was present in the occupied Donetsk state administration building shortly after its seizure (Grove and Baczynska 2014; Ostrov 2014r). According to Serhii Shcherbina’s (2014b) research, Zakharchenko used to be the director of a company, which was tied to Rinat Akhmetov’s business empire through two other intermediary enterprises. In addition, journalist Kateryna Serhatskova (2015) cited an anonymous source in Ukraine’s intelligence apparatus claiming that Zakharchenko used to be involved in the trafficking of goods across the Russian border and “began his career in a group of bandits linked to Rinat Akhmetov.” However, the implications of these alleged links are the same as the implications of Pavlo Hubariev’s alleged links to the Yanukovich “Family.” Given the size of Akhmetov’s business network, past business links of this kind are, at best, weak evidence for a principal-agent relationship.

Even though the evidence provided is relatively weak, the above claims slightly increase the probability of H2 in relation to Akhmetov. However, another piece of evidence reverses this effect. This evidence relates to a meeting during the night of 7-8 April between Akhmetov and representatives of the activists occupying the Donetsk State Administration building. The first part of the meeting took place on a street in central Donetsk and was recorded by one of the activists (YouTube 2014ae). The activists tell Akhmetov that they “need a leader” and ask if he would be willing to lead a “committee of the Donbas.” In response, Akhmetov assures the activists that he shares their objective of safeguarding the interests of the



Donbas and that he will do everything he can to prevent the Kyiv authorities from using force to retake the occupied building. However, he also tells them that secession is not the way forward. Instead, he urges them to formulate concrete political demands and engage in a dialogue with the new Kyiv authorities. “If we say ‘Donetsk, Donbas, Ukraine!’ I will be with you,” Akhmetov says. The activists reject this idea and say that it is too late to give up the objective of seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia. They also doubt that there is any point in negotiating with the Kyiv authorities. Finally, Akhmetov suggests that the separatists choose a smaller group of representatives to come with him and meet Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Vitalii Yarema to continue negotiations. Akhmetov leaves with the representatives. The man who is recording walks back towards the occupied State Administration building. Before ending the recording, he predicts that the “movement’s leaders [...] will now betray everything to Rinat.”

The recording is *almost certainly* authentic because the footage can be geolocated to a precise location on Teatralnyi Boulevard in central Donetsk and both Akhmetov and Yarema confirmed that negotiations took place that night (Ukrainska Pravda 2014k; 2014g). Moreover, the recording is *almost certainly* not authorized by Akhmetov, because the phone camera is held very low and pointing towards the ground for most of the time, which suggests that the person filming was trying to avoid detection. The recording is *smoking-gun* evidence that significantly reduces the probability of H2 because the discussion between Akhmetov and the activists does not suggest in any way that Akhmetov is in control of the situation. Rather than speaking from a position of authority, he is pleading with the activists, who respond to his arguments with scepticism. Furthermore, the fact that further negotiations did not yield any results is a failed *hoop test* (van Evera 1997, 31), which “kills” the counterhypothesis that Akhmetov may have staged the nightly meeting. Contrary to the prediction by the person filming, the activists occupying the building did not change their agenda according to Akhmetov’s ideas. His mediation efforts both in the immediate aftermath of the building occupation and in the weeks that followed did not prevent the further escalation of the conflict in and around Donetsk.<sup>16</sup> This, in

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<sup>16</sup> As I will argue in chapter six, Akhmetov’s efforts to prevent further conflict escalation were more successful in Mariupol.

turn, had a severe negative impact on Akhmetov's business assets in the Donbas (Prelovskaya 2014).

This evidence reduces the probability that Akhmetov controlled the group of separatists who occupied the Donetsk State Administration building on 6 April. However, it does not suggest that Akhmetov was a strong opponent of the separatist movement who did everything in his power to prevent the conflict from escalating. On the contrary, according to Ukrainian journalist Denys Kazanskyi (2015a), the mere fact that the building occupations in Donetsk went ahead is evidence that their organizers had at least Akhmetov's tacit support. This is because "Akhmetov has always had complete control over the situation in Donetsk Oblast and it is a fairly open secret that all officials of any real significance in the oblast were generally appointed with his approval." Kazanskyi started his career as an anti-corruption blogger in Donetsk Region and was a well-known expert in local politics long before the outbreak of the war. For this reason, his assessment carries considerable weight. Moreover, Yehor Firsov, another prominent pro-European activist from Donetsk makes a similar argument. He said: "I have lived in Donetsk all twenty-five years of my life. For the last seven years I have been involved in politics and I am 100% certain that not a single more or less significant process takes place without Akhmetov's permission" (Firsov and Ivanov 2014). Kazanskyi's news website Chetvertaya Vlast (2015) also published a detailed chronology of Akhmetov's reactions to separatist activities in the run-up to April, which suggests that he did little more than issuing vague statements. In addition, Kazanskyi (2015a) argues that Akhmetov controlled the Donetsk Region police, which failed to prevent or resist the building occupations. Journalist and anticorruption activist Artem Furmaniuk (2014) makes a similar argument by naming three high-ranking police officials in Donetsk who, according to his sources, used to work for companies owned by Akhmetov.

Considering these assessments, Akhmetov's half-hearted statements against separatism, and his open attempt to co-opt the separatists' agenda, it is *almost certain* that he did not do all he could to prevent the events of early April from happening. This failure on his part does not change the conclusion that he was not in control of the situation. It rather suggests that he overestimated his ability

to regain control over the events and remained confident that he could step in and use the threat of separatism to his advantage until it was too late.

#### *4.3.3. Oleksandr Yefremov*

In Luhansk, accusations of orchestrating separatism have focused on Oleksandr Yefremov, a local oligarch and former head of the Party of Regions faction in the Ukrainian Parliament. Yefremov has publicly expressed solidarity with the separatist movement. Also, he is the only high-profile Ukrainian politician who is standing trial for supporting separatism. Nevertheless, neither the court case against Yefremov nor those who accused him in the media have revealed any convincing evidence linking him directly to the group that occupied the Luhansk SBU building on 6 April.

To some extent, Yefremov has sided with the separatists in public. On 2 March he told a separatist rally in Luhansk that the regime change in Kyiv was unconstitutional (Yefremov 2014a). He then entered the Regional Assembly building where the deputies voted for a resolution that declared the Kyiv authorities “illegitimate” and “reserved the right” to call the “brotherly nation” of Russia for help if the situation did not improve (Holenko 2014). Shortly after the occupation of the Luhansk SBU on 6 April, Yefremov (2014b) told journalists that the people who occupied the building represent “the opinion of many people and want to make a stand for this opinion.” As late as mid-May, he used a parliamentary hearing in Kyiv to blame the central government for the escalation of the situation. He urged interim President Turchynov, to end any military operations in the Donbas, take the result of the separatist “referenda” of 11 May seriously, and engage in negotiations (Yefremov 2014c).

First allegations that Yefremov’s support for separatism consisted of more than just rhetoric were voiced by Luhansk investigative blogger Serhii Ivanov and former Party of Regions MP Volodymyr Landik. They claim that Yefremov financed separatist activities and collaborated with Russian intelligence to bring activists from Russia to Luhansk. They also claim that Valerii Bolotov, a leader of the “Army of the Southeast,” used to oversee illegal coal mines in Luhansk Region on Yefremov’s behalf (Ivanov and Zarovna 2014; Landik 2014; 2016). Moreover, journalistic investigations by Ukrainian journalist Stanislav Kmet

(2014) and Russian journalist Yuliya Polukhina (2015) both reached the conclusion that the war did not change the economic power structures in Luhansk Region. They argue that Yefremov's local business networks remained largely intact and that many close associates of his were appointed to senior positions in the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).

However, there is no concrete evidence that Yefremov controlled the separatist movement in Luhansk or that any financial support of his had reached the "Army of the Southeast" by April 2014. Yefremov's trial commenced in January 2017 (RBK-Ukraine 2017) and is continuing at the time of writing. As of autumn 2021, it has not brought to light any convincing evidence. On the contrary, the former leadership of the Luhansk SBU testified in favour of Yefremov. Former Luhansk SBU head Oleksandr Petrulevych (2017) testified that he did not know of any evidence that links Yefremov to the creation of the "Army of the Southeast." Petrulevych's deputy Oleh Zhyvotov (2018) said that he did not have any information regarding a link between Yefremov and Bolotov, either.

This does not mean that Yefremov did not contribute to the escalation of the situation. Like Akhmetov in Donetsk, he failed to use his influence in the region to prevent separatist activities. What is more, he did not even hide the fact that he was trying to use separatism to put pressure on the Kyiv authorities. This fact and the close ties of his business network to the separatist authorities that later emerged in Luhansk make it *likely* that Yefremov financed separatist activities in Luhansk to some extent at some point in time. Moreover, there is a *realistic possibility* that some of this funding reached the "Army of the Southeast." Regardless of this finding, there is no compelling evidence that the men who occupied the Luhansk SBU in April were under his control.

The conclusions regarding Akhmetov's and Yefremov's role raise the question whether the causal mechanism accompanying H2 needs to be modified to define the inaction rather than the actions of local elites as the primary cause of the critical juncture in question. However, there are two reasons against such a modification. Firstly, even under the assumption that Akhmetov and Yefremov had almost complete control over the police in Donetsk and Luhansk before April 2014, it remains uncertain whether this would have been sufficient to prevent the

building seizures. If Akhmetov and Yefremov had spoken out against separatism and demanded the use of force against separatist protests, the security forces may have turned against them. Secondly and more importantly, refocusing the causal mechanism on elite inaction would contradict the principle of *abnormalism*. The reasoning here is analogous to Yanukovych's potential financing of separatist activities. The fact that a group of local people was willing to self-organize, obtain arms, and barricade buildings was more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the fact that local elites initially responded with a wait-and-see approach. Given that both Akhmetov and Yefremov used to be allies of Yanukovych, it is by no means extraordinary that they did not rush to the aid of the new Kyiv authorities but tried to exploit the situation. For this reason, their passivity should be mentioned as a supporting factor within the causal mechanism but not as its key determinant.

#### 4.3.4. Oleksandr Bobkov

Another former Party of Regions MP from the Donbas accused of sponsoring separatism is Oleksandr Bobkov. Ukrainian journalists Denys Kazanskyi and Maryna Vorotyntseva (2020, 245–54) call Bobkov “the godfather of Donetsk separatism.” They argue that Bobkov founded and financed a separatist group called Oplot. Ukrainian journalist Artem Furmaniuk (2016), Ukrainian activist Yegor Firsov (Ostrov 2014r), and unnamed insider sources of the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* (Kanygin 2014) have voiced similar claims.

In the case of Bobkov, there is additional evidence indicating direct collaboration with Oplot. In a 2016 interview with a separatist news website, Bobkov admitted that he had met Oplot leader Oleksandr Zakharchenko at protests against the new Kyiv authorities in Donetsk in spring 2014. He also admitted that he had talked to Zakharchenko about plans to have the Donetsk City Council issue certain demands to the Kyiv authorities (Komitet 2016). On 16 April 2014, armed Oplot members entered the Donetsk City Council building. According to a correspondent of the local news website *62.ua*, Oleksandr Zakharchenko told reporters at the scene that Oplot demanded that the Kyiv authorities “pass Oleksandr Bobkov’s draft law on local referenda” (Lazorenko 2014).

This episode strengthens the credibility of the sources which claim that Bobkov played a key role in the creation and operation of Oplot. It suggests that it is *likely* that Bobkov and Zakharchenko closely coordinated their actions around the time of the Donetsk State Administration seizure. This would mean that Bobkov's involvement in the events went beyond permissive passivity. However, it does not imply that this involvement was a necessary condition for the events of early April in Donetsk. Although Zakharchenko and Oplot were present in the Donetsk State Administration building soon after its occupation (Grove and Baczynska 2014; Ostrov 2014r), there is no evidence to suggest that they played a leading role in the events of 6 April. In fact, pro-separatist journalist Aleksandr Barkov (2018), who was a Donbas correspondent of the Russian extreme-right-wing newspaper *Zavtra* at the time of events, claims in his memoirs that Oplot established its base in the occupied building only on 11 April. In any case, even if Zakharchenko or other Oplot members helped seize the building, they were only one component of a heterogeneous group of actors. There is nothing to suggest that the seizure of the building could not have taken place without them. Moreover, since Bobkov was not a major oligarch and did not have access to the same resources as the Yanukovich "Family," it is *likely* that Zakharchenko and his men would have simply looked for another sponsor had Bobkov withdrawn his support.

#### *4.3.5. Other Potential Sponsors*

Although accusations of orchestrating Donbas separatism mainly focus on Yanukovich, Akhmetov, Yefremov, and Bobkov several other politicians have also been associated with it. The role of three of these actors merits a brief discussion. However, the probability that any of them controlled the building occupations in Donetsk or Luhansk is even lower than for the four actors discussed above.

Of all members of parliament of Yanukovich's Party of Regions, Oleh Tsarov was the one who voiced the strongest support for the separatist movement in public. He travelled to Donetsk on 11 April, gave speeches supporting the separatists both inside and outside the occupied State Administration building, and posted videos of these speeches on his own YouTube channel (Tsarov 2014a; 2014b). On the following day, he spoke outside the occupied SBU building in Luhansk

(Tsarov 2014c; 2014d). However, Tsarov was from Dnipropetrovsk Region and did not have a business network in the Donbas. Neither is there any other evidence that suggests that he had significant control over the separatist movement. His flying visits to the occupied buildings rather suggest that he was trying to jump on a separatist bandwagon.

The ties of Party of Regions MP Mykola Levchenko to the separatists are also well documented. According to Rinat Akhmetov, Levchenko was the person who informed him that the occupants of the State Administration wanted to meet in the night of 7-8 April (Ukrainska Pravda 2014k). Levchenko was present at that meeting. When Akhmetov drove off with some separatist representatives to continue negotiations, Levchenko walked with a group of activists, which included the person who was secretly recording, back to the square in front of the State Administration. During the conversation, Levchenko expressed support for a united Ukraine but also said that Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus should ideally merge into one state (YouTube 2014ae at 36:30). Moreover, Levchenko was the person who enabled Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev’s first public appearance at the Donetsk City Council on 28 February. According to Donbas news website Ostrov (2014c), Levchenko urged the deputies to let Hubariev speak by saying: “I have known him for a long time. He has helped us in election campaigns.” However, even though this episode and the recording of 7-8 April suggest that Levchenko was on good terms with some members of the separatist movement, they do not indicate that he was in a position of authority or control. Neither was he a major oligarch with access to financial means comparable to the wealth of Akhmetov, Yefremov, or the Yanukovych “Family.”

Luhansk anti-corruption activist Maksym Mykhalkov (2014) accused the Luhansk branch of the Communist Party of Ukraine and its branch leader Spiridon Kilinkarov of financing the separatist movement. Considering that collaboration between Ukraine’s Communist Party and a separatist fringe group in the Donbas was documented as early as 2006 (Novosti Donbassa 2006), it is *likely* that these claims are accurate. However, like in the cases of Yanukovych and Yefremov, there is no evidence which links Spiridonov or the Communist Party of Ukraine directly to the occupation of government buildings in April 2014 or suggests any degree of control over the people involved in them.

#### **4.4. The Role of Russia**

According to the findings of the previous section, the balance of probabilities remains unaltered and H2 should be discarded as a *highly unlikely* explanation for the escalation of the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk in early April. While local elites contributed to the events in a variety of ways, evidence for their involvement is not strong enough to overturn H1 and support the claim that they were the primary cause of events. The following section will determine whether the same applies to H3.

##### *4.4.1. The Glazyev Tapes*

A key piece of evidence for direct Russian state support for separatism in Southeast Ukraine are intercepted phone conversations between separatist activists and Russian Presidential Adviser Sergey Glazyev. Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office (2016) first published a small collection of intercepts in August 2016. Ukraine's Military Prosecutor's Office then presented a larger collection of 35 intercepts in late 2017 and early 2018. Audio files and annotated transcripts were subsequently published by the Ukrainian news website *Tsenzor.net* (Romaliiska 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). According to the Ukrainian prosecutors, the intercepted calls were made between 27 February and 6 March 2014. Most of the calls are between Glazyev and Konstantin Zatulin, the head of a Russian pro-Kremlin think tank. Most of their content focuses on the political situation in Crimea. Some conversations, however, also focus on the situation in other regions. Glazyev and Zatulin discuss the financing of separatist protests in Kharkiv and Odesa. An activist from Kharkiv calls Glazyev to ask for money. Glazyev urges pro-Russian activists from Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, and Luhansk to occupy the local regional legislative assemblies and force them to adopt resolutions declaring the Kyiv authorities illegitimate.

Glazyev called the recordings "nonsense created by neo-Nazi criminals" and declined to comment further (RBK 2016). Zatulin, on the other hand, claimed that the recordings were a "doctored compilation," while admitting that they were based on intercepts of actual conversations between him and Glazyev (Business FM 2016; RBK 2016). Indeed, the fact that the Ukrainian authorities only published these recordings several years after the relevant events raises some



doubts regarding their authenticity. However, it is *highly unlikely* that the Ukrainian authorities went through the effort of fabricating more than two hours of detailed and plausible conversations without making them more incriminating. The recordings do not prove a targeted and elaborate Russian conspiracy that led to the eventual escalation of violence. All they prove is that a Kremlin adviser was trying to coordinate and finance a variety of pro-Russian separatist forces across Ukraine's Southeast in the immediate aftermath of the regime change in Kyiv. None of the key actors involved in the later escalation of violence feature in the Glazyev tapes. On the contrary, the efforts of the actors Glazyev was speaking to failed in Odesa, Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Zaporizhzhia. Moreover, the content of the intercepted conversations is entirely consistent with an article that Glazyev wrote for the Russian extreme-right-wing newspaper *Zavtra* in May 2019. In this article, he laments that Russia did not take more decisive actions in early 2014 to prevent Ukraine from becoming "occupied by pro-American neo-Fascists" (Glazyev 2019). Finally, the content of the Glazyev tapes is also in line with Donetsk "People's Governor" Pavlo Hubariev's memoirs. Hubariev writes that Glazyev called him on the evening of 5 March 2014 to express approval and moral support. Hubariev also writes that he and his associates tried to set up a Skype call with Konstantin Zatulin the same evening, which failed because of an Internet outage (Hubariev 2016, 113).

It cannot be ruled out that certain details of the Glazyev tapes were subject to manipulation. However, it is *highly likely* that their overall content is accurate, which means that a Kremlin adviser was communicating with separatist activists in eastern Ukraine in early March 2014. At the same time, this does not necessarily mean that Glazyev was implementing a carefully devised plan that was supported by the entirety of Russia's political elite. Although Glazyev states in one of the conversations that he has "direct instructions from the leadership" (Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine 2016, at 5:17) this may be an exaggeration. In fact, Glazyev is known for his extreme views. Russian presidential spokesperson Dmitriy Peskov (2015; 2016; 2017; 2019) stressed on regular occasions that these views do not necessarily align with those of the Kremlin. Moreover, Glazyev's conversations with Zatulin suggest that their financial means were limited and that Zatulin financed some separatist activities out of his own pocket (Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine 2016, from 3:28).

Therefore, it is entirely plausible that Glazyev's contacts with separatist activists were his own initiative rather than part of a plan handed down to him from further up in the chain of command. However, this does not change the fact that Glazyev was a Russian presidential adviser and remained in this position for several years after the events in question. He did not cease to represent the state just because he may well have enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy to pursue his own initiatives. No state apparatus is entirely homogenous. On the contrary, a certain degree of autonomy is integral to many systems of governance, including Putin's Russia.<sup>17</sup> It is commonplace that the actions of some actors are more extreme than the actions of others while all of them represent the same state. If a state makes no meaningful effort to disassociate itself from the actions of its officials, these actions should be attributed to the state – especially if they relate to core competencies of the state such as foreign policy and security. Hence, in the absence of strong evidence that his superiors tried to prevent and reverse Glazyev's activities, it makes sense to attribute his actions to the Russian state as a fragmented yet collective entity.

Nevertheless, the Glazyev tapes are only relatively weak evidence in relation to the events of April. The latest recording is dated 6 March and Donetsk and Luhansk are not discussed extensively. Nevertheless, it is *unlikely* that ties of Glazyev or other Russian state actors with a similar agenda to the two regions with the strongest separatist sentiment were weaker than to the rest of Ukraine's Southeast. It is also *unlikely* that Russian state actors severed such ties as attention shifted from successfully annexed Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland in mid-March. This does not prove Kremlin control over the actors occupying the buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, but it suggests that it is *likely* that representatives of the Russian state were in contact with these actors and offered strategic and financial support.

#### 4.4.2. Eurasianism and Its Friends in Donetsk

In addition to *likely* support from the Kremlin itself, the occupants of the State Administration in Donetsk *almost certainly* received direct support from Russian neo-Imperial and neo-Soviet organizations. Their direct involvement in the events

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<sup>17</sup> See my discussion of informal practices and the principle of *otmashka* in chapter five.

is well documented. On 29 March 2014, Kateryna Hubarieva, the wife of Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev published a recorded Skype conversation between her and Russian right-wing extremist philosopher and activist Aleksandr Dugin (Dugin and Hubarieva 2014). During the call, Dugin says that his Eurasian Movement is “in permanent contact with our country’s leadership” and that “the Russian state and Russian society are absolutely determined to fight for Ukraine’s Southeast.” Dugin criticizes separatist activists for leaving occupied buildings. He says that they must stay in the buildings, assert their authority, and appoint representatives. Finally, Dugin claims that several dozen of his activists had recently travelled to Ukraine. Many more had tried but were allegedly stopped by Ukrainian border guards.

Dugin’s conversation with Hubarieva gains additional significance from the fact that the “Provisional Government” of the DNR appointed Hubarieva chairwoman of the DNR’s “Committee on Foreign Political Relations” on 10 April. This appointment was announced in a statement which also noted that Hubarieva was currently in Russia on an “official visit” (YouTube 2014ah). According to Hubariev’s (2016, 102, 124) memoirs, his wife and children had left Donetsk on 2 March to stay with a supporter of Dugin’s movement in Rostov-on-Don.

Dugin’s interest in the Donbas was not new. He had started to support the idea of secession already after the 2004 Orange Revolution. Anton Shekhovtsov (2016), a leading expert on Russian extreme-right ideology, and Ukrainian journalist Inna Bezsonova (2015) have collected evidence of Dugin’s links with Donbas activists. According to their investigations, a key partner of Dugin’s Eurasian Youth Movement (ESM) in Ukraine was the Donetsk Republic (DR) – a fringe separatist organization created in 2005. It was this organization’s emblem that the DNR adopted as its “official” flag. Shekhovtsov and Bezsonova collected photographs of DR activists attending an ESM training camp in Russia in 2005, posing with DR and ESM flags while collecting signatures for an independence referendum in Donetsk in 2006, and participating in a conference titled “the Donbas in the Eurasian Project” together with leading ESM figures in 2012. The pictures from all three events feature DR co-founder Andrii Purhin. On the 2012 conference panel, Purhin and others were joined by Oleksandr Khriakov, another pro-Russian activist from Donetsk, who had been a vocal opponent of Ukraine’s

integration with the West since the Orange Revolution (Ostrov 2014r). Purhin and Khriakov were both present at the first session of the “Provisional Government” of the DNR in the occupied State Administration building on 8 April. They can be seen talking to each other and leaving the room together during the session, shortly before Purhin is “elected” as one of the “Provisional Government’s” first six members (YouTube 2014ab).

Dugin’s network was not the only Russian organization with a direct involvement in the events. On 2 April, Eduard Limonov, leader of the nationalist, anti-Western Other Russia movement, wrote on Facebook that two of his movement’s activists had been arrested in Donetsk. The SBU confirmed one arrest (Holos Ukrainy 2014). Another activist of Limonov’s movement posted pictures of himself at separatist rallies in Donetsk in early March (Ostrov 2014f; pauluskp 2014). During the 6 April separatist rally on Donetsk’s Lenin Square, one of the speakers, Artem Olkhin (2014), said that “representatives of Yevgeniy Federov’s National Liberation Movement” were with him on the stage. He also said that the separatist movement in Donetsk is “collaborating with Kurginyan’s Sut Vremeni.” The National Liberation Movement is an organisation of anti-Western activists founded and headed by Yevgeniy Federov – a Russian State Duma deputy from Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party. Sut Vremeni (Essence of Time) is a Soviet restorationist movement led and founded by Russian theatre producer Sergey Kurginyan. Given the confirmed presence of Dugin’s and Limonov’s followers in Donetsk, it is *highly likely* that the separatists’ own claim that Federov’s and Kurginyan’s followers were also working with them is accurate as well. Moreover, already in early March, there was at least one social media page that was recruiting Russian volunteers to take part in protests in Donetsk. Potential volunteers were asked to call a person named Vladimir on a Russian mobile phone number (Ukrainska Pravda 2014b). Recruitment efforts of this kind continued. On 11 April, a Russian radio correspondent interviewed a volunteer from Russia inside the occupied State Administration building. The man introduced himself as Pavel Paramonov from the town of Yefremov in Tula Region (Russkaya Sluzhba Novostey 2014). In May, Paramonov (2014) gave another interview to a local Tula news agency and said that he had been recruited via social media by a person with the pseudonym “Russian Patriot.”

The evidence above suggests that it is *almost certain* that Russian organizations were directly involved in the occupation of the Donetsk State Administration, with Dugin's Eurasianist network playing a particularly important role. By staying in the occupied building and creating an institutional structure, the separatists de facto followed Dugin's advice from a week earlier. They adopted the flag of a local partner organization of Dugin's movement and appointed a local supporter of Dugin to the "Provisional Government." However, the available evidence only links two of the people present in the occupied building to Dugin and identifies only one Russian citizen directly involved in the events. This is not sufficient to outweigh the combined evidential weight of *straw-in-the-wind* evidence for H1 and the initial bias in favour of H1 due to Occam's razor and the Sagan standard. Together with the Glazyev tapes, the evidence discussed in this section indicates Russian support rather than Russian control. It does not prove that the Donetsk separatists were dependent on the mentioned Russian actors. At the same time, the observed degree of cooperation cannot be considered *abnormal* for local radical separatist groups with the aim to join Russia. Hence, it remains *highly unlikely* that the mentioned Russian actors and organizations were the main cause of the events in Donetsk.

#### 4.4.3. *The Crimean Link*

A final piece of evidence for the involvement of the Russian state in the events in Donetsk is Viacheslav Ponomarov's (2014) account of the temporary seizure of the Donetsk SBU building on 6-7 April. Ponomarov, who claims to be a key organizer of the Donetsk SBU seizure, openly admits that he visited annexed Crimea for consultations at an unspecified time between mid-March and 6 April. This is in line with the account of an anonymous Crimean militiaman with the nom-de-guerre Trifon, who also says that Ponomarov came to Crimea in the second half of March and asked for support (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020a). Trifon was a member of an armed group that would come to the Donbas and take control of towns north of Donetsk on 12-14 April. Chapter five, which discusses these events, will argue that this armed group was *almost certainly* acting as an organ of the Russian state and had the support of the Russian security apparatus. Other members of this group (Khokhlov 2019a, at 0:21; Anosov 2019, at 5:19) reported that two of their fellow militiamen, Igor Bezler (nom-de-guerre Bes) and Aleksandr Parkhomenko (nom-de-guerre Volk), were sent to the Donbas from

Crimea early for reconnaissance purposes. Ponomarov (2014) said that these two men visited the Donetsk SBU building on the morning of 7 April while it was still occupied. The presence of Bezler, and Parkhomentko in the occupied SBU building is also confirmed by Donetsk separatist activist Serhii Tsyppkalov and another activist with the nom-de-guerre Buyny. Both men were associates of Donetsk “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev and their testimonies feature in Hubariev’s memoirs (Hubariev 2016, 162–67). However, none of the cited accounts indicate that Bezler and Parkhomenko had a leading role in the operation. In the absence of further evidence to the contrary – and in light of Occam’s razor and the Sagan standard – it remains *likely* that Ponomarov’s claim that a local activist network was in charge of the Donetsk SBU operation is correct. However, it is *almost certain* that Ponomarov coordinated these actions with paramilitary forces involved in the Russian takeover of Crimea and received advice from them.

#### 4.4.4. *The Don Cossack Network*

In the case of Luhansk, it was Don Cossacks from neighbouring Russian regions who played the role that Dugin and other Russian extremists played in Donetsk. On 29 March, Anastasiia Piaterkyova, a leading figure in the Luhansk Guard, one of the main separatist organizations active in Luhansk throughout March, spoke at a Don Cossack rally in the Russian town of Voronezh and called for help. In response, Aleksandr Agulov, a local Don Cossack leader, said that the Don Cossacks would “come to help” their “closest neighbour Luhansk,” noting that they had also gone to Crimea “when the Crimeans turned to them for help” (Votnova 2014).

There is no evidence that Don Cossacks from Russia came to Luhansk already in early April. However, it is *highly likely* that they provided material and organizational support to local Cossacks,<sup>18</sup> who stormed the building together with the “Army of the Southeast.” More significant evidence for this than Agulov’s promise is the fact that Mykola Tarasenko was filmed in the occupied SBU

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the actions of Cossack activists who supported separatism in 2014 are not representative of people identifying as Cossacks in the Donbas, let alone in Ukraine as a whole. The pro-Russian Don Cossack movement is only one facet of Cossack identity in eastern Ukraine. Many other people identify as Zaporizhian Cossacks and are strongly in favour of Ukrainian independence.

building on 9 April (YouTube 2014af). Tarasenko is a former archaeologist, who became a local attraction in Luhansk Region after he settled on a hill near the village of Kamianka and started to build a church (Krykun 2014; YouTube 2014ap). However, Tarasenko also self-identifies as a Don Cossack and is a close associate of Nikolay Kozitsyn, a Don Cossack leader from Russia's Rostov Region who would play an important role in the further escalation of the conflict. On 9 April, Kozitsyn (2014a; 2014b) announced the creation of a "Cossack National Guard" in Ukraine and appointed "Cossack Elder" Mykola Tarasenko as the head of this organization's "Security Service." However, there is no evidence documenting the presence of other Don Cossacks with prior links to Russia in the occupied SBU building or indicating that Tarasenko had a leadership role within the "Army of the Southeast." This means that, like in the case of Dugin in Donetsk, the presence of Tarasenko in the Luhansk SBU building combined with the Glazyev tapes is evidence for Russian support, but not for a primary role of the Russian state.

#### *4.4.5. FSB and GRU in Luhansk*

Potential evidence for Russian control in Luhansk are the accounts of the city's former SBU leadership. Oleksandr Petrulych, who was the head of the SBU in Luhansk and present in the building when the separatists stormed it, claims that the occupation of the building was an operation by Russia's domestic intelligence service FSB. He argues that the FSB founded and controlled the "Army of the Southeast." Moreover, he claims that he was questioned by FSB officers while being held captive inside the building. These officers "introduced themselves and even showed their ID, covering their last name and rank with a finger" (Dvali and Petrulych 2014). Petrulych says he was smuggled out of separatist captivity by Mykola Tsukur, a separatist activist who had changed sides and worked undercover for the SBU at the time of the occupation. Tsukur subsequently confirmed this and also claimed that he saw people entering the occupied building who introduced themselves as FSB agents to separatist leaders and showed their IDs (Tsukur and Dvali 2015). Oleh Zhyvotov, who was Petrulych's deputy at the time, also supports Petrulych's and Tsukur's claims and argues that the group that occupied the SBU building "is not worth being called separatists – they are direct agents of the FSB and the GRU [Russia's military intelligence service]." Zhyvotov also claims that, when the SBU arrested some

members of the “Army of the Southeast” on 5 April, one day before the others stormed the building, they confiscated a computer and “found and documented all the evidence for their cooperation with Russian special services” (Zhyvotov and Butkevych 2016).

However, the testimonies of all three people leave doubts. Zhyvotov claims that Alexej Relke was the “main coordinator of the separatist movement in all southeastern regions of Ukraine” and makes far-reaching claims about Relke’s past:

He is a career operative of Russian intelligence who worked for the German police in a unit working with Russians. He retired when he was 35 and suddenly moved to Ukraine in 2007 – after being assigned a new mission on the frontline. At the same time, he continued to receive a pension via Russia’s Sberbank (Zhyvotov and Butkevych 2016).

Zhyvotov’s account is not compatible with the account of Relke’s mother. In Summer 2014, after Relke had been arrested by the SBU and taken to Kyiv, a journalist spoke to Ida Relke in the German town of Koblenz. According to his mother, Alexej worked in construction and had regular trouble with the police because he was “quick with his fists.” He returned to Stakhanov in 2006 after losing his job in Germany but continued to rely on frequent money transfers from his mother (Ostermann and Relke 2014). Three considerations suggest that Ida Relke’s account is *highly likely* to be closer to the truth than Zhyvotov’s. Firstly, the level of Alexej Relke’s German, which he demonstrated during an interview with German journalists in the occupied SBU building in April 2014 (Gathmann 2015), is *unlikely* to be sufficient to work in the German police force. Secondly, considering German civil service employment regulations, it is *unlikely* that Relke was able to retire and receive a pension in his mid-thirties. Thirdly, it is *unlikely* that Relke gave up a successful career in the German police to live as a sleeper agent in Stakhanov for seven years or that Russian intelligence withdrew an agent from the German police for this purpose. Petrulevych also stresses the role of Relke and calls him a “career operative of Russia’s special services” (Petrulevych and Hordon 2017). Moreover, Petrulevych’s frequent interviews, in which he presents himself as one of the few Ukrainian state officials who had the integrity to make a stand against Russian aggression in 2014, also raise the possibility that his account contains exaggerations. After all, it is more beneficial for his reputation to have lost his Luhansk headquarters to a well-equipped and



organized Russian intelligence operation than to a group of local separatists. Mykola Tsukur's credibility is called into question by his turbulent career: At first, he was a separatist. Then he became an SBU mole. After that, he became the deputy commander of a pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalion (Tsukur and Dvali 2015). Finally, this battalion was disbanded, and its leadership was convicted of abduction and torture. Tsukur was sentenced to nine years in prison (Gordon 2017).

The most problematic aspect of Zhyvotov, Petrulevych, and Tsukur's statements, however, is the lack of additional supporting evidence. Tsukur and Petrulevych insist that the Russian intelligence operatives did not hide their affiliation and even carried IDs. At the same time, Zhyvotov and Petrulevych both talk about the 5 April raid and claim that the SBU not only confiscated a computer with valuable information but also arrested one of the "Army of the Southeast's" alleged handlers, "GRU Officer" Sergey Bannykh (Petrulevych and Hordon 2017; Zhyvotov and Butkevych 2016). Despite this arrest and the Russian intelligence officers' alleged openness, the SBU has published very little evidence to back up Zhyvotov, Petrulevych, and Tsukur's claims. All there is is a statement on the SBU's official website from 7 April 2014, which features a picture allegedly showing Bannykh and claims that he was "registered at Military Base 13204, which is part of the GRU [...]" (SBU 2014b).

The SBU did not publish any documents confirming Bannykh's position or his relationship with the "Army of the Southeast," apart from a link to two intercepted phone conversations – allegedly between Bannykh and another intelligence operative in Russia. On the recording, two men can be heard talking about "two groups in Luhansk," which are "equipped" and "ready for action." One of the men asks if "the guys from Belgorod" will join. They also mention a person called "Vova" who is currently in Moscow. They then talk about organizing rallies in Donetsk and Luhansk and about flying to Crimea to get support from there. Finally, the man captioned as Bannykh says that "if all the little groups from Donetsk and Luhansk can be brought together in some way, it will be possible to form one group that is more or less combat-ready" (SBU 2014a). Although these recordings are shorter than the Glazyev Tapes, they are *likely* to be authentic for the same reason – they do not contain any *smoking-gun* evidence. All that can

be deducted from them is that two unidentified men were trying to organize material and organizational support for separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk from Russia and Crimea. This is entirely consistent with the evidence for Russian support discussed so far but does not prove that Russian intelligence service activity was the primary determinant of the separatist movement's actions.

The available evidence against Zhyvotov, Petrulyevych, and Tsukur's claims leads to the conclusion that it is *likely* that their accounts contain exaggerations. However, there remains a *realistic possibility* that their overall assessment regarding the role of Russian intelligence in Luhansk is correct. In Luhansk, there is little evidence for H1 apart from Occam's razor and the Sagan standard. The combined weight of the Glazyev tapes, the Don Cossack involvement, the SBU officers' testimony, and the SBU's intercepted phone conversation come closer to tipping the balance of probability in favour of H3 than in Donetsk. However, they still do not quite make it. There is a *realistic possibility* that the "Army of the Southeast" acted as an organ of the Russian state. However, there remains the other, somewhat more probable *realistic possibility* that the "Army of the Southeast" consisted of a network of local war veterans, Don Cossacks, and Soviet nostalgists, who acted on their own accord, albeit with Russian support.

#### **4.5. Chapter Conclusion**

The analysis of the available digital open source data has not found sufficient evidence to turn the balance of probability in favour of either H2 or H3. Considering Occam's razor and the Sagan standard, it remains *highly unlikely* that the buildings occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk were orchestrated primarily by local elites. Russian involvement as the primary cause is *highly unlikely* in the case of Donetsk. In the case of Luhansk, H3 is a *realistic possibility* but H1 remains the more probable default explanation.

At the same time, the analysis in this chapter has highlighted that H1 only reflects the currently available digital open source evidence and has pointed out a number of caveats.

1. The building occupations of April 2014 were the result of a fringe rather than a mass movement. Protest turnout in early April was visibly lower than in early

March. What increased was not general separatist protest sentiment but the level of organization and determination on the part of a small radical core of activists.

2. It is *likely* that some of the founders of the DNR in Donetsk received financial support from the business network surrounding former President Viktor Yanukovich. In Luhansk, financial support for the “Army of the Southeast” by Yanukovich and also by local oligarch Oleksandr Yefremov is a *realistic possibility*.
3. It is *almost certain* that Yefremov as well as Donetsk oligarch Rinat Akhmetov did not use all the resources available to them to prevent or end the building occupations, in the hope to use separatism for their own political agenda.
4. It is *likely* that Party of Regions MP Oleksandr Bobkov supported and coordinated the actions of one of the separatist groups involved in the aftermath of the Donetsk State Administration building occupation.
5. It is *almost certain* that the nascent DNR received direct financial and organizational support from Russian organizations. This support came from a variety of neo-Imperial and neo-Soviet networks with Aleksandr Dugin’s Eurasian Movement playing a particular important role. In Luhansk, it is *highly likely* that the Don Cossacks were a similar source of support for the “Army of the Southeast.” Even though some of the organizations in question have an ambiguous relationship with the Russian authorities, the Kremlin has given them space to pursue their activities within Russia’s tightly controlled NGO sector (Arnold and Umland 2018; Baranec 2014; Kolsto 2016; Laruelle 2014). Neither has the Kremlin made any attempts to prevent them from supporting separatism in Ukraine. For these reasons, it is appropriate to see them as informal organs of the Russian state and their activities in the Donbas as a Russian foreign policy instrument.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I will discuss and justify the idea of informal state organs in greater detail in chapter five in relation to the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

6. It is *likely* that Russian financial and organizational support was not limited to the above organizations but also involved Kremlin adviser Sergey Glazyev. In the case of Donetsk, it *almost certainly* also involved a paramilitary group that had participated in Russia's takeover of Crimea.

These caveats take account of the fact that all initial hypotheses were ideal types. It is therefore not surprising that the causal explanation most closely in line with the available evidence features elements of all three. This explanation is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4: Causal Mechanism for Juncture 1**



A comprehensive explanation of the initial critical juncture of the conflict that has been investigated in this chapter should mention all the factors in the list above. In the context of a reductionist approach that applies the principle of linear colligation (Roberts 1996, 109–10), it would be appropriate to single out the activities of small radicalized pro-Russian fringe groups as the primary cause of the escalation. However, even such a reductionist approach would have to highlight another caveat: Even though the events of 6 April marked the creation of the first armed separatist footholds in the Donbas, they did not mark the beginning of the armed conflict. The Kyiv authorities responded to the developments with negotiations rather than violence. When the first person died in armed combat a week later, it was far away from the two occupied buildings and under completely different circumstances, which will be scrutinized in the following chapter. Fighting did not reach Donetsk and Luhansk for more than a month and half, and, by the time it did, the situation across the Donbas had changed fundamentally.

## **5. The Occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk**

This chapter will analyse the second critical juncture of the Donbas war's escalation sequence – the occupation of the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area by a group of armed men. It will investigate two hypotheses. According to the first hypothesis, the primary cause of the armed men's action was the domestic separatist movement in the Donbas. According to the second hypothesis, the primary cause were the actions of the Russian state. I will argue that three sets of evidence enable three stages of Bayesian updating. This evidence relates to the armed men's prior participation in the Russian takeover of Crimea, documented ties between the group's leader and actors in Russia, and the unwillingness of the Russian state to punish any of the involved actors for the actions. If added up, these three stages of Bayesian updating increase the probability of the second hypothesis to *almost certain* while only leaving a *remote chance* that the first hypothesis is accurate.

### **5.1. Events Overview and Hypotheses**

On the morning of 12 April 2014, a group of masked men in camouflage armed with automatic rifles occupied the police station in the town of Sloviansk, 90 km north of Donetsk, close to the border of Kharkiv Region (YouTube 2014ak). The armed men and some local helpers constructed barricades outside the building while a crowd of local residents stood by and cheered (YouTube 2014aj). On the evening of the same day, armed men of a similar appearance to those seen in Sloviansk stormed the police station in the neighbouring town of Kramatorsk. They shot in the air and pushed aside a group of men who tried to explain to them that the police station had already been “taken by Afghan war veterans from Kramatorsk” who were “for the Donetsk People's Republic” and “for Russia” (YouTube 2014al).

On the morning of 13 April 2014, Ukrainian special forces, who had been deployed to Sloviansk, were ambushed on one of the major roads approaching the town. Footage from the site, which was aired by a Russian television channel and can be geolocated to a woodland area near the town's southeastern boundary, shows one dead and one injured person (LifeNews 2014b). Later that day, Ukraine's Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov reported that the dead person was an officer of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) and that three other

members of the security forces had sustained injuries in the attack. He then officially announced the start of an “antiterrorist operation” involving the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Turchynov 2014b).

The events of 12-13 April are key to the second critical juncture of the conflict. This critical juncture is of particular importance because it encompasses the crossing of three escalation thresholds – the appearance of armed groups, the deployment of the military, and armed clashes – within a short period of time. Only the first one of these thresholds, the appearance of armed groups, had been crossed before elsewhere in the Donbas, namely during the previous week when separatist activists in Donetsk and Luhansk seized military-grade weaponry from buildings they had occupied. Outside the two regional centres, however, no armed men had been spotted so far. More importantly, the Kyiv authorities had not previously responded with force. This time, armed units were deployed to Sloviansk and met armed resistance, which led to the first battle-related casualty in the Donbas. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s methodology, the first battle-related casualty marks the dividing line between peace and armed conflict (Pettersson 2020, 6). Moreover, the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area remained the central theatre of armed combat in the Donbas until the separatist forces withdrew to Donetsk in early July.

The head of the armed group that occupied the buildings was Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov or under his nom-de-guerre Strelok), a Russian citizen and resident of Moscow. Girkin is briefly visible in the first seconds of one of the first videos showing the occupation of Sloviansk on 12 April (YouTube 2014aj). His first major media appearance took place on 26 April in a video interview with the Russian tabloid newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Girkin, Kots, and Steshin 2014). In this interview Girkin said that his group had gathered in Crimea and that two thirds of it consisted of Ukrainian citizens – residents of Crimea and “refugees” from other regions. Subsequently, Girkin made frequent media appearances both during and after his time in the Donbas. He provided a particularly detailed account of his activities in an interview with Ukrainian journalist Dmytro Hordon, which was published in May 2020. As on previous occasions, Girkin confirmed in this interview that he was a Russian citizen and used to work for Russia’s internal FSB intelligence service until 2013 (Girkin and

Hordon 2020 from 13:05). However, he challenged Hordon's assertion that he and his men were Russian agents. Girkin claimed that his group mainly consisted of Ukrainian volunteers and that neither he nor any other group members were working for the Russian state (Girkin and Hordon 2020 from 58:14).

This disagreement between Girkin and his interviewer has important implications for the causal mechanism at work within this particularly important critical juncture of the conflict that crossed the dividing line between war and peace in the region. It is, therefore, not surprising that the divide between proponents of domestic and foreign causes of the Donbas war in the academic literature is also visible in different scholars' characterizations of Igor Girkin. Some portray Girkin and his men as mavericks, who were not acting on behalf of the Russian authorities (Katchanovski 2016, 479–80; Kudelia 2016, 14–17; Robinson 2016, 511). Others portray Girkin as an agent of the Russian state (Kuromiya 2019, 257–58; Mitrokhin 2014, 167–70; Wilson 2016, 648).

This divide in the characterization of the key actors leads to two contradicting hypotheses regarding the causes of the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Each of the two hypotheses is associated with a specific causal mechanism (Figures 1 and 2). Naturally, both causal mechanisms are simplifications. They are examples of "linear colligation," in which the "most disruptive or abnormal" conditions were selected from a large web of contributing factors (Roberts 1996, 109–10). Neither mechanism presents an exhaustive explanation. However, the two mechanisms represent the two primary causal dynamics that dominate the political and academic debate on the events in question.

H1: Igor Girkin and his men were non-state actors who participated in the conflict as part of a domestic separatist movement.

**Figure 1: Sloviansk/Kramatorsk Internal Conflict Mechanism**



H2: Igor Girkin and his group were an organ of the Russian state and their participation in the conflict was de facto a Russian invasion.

**Figure 2: Sloviansk/Kramatorsk Russian Invasion Mechanism**



These two contradicting hypotheses and the two associated causal mechanisms need to be tested against the available digital open source evidence. As a starting point for informal Bayesian analysis, it is appropriate to begin with the assumption that H1 is *likely* while H2 is *unlikely*. As in the previous chapter, this assumption is based on Occam's razor and the Sagan standard. The hypothesis that a group of volunteers decided to seize Sloviansk and Kramatorsk does not require the additional theoretical construct of state instruction or approval, unless there is evidence that demands this addition. At the same time, an act of Russian aggression against its neighbour is a more extraordinary claim than conflict



escalation by a group of maverick volunteers. This means that, to overcome the initial burden of proof, H2 requires strong evidence in its support. Such evidence could come from eyewitness accounts, intercepted communications, or circumstantial observations which point at a principal-agent relationship between Girkin's group and the Russian state.

## **5.2. The Militia's Russian and Crimean Origins**

Even though H2 starts off as the weaker hypothesis, the available digital open source evidence allows for three stages of informal Bayesian analysis which not only flip the balance of probabilities but raise the probability of H2 to *almost certain*. The first stage is based on evidence that Girkin's group formed in Crimea and included many people who had been involved in Russia's takeover of the peninsula. Girkin himself never made a secret of this and at least two journalists working for nationalist Russian websites confirmed his leading role in the Crimean events. Sergey Shargunov said that he had met Girkin in Crimea in late February 2014 as an authority figure among the paramilitary groups which supported the Russian takeover (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). Oleg Kashin (2014a; 2014b; 2014c) also wrote that he met Girkin in Crimea in March as an influential figure. Moreover, Girkin appears in a video showing the arrest of Ukrainian businessman Hennadii Balashov in Simferopol, Crimea, on 4 March 2014 (Hromadske TV 2014a at 3:25). In the video, Girkin can be seen talking to Samvel Mardoyan, a prominent paramilitary figure at the time. In his interview with Hordon, Girkin again confirmed his involvement in the Crimean takeover (Girkin and Hordon 2020 from 30:00).

Numerous other members of Girkin's group have either spoken about their experience, feature in the accounts of their comrades-in-arms, or were identified by journalists through their social media profiles. According to Girkin, the group that gathered in Crimea and went to Sloviansk comprised a total of 54 men (Girkin and Hordon 2020 at 57:42).<sup>20</sup> On the basis of the available digital open source evidence, I have been able to gather information on 27 men who were *highly likely* members of this group. At least nine of them are Russian citizens. More

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<sup>20</sup> Many other accounts of the events speak of 52 men. In the interview with Hordon, Girkin initially admits that he is not entirely sure anymore if the group had a size of 52 or 54 but eventually goes for the latter figure.

importantly, many of them had been involved in the Russian annexation of Crimea before following Girkin to Sloviansk.

1. **Igor Girkin** (also known as Igor Strelkov, nom-de-guerre Strelok) was the leader and key public face of the group while it was in control of Sloviansk. Previously, he played an important role in Russia's annexation of Crimea.
2. **Yevgeniy Skripnik** (nom-de-guerre Prapor) appears with Girkin in the first seconds of a video taken in Sloviansk on 12 April (YouTube 2014aj). In autumn 2014, Skripnik confirmed in an interview that he had come to Ukraine from Russia and that he had taken part in the takeover of Crimea before moving on to Sloviansk (YouTube 2014bw, from 06:48 and at 15:55). He also confirmed that he had known Girkin since their joint involvement in the Transnistrian conflict in 1992 (YouTube 2014bw, at 09:35). As of autumn 2020, he runs a social media profile under his real name (Skripnik n.d.).
3. **Vladimir Kollontay** (nom-de-guerre Ded) went missing in action near Sloviansk in June 2014 and was presumed dead. In an obituary posted on Russian social network VK, Andrey Afanasyev (2016), a well-connected supporter of Donbas separatism from Russia's Novosibirsk, wrote that Kollontay had taken part in the takeover of Crimea before moving on to Sloviansk together with Girkin. Kollontay is also mentioned in another group member's account of the trip from Crimea to Sloviansk (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c). In a post in the forum of the Novorossiia Movement, which Girkin founded after he returned from Ukraine to Russia, Girkin (2016c) wrote that Kollontay had served in Transnistria and both Chechen wars. In another social media post, Girkin (2016b) specified that Kollontay was a former GRU military intelligence officer and posted a picture showing himself next to Kollontay in Chechnya in 2000.
4. **Nom-de-guerre Tikhiy** is a member of Girkin's group who gave an extended interview to a pro-separatist YouTube channel in April 2020 (YouTube 2020a). He wore a balaclava and did not give his real name. Shortly afterwards, Girkin gave an interview to the same YouTube channel. He confirmed that Tikhiy had been part of his group during the takeover of Crimea and went with him

to Sloviansk. He did not identify Tikhiy by his real name but said that they had first met in 2000 in Chechnya and that Tikhiy was a former Russian GRU military intelligence officer (YouTube 2020b, at 1:30 and 27:57).

5. **Igor Bezler** (nom-de-guerre Bes) was a member of Girkin's group, who, according to the consistent accounts of two other group members (Khokhlov 2019a, at 0:21; Anosov 2019, at 4:37), was sent from Crimea to the Donbas early on a reconnaissance mission. After the rest of the group arrived, Bezler did not stay in Sloviansk but established a separatist unit in the town of Horlivka. In an interview with Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, he confirmed that he was a Russian citizen and army veteran who had taken part in the takeover of Crimea (Bezler 2014).
  
6. **Arsen Pavlov** (nom-de-guerre Motorola), was a Russian citizen who later became a prominent separatist commander in Donetsk. In conversations with Russian journalists, Pavlov claimed that he had served in the Russian military and fought in Chechnya (Olevskiy and Romenskiy 2014; Pavlov and Gorbachova 2015). Girkin mentioned Pavlov as one of the members of his group in a 2014 Interview (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). According to another group member's account, Pavlov arrived in Crimea in early April with a group of men who had previously taken part in separatist protests in Kharkiv (Chalenko and Saveliev 2019).
  
7. **Aleksandr Mozhayev** (nom-de-guerre Babay), a Russian citizen from the town of Belorechensk in Russia's Krasnodar Region, identified himself by showing his passport to journalist Simon Ostrovsky (2014) in Kramatorsk on 21 April. In a later interview with another journalist, Mozhayev also admitted that he had participated in the occupation of Crimea (Mozhayev and Shuster 2014).
  
8. **Yevgeniy Ponomaryov** (nom-de-guerre Dingo), also a Russian citizen from Belorechensk, told Ostrovsky (2014) that he and Mozhayev were "Terek Cossacks." He did not give his name at the time but was later identified by Ukrainian activists through his social media profile (Babiak 2014; Garmata.org 2014c).

9. **Anton Morozov** is another Russian citizen who was photographed with other members of Girkin's group outside Sloviansk town hall during the first days of the occupation (Babiak 2014; Garmata.org 2014a). According to his social media profile, he is from Irkutsk and a supporter of Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasian Movement (Morozov 2014). Morozov also featured in a later report on events in Sloviansk by a local Irkutsk TV station (Malyshkina 2014).
10. **Ihor Heorhiievskiy**,<sup>21</sup> a resident of Simferopol, is visible in the background of Simon Ostrovsky's (2014) video. He was also photographed together with Aleksandr Mozhayev in Sloviansk by photojournalist Maxim Dondyuk (2014). He was later identified by Ukrainian activists through his social media profile, where he posted personal information and pictures of himself among paramilitary forces in Crimea (Babiak 2014; Garmata.org 2014b). Moreover, he posted Ostrovsky's (2014) video on his social media profile and this post was subsequently shared by Anton Morozov (2014).
11. **Evgen Zloy** is the social media pseudonym of another man who was photographed with other members of Girkin's group outside Sloviansk town hall during the first days of the occupation (Babiak 2014; Garmata.org 2014a). On his social media profile, he wrote that he was a resident of Simferopol and attended the city's School No. 3 (VK 2014). His profile also shows that he is friends with Anton Morozov.
12. **Tikhon Karetnyy** is the social media pseudonym of another man who was photographed with other members of Girkin's group outside Sloviansk town hall during the first days of the occupation (Babiak 2014; Garmata.org 2014d). There is little additional reliable information on his background. According to Babiak (2014), his social media profile was part of the Terek Cossack community in the Russian town of Belorechensk, but this information is not visible on the archived version of Karetnyy's page.

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<sup>21</sup> I will use Ukrainian transliterations for the names of all group members who may have held Ukrainian citizenship before the Russian annexation of Crimea. It is possible that some of them obtained Russian citizenship before travelling from Crimea to Sloviansk, but this is difficult to verify.

13. **Serhii Zdryliuk** (nom-de-guerre Abver), spoke to a journalist in early May and said that he was Girkin's deputy (Inter TV 2014). A few days later, a Ukrainian newspaper interviewed his mother and former neighbours. They said that Zdryliuk was from Ukraine's Vinnytsia Region but had lived in Crimea for many years (Zdryliuk and Murakhovska 2014). Zdryliuk is also mentioned in another group member's account as one of Girkin's deputies on the way from Crimea to Sloviansk (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c).
  
14. **Andrii Saveliev** (nom-de-guerre Vandal), was a sixteen-year-old boy from Kyiv who took part in the Russian takeover of Crimea and travelled with Girkin's group to Sloviansk. He subsequently wrote a book about his adventures as a child soldier and presented it at public book launches in Russia and Crimea (Saveliev 2019a; 2019b; 2019c).
  
15. **Nom-de-guerre Krot** is a close friend of Andrii Saveliev's and features prominently in Saveliev's memoirs (Chalenko and Saveliev 2019; Saveliev 2019a). According to Saveliev, Krot's first name is Sergey and both of them had been members of a pro-Russian Cossack youth group in Kyiv before travelling to Crimea, taking part in the Russian takeover, and moving on to Sloviansk as part of Girkin's group.
  
16. **Dmytro Zhukov** (nom-de-guerre Kedr) took part in Saveliev's book launch in Sevastopol (Saveliev 2019b from 49:25). He described himself as a pro-Russian resident of Kyiv who went to Crimea after the Euromaidan revolution and participated in the Russian takeover under Girkin's command before following Girkin to Sloviansk. These basic facts of his personal story are consistent with an investigative article on his identity and background published by a Ukrainian journalist (Dobryi 2018).
  
17. **Artem Razuvaiev** (nom-de-guerre Frits) took part in Saveliev's book launch in Moscow. During the event, Saveliev said that he had known Razuvaiev from Kyiv and met him again by chance on the ferry from Crimea to the Russian mainland when Saveliev was travelling to Sloviansk as part of Girkin's group (Saveliev 2019c from 26:45). After the meeting on the ferry,

Razuvaiev spontaneously decided to join Girkin's group. In an earlier interview with a Russian news website, Razuvaiev told the same story. He said he was a Ukrainian citizen who had taken part in the annexation of Crimea as part of a pro-Russian Cossack group. When he was on his way to Rostov-on-Don to look for a job in Russia, he met old friends from Kyiv on the ferry. These friends were part of Girkin's group and Razuvaiev decided to join them (Pegov 2016).

18. **Vadym Ilovchenko** (nom-de-guerre Terets) also participated in Saveliev's book launch in Sevastopol and described himself as a pro-Russian Cossack leader from Crimea. He said he met Igor Girkin in early March, served with him in Crimea, and followed him to Sloviansk (Saveliev 2019b from 22:50). Information from the SBU published in Ukrainian media confirms Ilovchenko's own claim that he played an important role in both the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (TSN 2019b).

19. **Serhii Zhurykov** (nom-de-guerre Romashka) was a pro-Russian resident of Kyiv. In his interview with Dmytro Hordon, Igor Girkin mentioned that he met Zhurykov during a trip to Kyiv in January 2014 (Girkin and Hordon 2020 at 21:40). Publications by Ukrainian journalists as well as Andrii Saveliev's memoirs confirm that Zhurykov joined Girkin's group during the Russian takeover of Crimea and then went on to Sloviansk where he died in an armed clash (Butusov 2016; Dobryi 2018; Saveliev 2019d; 2019a, 89).

20. **Illia Khokhlov** (nom-de-guerre Makhno) gave an interview to a Russian nationalist YouTube channel in Spring 2019. He said he came to Sloviansk with Girkin's group and commanded a group of fighters in one of the first major clashes with the Ukrainian Armed Forces on 5 May (Khokhlov 2019a).

21. **Viktor Anosov** (nom-de-guerre Nos) gave an interview in response to Khokhlov. He criticized various details of Khokhlov's account but confirmed that both of them were from Simferopol, took part in the takeover of Crimea, and went to Sloviansk as part of Girkin's group (Anosov 2019).

22. **Denys Koval** identified himself during a heated argument with Viktor Anosov in the comments section of Khokhlov's (2019a) YouTube testimony. Anosov accused Koval of betraying Girkin by leaving Sloviansk and joining Igor Bezler in Horlivka. Koval responded by saying that he went to Horlivka after receiving an order from Bezler, who had been his commander "since the very beginning – since Crimea." Another group member's account of the trip from Crimea to the Donbas also mentions a man called "Koval" and describes him as a resident of Crimea (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c).
23. **Oleksandr Parkhomenko** (nom-de-guerre Volk) died in combat on 5 May and was buried in Sloviansk two days later (Slavyansk Delovoy 2014). In their accounts of the events, both Illia Khokhlov (2019a, at 0:21) and Viktor Anosov (2019, at 4:37) confirm that Parkhomenko was part of their group. They also report that he was sent from Crimea to the Donbas early on a reconnaissance mission together with Igor Bezler. It is possible that his name is a pseudonym because Aleksandr Parkhomenko is also a historical figure from the Russian Civil War and subject of a Soviet adventure film.
24. **Viacheslav Rudakov** (nom-de-guerre Medved) died and was buried on the same day as Parkhomenko (Slavyansk Delovoy 2014). According to his comrade-in-arms Tikhyy, Rudakov was a former paratrooper but did not have any combat experience (YouTube 2020a, at 29:55). Rudakov's nom-de-guerre also features in another group member's account of the trip from Crimea to the Donbas (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c). A journalist later discovered Rudakov's name on a photo carried by members of the "Crimean Self Defence Forces" during a memorial event for Crimeans who died in the Donbas (Veselova 2017).
25. **Serhii Trifonov** (nom-de-guerre Trifon) provided a detailed account of the formation of Girkin's group and its trip from Crimea to Sloviansk for a Russian news website (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020b; 2020a; 2020c). Writing under his nom-de-guerre, Trifon describes himself as a former member of the Ukrainian security forces who took part in the Russian annexation of Crimea. The nom-de-guerre Trifon also appears on documents of "military tribunals" which handed down death sentences during the occupation of Sloviansk. Journalists

from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty analysed the documents and tried to establish the identity of the people responsible (Miller, Dobrynin, and Krutov 2020). They identify Trifon as Serhii Trifonov but fail to specify how they came to this conclusion. However, regardless of whether Serhii Trifonov is his real name, Trifon's account of events is consistent with the story of other group members.

26. **Viacheslav Apraksimov** (nom-de-guerre Balu) is another member of the "military tribunals" investigated by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Miller, Dobrynin, and Krutov 2020). Further evidence linking name and nom-de-guerre is a YouTube video calling for donations for the separatist cause in the Donbas. The video was published in late 2014 by an account named Viacheslav Apraksimov and features the caption "Team 'Balu'" (Apraksimov 2014). Andrii Saveliev also mentions a man with the nom-de-guerre Balu, who arrived in Crimea from Kharkiv in early April (Chalenko and Saveliev 2019). Moreover, a man called Viacheslav Apraksimov received the medal "For the Defence of the Crimean Republic" from the Crimean occupation authorities in October 2015 (Aksyonov 2015). However, Saveliev (2019a, 120) also writes that Balu travelled to Sloviansk from Crimea via mainland Ukraine and not via Russia like the rest of the group.

27. **Edvard Piterskiy** is the pseudonym of another man who, according to a portrait published by a pro-separatist YouTube channel, travelled from Kharkiv to Crimea and joined Girkin's group there (YouTube 2014ax). According to the video, Piterskiy was born in Vynnytsia and lived in both Ukraine and Russia before becoming a member of the separatist movement. Aleksandr Barkov (2018), who was a correspondent of the Russian extreme-right-wing newspaper *Zavtra* at the time, also remembers meeting Piterskiy in Sloviansk in May 2014. He writes that Piterskiy had joined Girkin in Crimea coming from Kharkiv together with Arsen Pavlov.

The accounts of Trifon, Saveliev, and Russian pro-separatist activist Aleksandr Zhuchkovskiy, who arrived in Sloviansk in May and subsequently wrote a book about the events, mention 15 other noms-de-guerre of alleged members of the group that went with Girkin from Crimea to Sloviansk. These noms-de-guerre are



Bolik, Gus, Lyolik, Ramses, Vasilich, and Veter (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c); Argun, Glas, Nemoy, Odessa, and Ten (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 20–21); and Boroda, Moskal, and Piter (Saveliev 2019a, 146, 170). However, the respective authors give little or no information on these men’s backgrounds or identities. Veter is allegedly from Crimea; Bolik, Lyolik, and Vasilich are said to be from Zhytomyr; and Odessa is supposedly from Odesa. Online searches for these noms-de-guerre did not yield any useful results, either.

Even though the background information on many group members remains patchy or non-existent, the described digital open source evidence on 27 of them offers considerable insights into the group’s composition. It suggests that Girkin’s men were recruited primarily from the paramilitary forces which supported the Russian annexation of Crimea. These forces included Russian military and intelligence veterans as well as residents of Crimea and some pro-Russian activists from Kyiv. However, as Crimean militia member Vadym Ilovchenko openly admitted, paramilitary groups in Crimea coordinated their actions with Russia’s intelligence agencies from the very beginning of the Russian takeover (Saveliev 2019b at 33:15). There is no reason to doubt his words. In a March 2015 Russian TV documentary, Vladimir Putin himself admitted that the takeover of Crimea was planned in the Kremlin and that Russia’s military and security apparatus was in charge of its implementation (Rossiya 24 2015, at 1:47 and from 1:06:44). Hence, it is *almost certain* that any paramilitary group assisting the Russian annexation was under the close supervision of Russian state structures.

The testimony of Girkin and other group members also indicates that Girkin and his men travelled to Sloviansk via mainland Russia. According to Girkin, his group crossed the border on foot and was met by vehicles organized by Ukrainian separatists on Ukrainian territory (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). Girkin also stated that his group spent a day preparing and stocking up on equipment before crossing the border to Ukraine. On this day, his group “received the uniforms that we should have already received in Crimea” (Girkin and Urzhumov 2016). Girkin’s account is consistent with the account of his subordinate Trifon, who wrote that the group left Crimea during the night of 8-9 April and spent a day in Rostov-on-Don. During the night of 10-11 April, they left Rostov. They crossed

the border on foot in a rural location,<sup>22</sup> were met by a car and a minibus on a road, and arrived in Sloviansk on the morning of 12 April (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c). Group members Andrii Saveliev and Artem Razuvaiev also said that the group took the ferry from Crimea to mainland Russia before moving on to the Donbas (Saveliev 2019c from 26:45). Moreover, according to Girkin, the group carried military-grade weaponry through Russia into Ukraine. In a 2017 debate with Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalnyy, Girkin admitted that he had obtained weapons for the Sloviansk operation in Crimea (Girkin, Navalnyy, and Zygar 2017). Tikhyy also confirms that the group carried automatic rifles across the border (YouTube 2020a, at 5:30).

Evidence that the men who occupied Sloviansk and Kramatorsk were the same people who helped the Russian state annex Crimea, and that they took military-grade weaponry from Crimea via Russia to mainland Ukraine, shifts the burden of proof from H2 to H1. Against the backdrop of this evidence, the hypothesis that Girkin's group continued to act on behalf of the Russian state is both simpler and less extraordinary than the hypothesis that they went rogue and acted on their own. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it appears *unlikely* that a paramilitary group that collaborated with Russia's security services was able to travel from Crimea to the Donbas without their knowledge and approval. This does not necessarily imply that Girkin and his group were following an explicit command from the Russian state when they moved to the Donbas. It does not even imply that the Russian state's approval was explicit and formalized. However, this is of secondary importance, as I will discuss further below.

### **5.3. Links to the State: The Oligarch and the "Prime Minister"**

The second stage of informal Bayesian analysis draws on a series of recordings which the SBU published on 14 April 2014, two days after the armed group first appeared in Sloviansk (SBU 2014c). According to the SBU, the recordings are

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<sup>22</sup> None of the group members has disclosed the exact location. However, Girkin stated in his interview with Hordon that he initially thought about occupying Shakhtarsk or Snizhne, which are located east of Donetsk. He said he decided to go to Sloviansk only after entering Ukraine and talking to the local separatists who met his group (Girkin and Hordon 2020 from 1:00:45). This indicates that Girkin's group may have crossed the border near Vyselky or Marynivka, southeast of Donetsk because these sections of the border are located on the most direct route between Rostov-on-Don and Shakhtarsk or Snizhne.

phone conversations of militiamen intercepted the previous day. In one of the recordings, a person addressed as “Strelok” is told that “Aleksandr from Russia” is calling. Strelok takes the call and reports to Aleksandr that his group “repelled the first attack.” In a subsequent recording, Strelok reports to a person who he addresses as “Konstantin Valeriyevich” about the same attack. He says that his group fired at three cars with Ukrainian security operatives and “eliminated” the people inside. In response, Konstantin Valeriyevich asks if Strelok has “briefed Aksyonov.” After Strelok says that he has not been able to get hold of Aksyonov, Konstantin Valeriyevich tells him to keep trying but also mentions that Aksyonov “will land here tonight” and that he “will meet with him tomorrow.”

The voices in the recording *almost certainly* belong to Igor Girkin (nom-de-guerre Strelok), Aleksandr Boroday, and Konstantin Valeriyevich Malofeyev. Boroday is a Russian political PR consultant, who would later become head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic. Malofeyev is a Russian oligarch and a strong advocate of conservative Russian Orthodox values. Aksyonov is the surname of Crimea’s “Prime Minister” Sergey Aksyonov<sup>23</sup> who was installed during the Russian takeover of the peninsula. The recording is *almost certainly* an authentic conversation between these three people for the following reasons:

- a. Although Boroday and Malofeyev denied collaborating with Girkin in connection with the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, they admitted that they knew him well. Boroday said in an interview on Russian state TV that he was Girkin’s friend and had known him since the 1990s. He also confirmed that Girkin had spoken to him on the phone from Sloviansk but claimed that the SBU had manipulated the contents of the recording in some unspecified way (Boroday and Maksimovskaya 2014 from 4:41). In a Russian newspaper interview, Malofeyev admitted that Girkin had travelled with him to Kyiv as part of his security personnel as recently as January 2014 (Malofeyev, Sergina, and Kozlov 2014). Girkin has confirmed this and even admitted that Malofeyev had financed him during the Crimean operation and that he had

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<sup>23</sup> Aksyonov had been a Ukrainian citizen before the annexation of Crimea. With the annexation, however, he became a Russian state official according to Russian law, which is why I transliterate the Russian version of his name.

bought the combat gear for the Sloviansk operation with Malofeyev's money (Girkin and Hordon 2020 from 28:15 and from 1:20:40).

- b. Russian journalist Oleg Kashin (2014a; 2014b; 2014c) wrote that he had met Girkin in Crimea in early March as a senior member of Crimean "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov's staff. Girkin himself confirmed that he closely collaborated with Aksyonov in Crimea (Girkin and Hordon 2020, from 28:45) and even admitted that he went to Sloviansk "with Aksyonov's direct support" (Girkin and Hordon 2020, at 52:50). Moreover, Aleksandr Boroday said that he also worked as an "unofficial adviser" for Aksyonov (Boroday and Maksimovskaya 2014 at 3:37).
- c. Sergey Aksyonov was participating in an event in Crimea on the morning of 13 April (KrymInform 2014). On 14 April, he met Vladimir Putin in Moscow (Putin and Aksyonov 2014). This is in line with Malofeyev's description of Aksyonov's travel plans, assuming that Malofeyev was in Moscow at the time of the conversation.
- d. Girkin's description of the armed clash near Sloviansk matches footage from the scene that was shown by Russian TV channel LifeNews and published on YouTube on 13 April, which shows three damaged cars (LifeNews 2014b).
- e. The SBU published its recordings on 14 April. Fabricating a recording with plausible voice imitations and the observed degree of detail within a day does not seem realistic, especially given that the SBU was facing a crisis situation at the time.

The fact that Girkin reported back to Malofeyev and Aksyonov after the occupation of Sloviansk further decreases the probability that Girkin's group stopped acting on behalf of the Russian state after moving from Crimea to the Donbas. The amicable, respectful tone of the conversation between Girkin and Malofeyev, combined with Girkin's claim that Aksyonov supported his actions (Girkin and Hordon 2020, at 52:50), makes it *highly unlikely* that Girkin was no longer acting on behalf of the two men. In turn, there is only a *remote chance* that Malofeyev and Aksyonov could not count on the approval of at least some

decisionmakers within the Kremlin. Malofeyev's links to the Kremlin are corroborated by a set of leaked emails published by Ukrainian activists and attributed to Kremlin officials. According to these emails, Malofeyev had met Kremlin advisers Sergey Glazyev and Vladislav Surkov in late 2013 to discuss ways to prevent Ukraine's integration with the West (Hosaka 2018, 361; 2019, 753–55). Hosaka (2018, 322–23) reports that he examined the context, content, and metadata of sample emails and is confident that the leak is authentic. Of course, there remains a chance that he is mistaken and the emails are fabrications, but this can be considered *unlikely*. Hence, combined with the general proximity between oligarchs and the state in modern Russia, the emails are strong evidence that Malofeyev acted at least with the tacit approval of parts of the Kremlin. Crimean "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov's links to the Kremlin are even clearer. According to Russian law, Aksyonov was heading a newly incorporated Russian Federation subject. This means that a newly appointed Russian state official was directly involved in the Sloviansk operation and met Vladimir Putin one day after the first armed clash. Considering Aksyonov's dependence on the Kremlin, it is hard to imagine that he risked acting without the knowledge or against the wishes of his new superiors. For these reasons, Girkin's continuing communication with Malofeyev and Aksyonov after the start of the Sloviansk operation increases the probability of H2 to *highly likely* and make it *highly unlikely* that H1 is correct.

#### **5.4. Actions without Consequences: The Return to Russia**

The third and final stage of informal Bayesian updating draws on the absence of any actions by the Russian authorities to restrict or sanction the activities of Girkin, Boroday, Malofeyev, or Aksyonov. If Girkin's armed group and its backers acted without the knowledge and approval of the Russian authorities, it could be expected that the Russian state take actions to either stop their activities or punish them. Neither was the case. Girkin returned to Russia in August 2014 and many of his group members followed his example. In his interview with Hordon, Girkin admitted that he left the Donbas as the result of pressure from Moscow. He said he was told that the separatists would not receive the support they needed if he did not leave (Girkin and Hordon 2020 from 1:52:15). However, even though the Russian leadership decided to remove Girkin from the conflict zone, they did not take further actions against Girkin or other key actors associated with

his group. In the years that followed, Girkin and Malofeyev lived in Moscow without ever facing an investigation. On the contrary, Girkin was able to create his Novorossiia Movement within Russia's strictly regulated NGO environment. Andrii Saveliev was able to publish a book on how he fought for Girkin's group at the age of 16 and promote it in Russia and Crimea together with his former comrades-in-arms. Sergey Aksyonov is still leading Crimea at the time of writing. And Aleksandr Boroday became a member of parliament for the ruling United Russia party in the September 2021 State Duma elections (State Duma n.d.). Added to the previous two stages of updating, this inaction on the part of the Russian authorities makes it *almost certain* that Girkin and his group acted as informal organs of the Russian state. It leaves only a *remote chance* that they participated in the conflict as non-state actors who were part of a domestic separatist movement.

### **5.5. Order or Tacit Approval? The Role of the Kremlin**

Although the available digital open source evidence strongly supports H2, the explanatory power of the causal mechanism associated with this hypothesis comes with an important caveat. The causal mechanism does not specify whether the Kremlin ordered or merely approved Girkin's Donbas operation. What is more, it even leaves the possibility open that the operation was Girkin's personal initiative and that the Russian state's approval was tacit and implicit. This question is left open deliberately because conclusive evidence in relation to it is virtually impossible to find. Any official order to intervene in the Donbas would *almost certainly* be a top-secret matter that none of those involved would consider disclosing. If any written documentation of such an order exists, it is *almost certainly* stored in Russian intelligence archives and remains inaccessible for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, several subject matter experts argue that the informal practices of Russia's security apparatus often avoid explicit orders and make it difficult to draw a dividing line between command and approval. According to Russian journalist Oleg Kashin, Putin may have told Malofeyev to "do whatever" rather than giving precise instructions (Kashin, Merkulova, and Solomin 2014). This is in line with the assessment of former Kremlin consultant Gleb Pavlovsky (2016), who argues that the Putin regime's "new governance style relies on indirection

and interpretation rather than command and control.” Pavlovsky highlights the importance of “*otmashka*, which can be translated as ‘go-ahead,’ implying not so much an order as a license to act in a desired direction.” Christo Grozev (2020), lead Russia investigator of the Bellingcat investigation collective, makes a similar point, arguing that the Russian state outsources interference abroad to private actors, who offer “competing, but always deniable, solutions to the Kremlin, and enjoy significant freedom [...]”. Similarly, Galeotti (2020) calls Putin’s Russia an “adhocracy” – a “de-institutionalised” system “in which the president’s favour is the main asset everyone wants to earn, and formal roles and responsibilities matter less than how one can be of use today.”

These interpretations appear just as plausible – if not more plausible – than the existence of an explicit order. Moreover, they allow for the possibility that Girkin’s Sloviansk operation was subject to disagreements and changes of mind within the Russian elite. They are even compatible with Aleksandr Boroday’s claim that, after meeting Girkin in Rostov-on-Don and providing him with the latest tranche of money from Malofeyev, he discussed the operation with five unnamed people in Moscow. According to Boroday, he advised caution and the group agreed to summon Girkin to Moscow. Girkin however, had anticipated this development, switched off his phone, and carried on with his plan (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 44–45). However, even if this account is true, Boroday, Aksyonov, Malofeyev, and their contacts within the Russian leadership accepted the fact that Girkin went ahead with the operation. Girkin remained in contact, was only called back to Russia in August, and did not face punishment for his actions.

H2 allows for a spectrum of Kremlin involvement. On one end of this spectrum, someone in a position of power in Moscow gave an explicit order to prepare a covert operation in the Donbas. On the other end, the Kremlin merely provided Girkin and his associates with the autonomy to make their own plans and tacitly approved the operation by acquiescence. However, the exact location of the decision-making process on this spectrum is of secondary importance. Following the historical explanation paradigm of *abnormalism* (Roberts 1996, 96–99), Kremlin knowledge and tacit approval of the operation is sufficient to establish Russian state responsibility as its primary cause. It is not surprising that there were some actors in Russia who were willing to intervene in Ukraine for

ideological reasons. Far more *abnormal*, and hence more important as a cause, are the close contacts between these actors and the Russian state combined with the fact that the Kremlin was prepared to let them go ahead with their actions. Regardless of the existence of an explicit order, the Kremlin was more than a passive bystander who failed to intervene. The three stages of Bayesian updating carried out above show that role of the Russian state in the occupation Sloviansk and Kramatorsk was different from the role of the Ukrainian state and local elites in the previous critical juncture. In Donetsk and Luhansk, the Ukrainian state was too weak to prevent the building seizures through its law enforcement organs. Local elites had a conflicted relationship with the state and, according to the available evidence, remained largely passive and adopted a wait-and-see approach. There was no strong evidence of systematic and active collaboration between state organs or local elites on the one hand and the separatist actors on the other. This is entirely different in the context of the present critical juncture. Girkin's group had collaborated with the Russian state in Crimea immediately before moving to Sloviansk. They reported back to a Russian state official and a Russian oligarch after their arrival, and they returned to Russia after the end of their operation. At the same time, the Russian state had not been weakened in a way that suggested it was incapable of controlling the activity of paramilitary groups on its territory or reign in oligarchs supervising such groups.

The coordination between the Russian state and Girkin's group combined with the Kremlin's obvious power to stop them means that the Russian state's actions were more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the personal motives of the group members. This line of reasoning can be illustrated with the allegory of a robbery. If a person is robbed at gunpoint and a bystander fails to intervene – either because the bystander is physically incapable or cannot be bothered – the actions of the robber should be considered the primary cause of the robbery. They are more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the passivity of the bystander. However, this assessment changes if the bystander and the robber had broken into a house together the day before, after which the bystander had given the robber a gun while talking about a personal grudge against the prospective robbery victim. The assessment changes even further if the robber calls the bystander to report on the progress of the robbery and returns to the bystander's house after the bystander pressures him to leave the crime scene. In



such a scenario, there can be no doubt that the bystander's actions supersede the robber's actions as the primary cause that is most *disruptive* to the normal course of events.

As chapter four has shown, Russian imperialist organisations also played a role in the building occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk, and it is reasonable to assume that these organisations also acted with the knowledge and approval of the Kremlin. However, the role of these organizations in the previous critical juncture was less prominent and their actions were less violent than the actions of Girkin's group in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. As I argued in chapter four, the available evidence indicates that the activities of Russian actors were less *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the actions of local separatists. What local actors did was more *abnormal* than the fact that the Kremlin allowed Russian imperialist organizations to fan the flames of separatism and provide a certain degree of support for local pro-Russian activities. This is no longer the case in the context of the present critical juncture because Russian actors took the lead.

### **5.6. The Role of Locals**

These considerations lead to another important caveat that has to be addressed, namely the role of local residents supporting Girkin's occupation. Girkin claims that "about 300 activists were ready and waiting when we arrived" (Girkin and Shargunov 2014). This number may be exaggerated, but the claim that a group of local separatists was ready to actively support Girkin is in line with the available evidence. Protests against the new Kyiv authorities had taken place in Sloviansk as early as 23 February (YouTube 2014a). Viacheslav Ponomarov, who became Sloviansk "People's Mayor" during Girkin's occupation, was a local resident, who, on 30 March, gave an interview as the leader of a local "self-defence group," which, according to him, was helping the police to protect the town from Maidan activists (YouTube 2014bd). Video footage from 12 April does not only show cheering local bystanders but also a group of people in civilian clothing, who help Girkin's armed men guard the occupied police station (YouTube 2014aj). Moreover, Girkin stated that he had met with Ukrainian separatist activists in Russia to prepare the operation and that these people organized local support and transport from the border prior to his group's arrival (Girkin and Hordon 2020

from 59:49). In particular, he said that he had been in contact with Kateryna Hubarieva, the wife of Donetsk Region “People’s Governor” Pavlo Hubariev who was imprisoned in Kyiv at the time (Girkin and Hordon 2020 at 1:08:08; see also Hubariev 2016, 158).

However, it is undisputed that Girkin’s men not only initiated the Sloviansk operation, but also remained in charge of the separatist forces in the area until their forced withdrawal in early July. Local activists were the subordinates of Girkin and his men. The seizure of the Kramatorsk police station, where Girkin’s men pushed aside local activists while shooting in the air, clearly illustrates this (YouTube 2014a). The recordings intercepted by the security service of Ukraine also indicate that Girkin was in charge of the operation and local activists were under the command of members of his group (SBU 2014c). Moreover, after an initial period of cooperation, local “People’s Mayor” Viacheslav Ponomarov was arrested on 10 June on Girkin’s orders (TASS 2014e). Finally, there is no evidence that local separatist activists in Sloviansk would have been able and willing to organize an armed occupation on their own if Girkin’s group had not come. At the same time, it is doubtful that the Ukrainian authorities would have responded to an occupation by locals in the same way they responded to Girkin’s group.

Hence, even though Girkin’s group depended on local support, the *abnormalism* paradigm points to Girkin’s actions as the primary condition for the occupation and the subsequent escalation of the conflict. In the context of the political situation in eastern Ukraine in April 2014, it is not surprising that there were some activists in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk who were willing to support a Russian invasion. The arrival of heavily armed men from Russia with the determination and ability to lead an insurrection is far more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the fact that some locals were willing to jump on these men’s bandwagon.

### **5.7. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the second critical juncture in the escalation of the Donbas conflict was initiated and led by an armed group that had previously participated in Russia’s takeover of Crimea. The leader of this group had close

and well-documented ties to the Kremlin-appointed “prime minister” of Crimea and to a Russian oligarch with close links to the Kremlin. Neither the group’s leader nor his Russian supervisors nor any members of his group have been sanctioned by the Russian state because of their actions in the Donbas. On this basis, I have argued that the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk was primarily the result of the actions of the Russian state. A more detailed account of the causal dynamics at play within this critical juncture should mention the difficulty to trace decision-making processes within the Russian elite and to distinguish between instruction and tacit approval. It should also mention the fact that Girkin and his group received local support, while stressing the secondary nature of both of these factors. A reductionist account aiming to single out the most significant factor, however, should focus on the invasion sequence. The corresponding adapted causal mechanism is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Sloviansk/Kramatorsk Consolidated Causal Mechanism**



## **6. Mariupol: Where Separatism Failed**

This chapter will investigate the third critical juncture of the Donbas war's escalation sequence, which consists of armed clashes in the port city of Mariupol in the south of Donetsk Region. Mariupol receives comparatively little attention in the academic literature on the Donbas conflict. This is not surprising considering that violence in Mariupol was less intense and more short-lived than in other parts of the region. As a result, a retrospective assessment of the situation in Mariupol is at risk of overlooking the fact that the city was the second place in the Donbas that witnessed armed clashes between separatists and the Ukrainian security forces. These clashes left a legacy of violence in the city, even though other parts of the Donbas suffered more. What is more, the fact that violence in Mariupol was relatively short-lived while it escalated further in other places provides additional insights into the relative importance of different causal factors from a comparative perspective. For these reasons, the causal mechanism behind the brief outbreak of violence in Mariupol is worth investigating despite the eventual failure of separatism there. Like in chapter four, I investigate three hypotheses which highlight the role of grassroots activists, local elites, and Russia respectively. Like in the case of Donetsk and Luhansk, I conclude that there is insufficient evidence for a leading role of either local elites or Russia. This means that the events in Mariupol should be seen as a case of grassroots separatism. However, I also conclude that the contrast between the failure of separatism in Mariupol and the further escalation in other parts of the Donbas indicates that the domestic conflict potential in the Donbas was limited.

### **6.1. Events Overview and Hypotheses**

Until mid-April, the trajectory of conflict escalation in Mariupol resembled the sequence of events in Donetsk and Luhansk with a time lag. Throughout March, Mariupol witnessed both separatist and pro-unity demonstrations which largely remained peaceful (Pratskova 2014a; Sokolova 2014a; Pratskova 2014b).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This chapter draws heavily on the reporting of the local news website *0629.com.ua*, a franchise of the popular City Sites network with a specific focus on developments in Mariupol. The website's correspondents provided the most comprehensive first-hand, real-time coverage of many key events that took place in Mariupol during the time period in question. They frequently illustrated their reports with photos from the respective scenes and were widely cited in other Ukrainian media. In most cases, the website's reporting did not engage in analysis or commentary, but recounted observed events that were not disputed by other sources and did not contradict the narrative of either conflict party. In line with this dissertation's general treatment of news sources,

Attempts to storm administrative buildings in mid-March and early April remained short-lived and inconsequential (Novosti Donbassa 2014b; Pratskova 2014c; Sokolova 2014b). In late March, separatist leader Dmytro Kuzmenko proclaimed himself “people’s mayor” and was arrested by the Kyiv authorities in early April (TSN 2014a; Sokolova 2014b). On 13 April – a week after the armed building occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk and one day after the appearance of Igor Girkin’s armed group in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk – separatist activists successfully occupied the Mariupol city council building and erected barricades around it (Pratskova 2014d). This day, as well as a smaller protest on 11 April, also featured some violence among protesters but to a lesser extent than clashes in Donetsk a month earlier (Pratskova 2014e; Sviashchenko 2014a).

#### *6.1.1. The First Casualties*

In the night of 16-17 April, however, conflict escalation in Mariupol overtook events in Donetsk and Luhansk. At this time, Mariupol witnessed its first armed clashes between separatist fighters and the Ukrainian security forces. As a result, it became the second theatre of armed conflict in the Donbas – shortly after the first armed clash near Sloviansk and long before fighting reached the two regional centres. On the evening of 16 April, a group of people gathered at the entrance of Military Base No. 3057 which is located not far from the city centre and was home to a Ukrainian National Guard unit at the time. A video filmed at the gates of the base shows masked men who urge the soldiers through a megaphone to rebel against their leadership and come out and join the protesters (Hromadske TV 2014c). A picture from the same location published by the Ukrainian news website *Fakty* shows that some of the men were armed with clubs (Zhychko 2014). Moreover, a local TV report that aired the following day shows masked men at the same location throwing Molotov cocktails towards the base, after which gunshots can be heard (Telekanal Donbass 2014). The correspondent of another local news website who was at the scene also reported extended periods of gunfire (mnews 2014a). Another local TV news report by a different channel that was filmed on the following day shows burn marks and bullet shells around the entrance of the base (TRK Sigma 2014).

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this chapter describes such events as facts. Information that may be disputed and, hence, should not be considered a fact but rather a claim made by the website is highlighted as such.

Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov reported on the morning of 17 April that three people who attacked the base had been killed and 13 had been injured (Ostrov 2014k). A pro-separatist social media group claimed that as many as 19 people had died (Pratskova 2014g). However, over the following week, only two victims, Oleksandr Averbakh and Andrii Guzhva, were named (mnews 2014b).

Attributions of blame for the fatal shots are also contradictory. According to the *mnews* correspondent at the scene, the situation escalated when the protesters started to throw Molotov cocktails at the base, after which the soldiers opened fire on them (mnews 2014a). However, the base's deputy commander told local TV that some of the protesters had been armed and opened fire themselves, after which his soldiers only fired warning shots in the air. He claimed that any casualties among the protesters were due to friendly fire (TRK Sigma 2014). The *Fakty* report cites unnamed eyewitnesses who confirm that some of the attackers were armed but also quotes a local resident who claimed that a relative stationed at the base told her on the phone that his unit would "fight back to the last bullet" (Zhychko 2014).

It is not possible to establish from this contradictory open source evidence with a high degree of confidence which side opened fire and who was responsible for the fatal shots. However, given that the only confirmed deaths were on the side of the protesters, the explanation that they were killed by soldiers trying to fight back attackers appears somewhat more plausible than the friendly fire hypothesis. Regarding the number of casualties, it is *unlikely* that the death toll was far higher than the two confirmed cases. In light of the close media scrutiny that the events' aftermath received from all sides, it would have been difficult to conceal a large number of additional deaths.

### 6.1.2. Violence on Victory Day

After over two weeks of relative calm, new clashes between separatists and the Ukrainian security forces took place in early May (Pratskova 2014h; Vesti 2014f; Sviashchenko 2014b; Pratskova 2014i). Initially, violence remained below the scale of the 16-17 April events. On 9 May, however, fighting suddenly intensified and reached the highest level observed in Mariupol throughout the Donbas conflict's formative phase. On this day, armed separatist activists tried to seize

the city's police headquarters. Soldiers of Ukraine's National Guard, the Ukrainian Armed Forces, as well as volunteer battalion fighters came to the aid of the police. The result was intense fighting in the city centre. Interior Minister Avakov claimed on the day that about 20 "terrorists" and one member of the security forces had been killed as a result of the fighting (Vesti 2014g). The following evening, the local health service reported that a total of nine people had been killed and 42 wounded on 9 May (Ostrov 2014m). By 15 May, the local news website *0629.com.ua* had gathered from official sources as well as social media the names of 13 men who had died. Six of them were members of the security forces (Sviashchenko 2014c). This is the most comprehensive and detailed list of casualties available at the time of writing.

The fact that fighting broke out around the police headquarters, after which the military intervened and people died on both sides is not disputed by either conflict party. According to the Ukrainian security forces, a group of separatists attacked the police headquarters with the aim of seizing weapons stored in the building, after which the local police commander called for reinforcements (Romanenko and Abroskin 2016; Zhyrokhov 2020). According to the separatist narrative, local police officers rebelled against their commander who had given them the order to dissolve pro-Russian protests in the city by force, after which the besieged commander called the military for help (Novorossia.su 2014a; Sibirtsev 2014). Like in the case of the 16-17 April events, it is not possible to confirm either version with a high degree of certainty. Moreover, it is also possible that the local police commander was facing both a separatist attack and a rebellion by some officers at the same time. However, in light of the high level of restraint shown by the law enforcement authorities towards pro-Russian protesters both before and after 9 May, it appears *unlikely* that the local police commander had given an order to dissolve protests by force.

### *6.1.3. Hypotheses and Causal Pathways*

The question which side fired the first shots and who exactly was responsible for the casualties is important and should be subject to further investigation. However, in order to assess the events in Mariupol in relation to the causes of the Donbas conflict as a whole, it is of secondary importance. The primary puzzle that needs resolving is the question who the two conflict parties were. In relation

to this question, the possible hypotheses that could explain events in Mariupol are analogous to the three hypotheses examined in chapter four in the context of the building seizures in Donetsk and Luhansk.

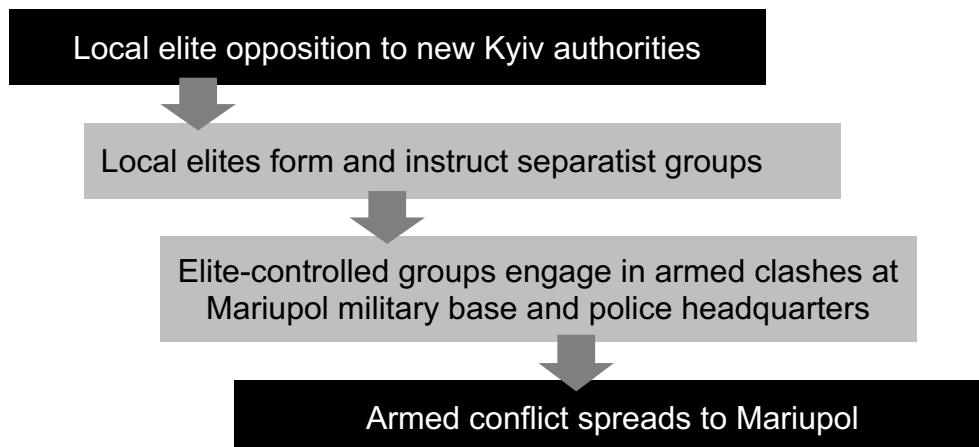
H1: Fighting in Mariupol took place between the Ukrainian security forces and pro-Russian grassroots activists.

**Figure 1: Internal Grassroots-Driven Causal Sequence**



H2: Fighting in Mariupol took place between the Ukrainian security forces and agents of local elites.

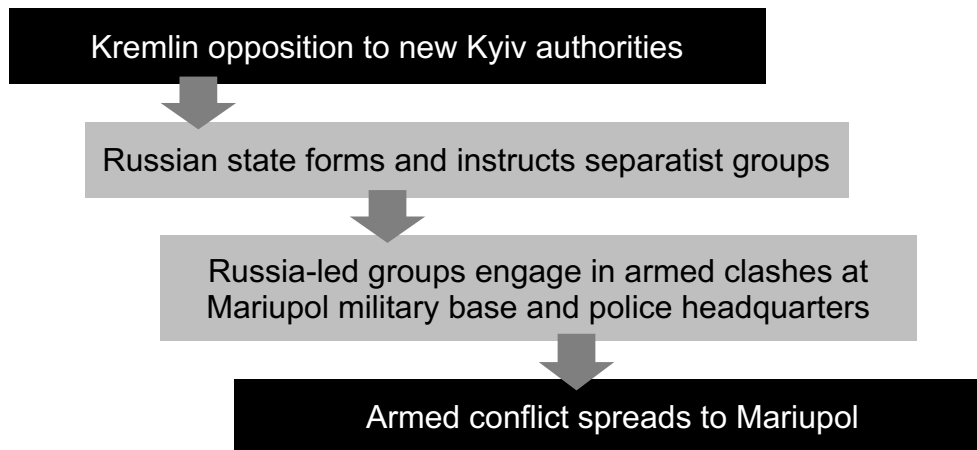
**Figure 2: Internal Elite-Driven Causal Sequence**



H3: Fighting in Mariupol took place between the Ukrainian security forces and organs of the Russian state.



**Figure 3: External Causal Sequence**



Like in the case of Donetsk and Luhansk, Occam's razor and the Sagan standard suggest a probabilistic head start of H1 in relation to the other two hypotheses. Although the precedent of Igor Girkin's arrival in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk somewhat reduces this head start in relation to H3, grassroots protests remain a more parsimonious and less extraordinary explanation of events than a plot by Russia or local elites. Hence, H1 should be considered a *realistic possibility*, H2 *highly unlikely*, and H3 *unlikely*. This means that the initial burden of proof remains with proponents of H2 or H3.

### **6.2. Evidence for Grassroots Activism**

Similar to the case of Donetsk in chapter four, this burden of proof increases somewhat after a first round of Bayesian updating that considers evidence in favour of H1. The most important evidence in this regard comes from the Ukrainian law enforcement agencies which have not identified a single Russian citizen among those arrested or put on wanted lists after the escalation of violence in the city. Neither have they provided any evidence of ties between detained or wanted separatist activist in Mariupol and local oligarchs or the Russian state. Shortly after the 16-17 April incident, Ukraine's Deputy Interior Minister Serhii Yarovyι claimed that the group who attacked the military base mainly consisted of local minor criminals. He claimed that the security forces had arrested 77 people, 90% of whom were known to the law enforcement agencies because of previous criminal or administrative offenses (Espresso TV 2014). On the first anniversary of the 9 May clashes, Donetsk Region police chief Viacheslav Abroskin (2015a) published a statement saying that the core group of separatist activists in Mariupol in May 2014 comprised 80 people. He claimed that the law

enforcement agencies had established the identity of most of them and arrested some. In the same post, Abroskin published the names and pictures of ten men who were allegedly directly involved in the violence. All the men were captioned as residents of Mariupol. Two weeks later, Abroskin (2015b) published names and photos of another 15 separatist activists who had been detained or were wanted in relation to the events in Mariupol. According to Abroskin, 11 of them were residents of Mariupol and surroundings, three lived in Donetsk, and one in Makiivka. In the same post, Abroskin wrote about Andrii Borysov (nom-de-guerre Chechen), the “commander of the security forces” of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) in Mariupol between mid-May and mid-June (YouTube 2014as). Abroskin (2015b) described Borysov as a “typical social parasite.” He claimed that Borysov had lived near Mariupol with the financial support of his parents before he started attending pro-Russian rallies in Donetsk and made up a story about having fought in Chechnya. Abroskin did not mention any alleged connections to Russia or local oligarchs in his description of Borysov or any of the other suspects. The absence of claims or evidence in this regard from the statements of Abroskin or other law enforcement officials increases the probability of H1. At the same time, it decreases the probability of H3 in particular because Ukraine’s law enforcement agencies have absolutely no incentive to hide evidence of Russian involvement in the Mariupol events. On the contrary, fighting off a covert invasion would be more prestigious for them than struggling with a random group of locals.

Moreover, like in the case of Donetsk, the background of the different separatist leadership figures in Mariupol is consistent with what would be expected from a heterogenous grassroots movement consisting of local pro-Russian fringe activists. According to *0629.com.ua*, Mariupol’s first “People’s Mayor” Dmytro Kuzmenko and his brother and successor Denys had been running a local boxing club in Mariupol (Hudilin 2020). The website published pictures of the Kuzmenko brothers at the club’s opening in 2013. It also alleged that they were involved in organized crime but did not provide any evidence for this allegation. Viacheslav Kuklin, who was elected interim “people’s mayor” by a group of protesters on 14 April (Pratskova 2014f) but immediately disappeared again from the limelight, was an elderly activist in a local residents association. His previous online footprint includes a speech at an 18 March Mariupol City Council hearing

(YouTube 2014o) and a speech at a 2012 Victory Day celebration (GO Sovest 2012). Ihor Khakimzianov, the “first DNR Defence Minister,” who was arrested by the Ukrainian security forces in Mariupol on 6 May and publicly interrogated by controversial Ukrainian populist politician Oleh Liashko (TSN 2014b), was a separatist activist from Donetsk. Khakimzianov made his first public appearance on 10 April when he was appointed as “commander of the People’s Army” at a session of the first DNR “government” (YouTube 2014ai). In a 2018 interview, Khakimzianov said that he came to Mariupol on 16 April 2014 with a group of “40-50 men to help with the seizure and disarmament of the military base” (YouTube 2017a). Oleksandr Fomenko, who announced on 1 June that he had been chosen to replace the arrested Denys Kuzmenko (Fomenko 2014), was a local entrepreneur and Communist Party of Ukraine activist. Ukrainian journalist Yuliia Dydenko interviewed the imprisoned Fomenko about his background and his version of the events in 2018 (Fomenko and Dydenko 2018).

Naturally, the openly available information on these men and their affiliations remains patchy. In the absence of additional evidence to the contrary, however, the seemingly random array of people that appeared to lead Mariupol’s separatist movement at different points in time is more consistent with H1 than with the other two hypotheses. In combination with the statements of Ukraine’s law enforcement authorities, it suggests that H1 becomes *likely* while both H2 and H3 lose probability and would require additional evidence to tip the balance. Such evidence would have to outweigh both H1’s probabilistic head start and the additional evidence in its favour.

### **6.3. Evidence for Local Elite Control**

The only plausible candidate for an elite-controlled insurrection in Mariupol would be oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, whose Metinvest group was a major local employer and driver of the local economy. However, the available open source evidence reduces rather than increases the probability that Akhmetov controlled Mariupol’s separatist activists. The behaviour of Metinvest in the aftermath of the 9 May clashes represents a failed *hoop test* for the hypothesis that supporters of the DNR in Mariupol were acting on Akhmetov’s behalf. When the Ukrainian military withdrew from the city after the 9 May clashes, Metinvest issued a statement urging the authorities to refrain from any further attempts to use force in urban

areas. To maintain peace and public order in Mariupol, the company promised to set up volunteer squads (*narodnyye druzhyny*) of steelworkers who would patrol the city in support of the local police (Metinvest 2014). According to a local correspondent for Ukraine's *Hromadske Radio*, these volunteer squads began their patrols over the following days (Burlakov 2014). The patrols did not enter into direct confrontation with separatist activists. DNR supporters were able to cast their votes in the 11 May "referendum on self-governance" undisturbed. However, volunteer squads and local police were not absorbed by the separatist movement, either. Neither Metinvest nor the local police subordinated themselves to the DNR. On the contrary, Rinat Akhmetov (2014) published a strongly worded video statement on 19 May, in which he condemned the DNR. He said the DNR's activities were a "struggle against the people of our region" and a "genocide of the Donbas." He called for a "Donbas without weapons" and for daily lunchtime warning strikes across all enterprises in the Donbas to protest for peace. In Mariupol, the local steelworks observed this call at least for the following two days. In response, a small group of DNR supporters organized a protest calling for the "nationalization" of Akhmetov's enterprises, but there were no attempts to take any actions along these lines (Ostrov 2014o). Instead, the 25 May Ukrainian presidential election, which the DNR considered illegitimate, was able to go ahead in Mariupol, with local police and Metinvest volunteers guarding polling stations (Sokolova 2014d; Pratskova 2014j). On the day of the election, local DNR figurehead Denys Kuzmenko was arrested by a special police unit (LB.ua 2014a; Novosti Donbassa 2014j). On 28 May, DNR commander Andrii Borysov published an appeal to Mariupol's mayor, the city's residents, and Rinat Akhmetov. Borysov urged them to cooperate with the DNR, complained about a lack of support, and warned of an impending Ukrainian counteroffensive (YouTube 2014av). These events clearly show that the DNR failed to establish a monopoly of violence in Mariupol despite the withdrawal of the Ukrainian military from the city. DNR activists had to share de facto control of the city with the local authorities and Metinvest. This tense but largely peaceful coexistence continued until 13 June when the Ukrainian military returned and forced the DNR out of Mariupol (Novorosinform.org 2014c; Novosti Donbassa 2014l).

This open source evidence does not necessarily suggest that the actions of Metinvest were the only factor that prevented the DNR from establishing a

monopoly of violence in Mariupol. However, it suggests that they *almost certainly* contributed. Hence, after the 9 May clashes, Rinat Akhmetov and the DNR were coexisting but working against each other. If the DNR activists had been Akhmetov's agents, the expected observation would be the opposite, namely cooperation or replacement. This failed *hoop test* significantly reduces the probability of H2 and leaves only a *remote chance* that separatist activists in Mariupol were agents of local elites.

Like in the case of Donetsk, this conclusion does not imply that Rinat Akhmetov does not bear any responsibility for the escalation of violence in Mariupol. On the contrary, the timing of Metinvest's actions and Akhmetov's anti-DNR statement suggests that Akhmetov did nothing to prevent initial manifestations of separatism in Mariupol although he may have had the ability to do so. Before 10 May, there is no evidence that Akhmetov was trying to rein in separatist activism in Mariupol in any way. This observation reinforces the conclusion of chapter four regarding Akhmetov's behaviour in Donetsk. It is *almost certain* that he did not do all he could to prevent separatist violence from happening in the first place. Instead, it is *likely* that Akhmetov overestimated his own control over the situation and was permissive if not supportive towards initial manifestations of separatism because he hoped it would strengthen his position in relation to the new Kyiv authorities. At the same time, however, Akhmetov's reaction to the 9 May events in Mariupol also reinforces another conclusion of chapter four, namely that a war in the Donbas or the region's secession from Ukraine were not in Akhmetov's interest. It is *almost certain* that, by mid-May, Akhmetov was trying to prevent a further escalation of violence. In Mariupol, this attempt was successful, even though it took another operation by the Ukrainian military on 13 June to bring separatist activities in the city to an end.

#### **6.4. Evidence for Russian Control**

Evidence that separatist activities in Mariupol were led by agents of the Russian state is relatively sparse and weak. The strongest evidence for Russian influence is a visit by future "People's Mayor" Dmytro Kuzmenko to Crimea in early March. On 4 March, the local news website *0629.com.ua* published a scan of a letter signed by Crimea's new "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov. In this letter, Aksyonov expressed his support for anti-Kyiv activism in Mariupol and promised

“maximal efforts” to coordinate the actions of his forces in Crimea with the actions of Kuzmenko’s forces in Mariupol. Together with the letter, the website also published a picture of Aksyonov and Kuzmenko shaking hands (Zhezhera 2014). On 8 March, Kuzmenko spoke at a separatist rally in Mariupol. He was introduced as “a man who has come from Crimea” and read out the first part of Aksyonov’s letter (YouTube 2014m, from 21:00). Since chapter five has demonstrated that Aksyonov was generally willing to support separatism in the Donbas, it appears plausible that he was happy to meet Kuzmenko and *unlikely* that Kuzmenko fabricated the letter and the photo from Crimea. However, Kuzmenko had returned to Mariupol by 8 March and there is no evidence that he had been more than a brief visitor to Crimea or that he received any material assistance. Neither is there any direct evidence to suggest that the promised coordination between Mariupol’s separatists and the leaders of the Crimean takeover actually took place. On the other hand, if Kuzmenko’s early-March trip to Crimea is seen in conjunction with the findings of chapter five, a certain degree of Russian state support for Mariupol’s separatists cannot be ruled out. Chapter five showed, that Aksyonov co-organized Igor Girkin’s occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk on 12 April. In this context, Kuzmenko’s Crimea trip suggests at least a *realistic possibility* that separatist activists in Mariupol also received some further advice and material support from Aksyonov.

Additional evidence of potential material support from Crimea for separatism in Mariupol comes from a Ukrainian court judgement discovered by Kudelia (2019, 291). In the judgement, a court in the town of Berdiansk, 70 kilometres southwest of Mariupol in Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia Region, sentences a resident of Mariupol to 13 years in prison for treason, creation of a terrorist group, and illegal handling of weapons (Berdiansk District Court 2015). According to the judgement, the defendant was a close associate of Denys Kuzmenko and travelled to Berdiansk on 25 May 2014 together with other local separatists to receive a shipment of weapons from Crimea. Both the weapons and the men were intercepted by Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) operatives. The defendant denied the charges but admitted that another separatist activist in Mariupol had told him in April that they were conducting negotiations about weapons deliveries from Russia. He also admitted that he joined Denys Kuzmenko on 25 May to receive the weapons and was arrested together with him. The judgement does not indicate whether

any other weapons delivery from Russian-controlled territory to Mariupol took place before the failed attempt of 25 May. Nevertheless, the judgement suggests that separatist forces in Mariupol continued to be in contact with the Russian state after Dmytro Kuzmenko's initial visit to Crimea. This raises the probability that separatist activists in Mariupol received at least some advice and material support from Russia to *likely*.

Other evidence of Russian involvement in the Mariupol events is weaker than Kuzmenko's Crimea trip and the court judgement. In his comments after the 16-17 April events, Deputy Interior Minister Yarovyi claimed that one of the killed attackers of the military base had served a prison sentence in Russia in the past (Espresso TV 2014). However, he did not go into further detail and did not allege any links between Russia's security services and the attackers of the military base at the time of events. Ukrainian populist politician Oleh Liashko claimed after his controversial interrogation of DNR "Defence Minister" Ihor Khakimzianov that the latter had admitted to having received money from Russia's FSB intelligence agency and orders from Igor Girkin (TSN 2014b). However, Liashko is famous for controversial PR stunts and statements of dubious veracity. Moreover, given the circumstances of the interrogation, any confession by Khakimzianov would have been made under duress. Another potential link between Khakimzianov and the Russian state can be inferred from Khakimzianov's own account of his biography in a 2015 interview with a separatist YouTube channel. In the beginning of the interview, Khakimzianov says that he was born in Makiivka but went to school in Russia's Krasnodar Region and spent a few years at a military higher education facility there before returning to the Donbas in 2001 (YouTube 2015b, at 1:27). However, this link remains relatively weak because of the considerable time that had passed since Khakimzianov's return to the Donbas. Another uncorroborated claim of Russian intelligence involvement in Mariupol was made by Ukrainian military historian Mykhailo Zhyrokhov (2020), who published a detailed analysis of the events of 9 May 2014, drawing on sources in the Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. Zhyrokhov's article claims that the group that attacked the Mariupol police headquarters on this day consisted of local separatists who had travelled to Donetsk before the attack, where they had received arms and orders from unnamed "Russian handlers" [*kuratory*]. However, Zhyrokhov does not provide

further evidence regarding this alleged trip to Donetsk or the identity of the alleged handlers. Similar claims of contacts between several separatist activists in Mariupol and Russia's GRU military intelligence agency are made by a man with the pseudonym Ivan Bohdan in a book about the rise and fall of separatism in Mariupol (Bohdan 2016; Pyzhova 2016). In his book, Bohdan claims that he was in Mariupol at the time of events and that he has SBU insider knowledge. However, he does not provide references and does not sufficiently explain how he or his contacts know about the alleged collaboration between separatists in Mariupol and the GRU, and why they are confident that this information is correct. Finally, a more direct piece of evidence for Russian presence in Mariupol consists of pictures of an "exhibition" about Ukrainian "fascism" in front of the occupied City Council building on 26 April 2016 (Sokolova 2014c). The pictures suggest that the exhibition was organized by supporters of *Sut Vremeni* – a Soviet restorationist movement headed by Russian theatre producer Sergey Kurginyan. However, it remains unclear whether any supporters of the movement had travelled to Mariupol from Russia, and it is possible that the organizers were local followers of Kurginyan.

Hence, there is some *straw-in-the-wind* evidence for links between Mariupol's separatists and Russia but no *smoking gun* indicating that they received more than a letter of support and a handshake very early on in the process. The only documented weapons delivery from Russia took place as late as 25 May and was intercepted by the SBU. To some extent, however, the available *straw-in-the-wind* evidence is strengthened further by the observations of Russian links to Donbas separatism from chapter four. Since it is *likely* that Russian Presidential Adviser Sergey Glazyev provided advice and material support to separatist activists from Donetsk and Luhansk, there is a *realistic possibility* that he or his associates were also in contact with activists from Mariupol. And since it is *almost certain* that representatives of Russian nationalist and imperialist organizations were involved in separatist activism in Donetsk, there is a *realistic possibility* that some of them were present in Mariupol as well. However, even if this is taken into account, there is still less evidence for direct links between local separatists and the Russian state in the case of Mariupol than there is in the case of Donetsk. And, even in the case of Donetsk, chapter four concluded that such evidence is not strong enough to infer that the initial wave of separatist activism in early April



was dominated rather than merely supported by the Russian state. In turn, this leads to the conclusion that the available evidence from Mariupol is insufficient to significantly change the balance of probability between the different hypotheses. To do so would require more substantive evidence, such as photos or videos of Russian actors in Mariupol, intercepted phone conversations, or detailed and credible eyewitness testimony from participants suggesting instruction and coordination from Russia. In the absence of such evidence, the balance of probability remains tilted against H3, which means that this hypothesis should be discarded. While some degree of Russian support in the form of money, weapons, or advice is *likely*, it remains *unlikely* that this support reached an extent that justifies defining Mariupol's separatists as organs of the Russian state. Hence, H1 is the most accurate explanation for events in Mariupol, with the caveats that some degree of Russian support is *likely*, and that separatist activity was enabled by the initial inaction of Rinat Akhmetov and his local enterprises.

#### **6.5. Chapter Conclusion: Mariupol as a Counterfactual Conflict Scenario**

Based on this conclusion, the case of Mariupol indicates that there was potential for violence between the Ukrainian security forces and pro-Russian grassroots activists in the Donbas in the spring of 2014. In Mariupol, this violence resulted in armed clashes and more than a dozen confirmed deaths. At the same time, however, the case of Mariupol also indicates that domestic escalation dynamics in the Donbas were not inevitably self-perpetuating. It suggests that it was possible for separatism to fizzle out even after the military had been deployed and engaged in armed combat. Violence in Mariupol was relatively short-lived and the situation did not escalate further after the armed clashes of 9 May. Despite the temporary withdrawal of the Ukrainian military, separatist activists were unable to establish a monopoly of violence in Mariupol and did not manage to turn the city into a militarized stronghold of the DNR. As a result, they were defeated by the returning Ukrainian forces a month later in an operation that involved less violence than the earlier clashes.

It is relatively simple to apply the Mariupol scenario to other locations in a counterfactual thought experiment: Attempts by separatist activists to occupy buildings and obtain arms lead to clashes with the military. The military withdraws. Local elites give up their tacit support for separatism and step up their

engagement for public order and safety. Separatist activity does not subside completely but stagnates. Local authorities and separatist institutions coexist until the security forces regroup and eventually remove the latter. Playing out this scenario across the Donbas would involve a certain degree of militarized violence in various locations, which may well cross 25-casualty threshold which the Uppsala Conflict Data Program defines for armed conflict. However, it is *almost certain* that such a counterfactual scenario would involve only a tiny fraction of the violence and destruction that the Donbas witnessed over the summer of 2014 and the years that followed. Even though the events of spring 2014 left a legacy of violence in Mariupol, this legacy was dwarfed by what other parts of the region had to endure.

This observation raises the question why the conflict's escalation sequence in other parts of the Donbas followed a different path. Particularly striking in this regard is the case of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, where the first armed clashes occurred at about the same time as in Mariupol. Why were separatist forces able to achieve a monopoly of violence and further militarize Sloviansk and Kramatorsk after the first armed clashes but failed to do so in Mariupol? A comparison of the causal mechanism identified in chapter five and the causal mechanism identified in the present chapter provides a compelling explanation. While local separatists in Mariupol were largely left to their own devices, the separatist takeover of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk was led by Igor Girkin's group of Russian and Crimean fighters and their superior experience, determination, and equipment. Hence, a comparison of the two cases adds additional support to the findings of the previous chapter's process tracing analysis, which identified Russian interference as the primary cause of conflict escalation in Sloviansk/Kramatorsk. The following chapter will investigate whether Russian interference is also suitable to explain why Donetsk, Luhansk, and other locations across the Donbas witnessed a further escalation of violence, rather than a fizzling out of separatist activity like Mariupol.

## 7. The Fighting Spreads

This chapter will analyse the fourth critical juncture of the Donbas war's escalation sequence – the outbreak of armed combat in several new locations across the Donbas and the resulting emergence of territorial frontlines in late May to mid-June 2014. Until the second half of May 2014, armed clashes between separatist fighters and Ukrainian forces were largely confined to two hotspots – the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area and the city of Mariupol. In other parts of the Donbas, separatist activities remained well below this level of escalation and did not involve armed combat, except for one isolated incident in Luhansk.<sup>25</sup> Between late May and mid-June, however, the theatre of war expanded rapidly. Within this time period, armed clashes occurred halfway between Donetsk and Mariupol, in the immediate surroundings of Donetsk and Luhansk, near the Russian-Ukrainian border in the south of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, and in an urban agglomeration northwest of Luhansk. These outbreaks of fighting in various locations within a relatively short period of time were another critical juncture in the escalation of the conflict. On the one hand, they left a lasting legacy of violence in some of the affected areas. On the other hand, they were a necessary condition for further conflict escalation because they significantly increased the geographical limits of violence. Rather than a vertical upwards movement on the conflict's escalation ladder, they represent a horizontal movement which spread the highest level of escalation that the conflict had reached so far across a larger area. As a result, the conflict changed shape. Both sides demarcated their control over territory. Larger frontlines replaced insular hotspots of violence. Without this development, the war could not have escalated further in the way it did over the following months.

I will investigate each major outbreak of fighting in a new location separately. As a result, I will divide this chapter's critical juncture into four component parts. Firstly, I will look at an attack on Ukrainian forces near Volnovakha, which can be attributed to a group of separatist fighters based in Horlivka and led by Igor Bezler. Secondly, I will look at fighting around Donetsk city with a particular focus on a failed attempt to seize Donetsk Airport, which led to a large number of separatist casualties. Thirdly, I will look at the consolidation of separatist control

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<sup>25</sup> On 3 May, the storming of a military conscription office led to a shootout and one reported death on the side of the separatists (0642.ua 2014b).

over Luhansk city and its immediate surroundings. Fourthly, I will look at fighting in the west and south of Luhansk Region. The digital open source information available on each of these four episodes will be tested against two hypotheses, emphasizing domestic and external causes respectively. I will argue that, in the case of all four components, there is convincing evidence that the actions of the Russian state were the primary cause of the outbreak of fighting.

Neither the separatists nor the Ukrainian side dispute that any of the armed clashes in question took place. What is more, they do not even disagree on the basic sequence of events in each case. The key difference between their narratives does not concern the events as such but their normative interpretation with respect to the legitimate use of force. The Ukrainian side argues that it had the right to advance on separatist positions and defend its facilities from separatist attempts to seize them because the new Kyiv authorities held the monopoly of violence over Ukrainian territory. The separatists, on the other hand, argue that they had the right to attack advancing Ukrainian forces and seize Ukrainian military facilities because the new Kyiv authorities did not have any legitimate claim to the Donbas. In the context of my research question, this normative dispute is not of central importance. Instead, I investigate whether the use of violence against representatives of the Kyiv authorities during the incidents in question should be attributed primarily to local or to Russian actors. Whether or not these actors had the moral or legal right to use violence is an important question for subsequent discussion but has no impact on the causal sequence itself. Hence, the general consensus regarding the basic sequence of events means that only two hypotheses have to be tested. Each of them can be visualized as a simple single-component causal mechanism.

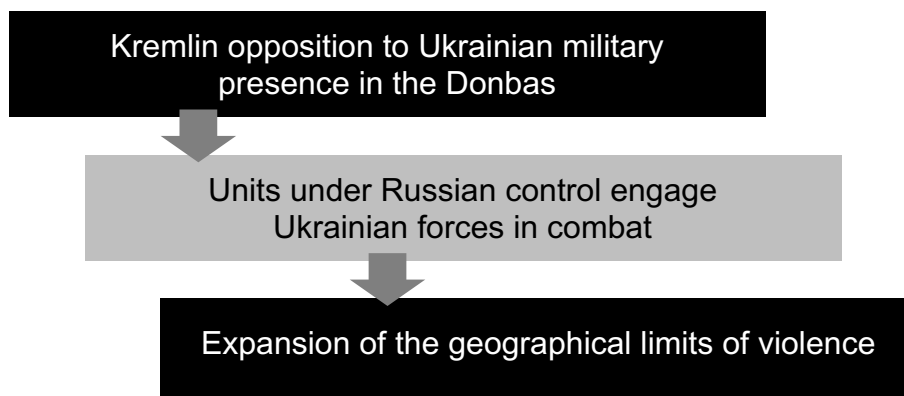
H1: The units that engaged Ukrainian forces in combat in various parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions between late May and mid-June were primarily local actors.

**Figure 1: Internal Conflict Mechanism**



H2: The units that engaged Ukrainian forces in combat in various parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions between late May and mid-June were organs of the Russian state.

**Figure 2: Russian Invasion Mechanism**



The remainder of this chapter will now test these two hypotheses against the four conflict escalation clusters included in the critical juncture investigated in this chapter. Like in the previous chapters, an explanation focusing on local factors will be given a probabilistic head start in line with Occams razor and the Sagan standard. This means that, as a starting point for the evaluation of evidence, I will consider H1 *likely* and H2 a *realistic possibility*.

### **7.1. The Volnovakha Attack: A “Demon” from Russia**

On the morning of 22 May 2014, a group of armed men attacked a Ukrainian Armed Forces checkpoint near the town of Volnovakha, about 45 km southwest of Donetsk. This attack was the deadliest armed clash of the conflict so far. Sixteen Ukrainian servicemen lost their lives and 32 were injured (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.b; Ostrov 2014p). Moreover, the attack took place in a

region of the Donbas that had not witnessed armed separatist activity before. There is no footage of the actual attack available from open sources. However, a video reportedly taken on 21 May shows the checkpoint intact. It also shows men in civilian clothing telling the soldiers that they are “occupiers,” who have been “zombified” by the Ukrainian authorities. The conversations in the video suggest that the soldiers are unable to advance because the road ahead has been blocked by local residents (YouTube 2019a).

Videos from 22 May show the destruction caused by the separatist ambush (YouTube 2019b; ICTV 2014). They also show what appears to be friendly fire by Ukrainian helicopters, which arrived after the original attackers had retreated (YouTube 2014at). Russian state television used the footage of the helicopters to portray the entire event as a punitive operation by the Ukrainian authorities against their own unit – supposedly because this unit had refused to fire at civilians and asked to return to its base (Channel 1 2014; NTV 2014). This narrative contradicts the later eyewitness accounts of surviving Ukrainian servicemen collected by military historian Mykhaylo Zhyrokhov (2016b). According to these accounts, the initial attack was carried out by separatist fighters. The subsequent friendly fire, which only injured one soldier, occurred because the helicopter pilots mistook burning vehicles for separatist positions.

What is more, the Russian propaganda account also contradicts the narrative of the separatist group that carried out the attack. On 23 May, the BBC’s Russian Service published an interview with a masked man captioned as the “leader of the rebels in Horlivka,” who claimed responsibility for the attack and showed his interviewers a large quantity of seized weapons (BBC News 2014b). The voice and eyes of this man match Horlivka separatist leader Igor Bezler (nom-de-guerre Bes, which translates as Demon). This observation is consistent with a statement reaffirming his group’s responsibility, which Bezler (2017) posted on his social media profile on the third anniversary of the attack. In light of this evidence, it can be considered a fact that a separatist unit from Horlivka under Igor Bezler’s command was responsible for the 22 May ambush against the Ukrainian checkpoint near Volnovakha. In turn, Bezler’s background and affiliation are key to answering the question whether the attack can be attributed primarily to local separatism or the Russian state.

Bezler first caught the attention of a wider media audience when he led the seizure of the Horlivka police headquarters on 14 April. In a video published on this day, he addressed a group of local police officers and introduced himself as a “lieutenant colonel of the Russian Army” (YouTube 2014am). Shortly afterwards, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) claimed that Bezler was an agent of Russia’s GRU military intelligence agency (Ukrainska Pravda 2014m). It published a scan of a Russian passport issued to Bezler in 2002 in the town of Mirnyy in Russia’s Arkhangelsk Region which was, at the time, home to a base of Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces (serg\_slavorum 2015). The SBU claimed that Bezler finished his active military service in 2002 and “was sent to Ukraine,” where the GRU “re-established contact” with him in February 2014 and instructed him to take part in the occupation of Crimea (Ukrainska Pravda 2014m). In an interview with Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, Bezler (2014) denied links to Russian intelligence but confirmed the SBU’s remaining claims. He said that he was a Russian citizen with a Ukrainian residence permit, that he had served in the Russian Armed Forces until the early 2000s, and that he had played an active role in Russia’s takeover of Crimea. Hence, similar to the case of Igor Girkin, the key point of contention is not Bezler’s identity or biography but the question whether or not he acted on behalf of the Russian state in spring 2014.

#### *7.1.1. The Origins of Igor Bezler and His Group*

Like in Igor Girkin’s case (see chapter five), there is convincing evidence linking Igor Bezler to the Russian security apparatus. This evidence consists of three parts, each of which increases the probability of H2 in relation to Bezler’s group in line with the principles of Bayesian updating. The first stage of updating relates to the fact that the core of Bezler’s group consisted of men who had come to Ukraine from Crimea with Igor Girkin. The consistent accounts of Bezler’s comrades-in-arms indicate that he participated in the takeover of Crimea and prepared his paramilitary activity in the Donbas as part of the same paramilitary group as Girkin. This has been confirmed by Girkin (2016a) himself and two other group members – Illia Khokhlov (2019a, at 0:21) and Viktor Anosov (2019, at 4:37). All three report that Bezler was sent from Crimea to the Donbas on a reconnaissance mission before the rest of them entered mainland Ukraine. This is also in line with the account of Sloviansk “People’s Mayor” Viacheslav

Ponomarov (2014), who said that Bezler visited the temporarily occupied Donetsk SBU building on 7 April.

After Girkin's arrival in Sloviansk, Bezler formed a separate base in Horlivka, where he was joined by some of Girkin's men. Girkin (2016a) as well as Khokhlov (2019b, from 1:43) report that Bezler re-joined their group after its arrival in Sloviansk on 12 April, but that he almost immediately left again and went to Horlivka on his own. This is consistent with the account of another member of Girkin's group with the nom-de-guerre Trifon. According to Trifon, Bezler came to Sloviansk on 13 April but got into an argument with Girkin and left the town (Trifon and Bezsonov 2020c). Nevertheless, Bezler did not cut all ties with his counterparts in Sloviansk. On the contrary, Girkin (2016a) claims that he sent "a detachment of 40 armed fighters" to Horlivka in May, which helped Bezler to gain "complete control" over the town. Khokhlov (2019b, from 4:05) and Anosov (2019, at 34:38) both confirm that several members of Girkin's group joined Bezler in Horlivka in late May but suggest that these fighters did not leave Sloviansk on friendly terms. The comments sections of their YouTube testimonies (Khokhlov 2019a; Anosov 2019) also feature posts by other group members who enter a heated argument about whether those who joined Bezler in Horlivka betrayed Girkin. These testimonies suggest that several fighters who had been involved in the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk joined Bezler in Horlivka near the time of the Volnovakha attack. They also prove that, despite their disagreements, both Bezler and Girkin participated in the Russian takeover of Crimea and moved on to the Donbas as part of the same network. As I discussed in chapter five, this network was coordinated by Crimean "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov and Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev with at least the knowledge and tacit approval of Russia's intelligence services and the Kremlin.

This means that it is *almost certain* that the leaders of the separatist occupation of Horlivka and the subsequent attack near Volnovakha came from the same network of men that was responsible for the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. Starting from the default assumption that H2 is a *realistic possibility*, this first round of updating makes it *likely* that Bezler and those members of Girkin's group that joined him in Horlivka continued to act on the Russian state's behalf. At the same time, the apparent tensions between Girkin's and Bezler's



groups also leave a *realistic possibility* that Bezler severed his ties with Russia. However, the probability that this was the case is reduced significantly by additional evidence.

### 7.1.2. Bezler's Second Passport

The second stage of informal Bayesian updating relates to evidence that the Russian intelligence services provided Bezler with a second identity. When the Bellingcat (2019) research collective obtained and analysed a leaked database of Russian flight passenger information, it discovered that a passport issued to Igor Nikolayevich Beregovoy was used to travel from Krasnodar to Simferopol on 27 October 2014. On 28 October, Igor Nikolayevich Bezler – whose date and place of birth are identical to Beregovoy's passport details – called his associates in Horlivka and told them that he had left the Donbas for good (Gorlovka.ua 2014). Moreover, Bellingcat checked Beregovoy's passport details against a database of Russian taxpayer identification numbers and did not find any entry, which further increases the likelihood that Igor Beregovoy is a fake identity. Finally, Bellingcat found that there is only a 28-digit difference between the serial number of Beregovoy's passport and the serial number of a passport issued to Andrey Ivanovich Laptev. According to Bellingcat, the latter name is the cover identity of Oleg Ivannikov, a GRU agent active in the Donbas in 2014 (Rakuszitzky et al. 2018).<sup>26</sup> Bellingcat (2019) argues that the serial number proximity suggests that the two passports were part of the same batch. This argument is consistent with the findings of Bellingcat's (2018a) initial investigation of Russia's 2018 chemical weapons attack in Salisbury. In this investigation, Bellingcat also discovered that several GRU agents held second identity passports with serial numbers in close proximity of each other.

Naturally, this evidence stands or falls on the authenticity of the flight passenger information database obtained by Bellingcat. However, Bellingcat has extensive experience of working with leaked databases sold on the Russian Internet. For example, such information also helped Bellingcat to identify the Russian agents responsible for the Salisbury poisonings (Bellingcat 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). In this case, evidence from a variety of other sources proved to be consistent with the

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<sup>26</sup> I will discuss Ivannikov in further detail below in the context of the events in Luhansk city.

evidence from leaked databases. Against this backdrop, it can be considered *highly likely* that Bellingcat's assessment of the obtained flight passenger data's authenticity is correct. As a result, it is *highly likely* that Russian intelligence services issued Igor Bezler with a fake identity either before or during his activities in the Donbas. This finding, in turn, increases the probability of H2 in relation to Bezler's group to *highly likely*.

### 7.1.3. Bezler's Handler: Introducing Vasiliy Geranin

The third and final stage of Bayesian updating refers to evidence that Bezler was cooperating with a Russian intelligence officer before, during, and after his activities in the Donbas. On 17 July 2014, only hours after Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 had been shot down over the conflict zone, the SBU (2014d) published an excerpt of an intercepted phone conversation between Bezler and a man captioned as "Russian GRU Colonel Vasiliy Nikolayevich Geranin." On 18 July, Russian pro-Kremlin media quoted Bezler as saying that this conversation had taken place but that it was not about MH17 but a different plane (Lenta.ru 2014; MK.ru 2014). Bezler (2016; 2020) later repeated this claim on his social media account. He argued that the SBU had faked the recording's timestamp and that he had been discussing a downed Ukrainian military aircraft rather than MH17. However, Bezler did not dispute the authenticity of the conversation itself. Moreover, shortly after the recording was published, Russian journalist Ilya Barabanov (2014) reported that he had called the number displayed in the SBU intercept and reached a man who responded when addressed as Vasiliy Nikolayevich Geranin. According to Barabanov, the man denied having discussed an airplane with anyone, but his voice sounded similar to the voice in the SBU's conversation excerpt.

A recording of the full conversation between Bezler and Geranin surfaced in 2020 in the context of the Dutch MH17 trial. First, additional excerpts of the conversation were published by Ukrainian video blogger Anatolii Sharii (2020a from 5:35), who claimed that he had got the file from an anonymous source. Sharii is a strong critic of the Poroshenko and Zelenskyi administrations, promotes pro-Russian political messaging via his YouTube channel, and has founded a Ukrainian opposition party. According to Sharii, the full conversation between Bezler and Geranin shows that the SBU had taken the excerpts published in 2014

out of context. Subsequently, Bellingcat (2020b; 2020c) published and analysed the complete audio recording of the conversation. It said it had obtained the audio file from a leaked email sent by Bezler to a Russian intelligence officer. Bellingcat's analysis of the contents contradicts Sharii's. It argues that the full recording is even less compatible with Bezler's claim that the conversation with Geranin was from an earlier date and did not refer to MH17. However, regardless of this dispute and the implications for the MH17 case, both Sharii and Bellingcat agree that they are talking about the same recording and do not question its authenticity (Sharii 2020b).

This recording of the full conversation between Bezler and Geranin (Bellingcat 2020b) suggests that Geranin was Bezler's superior and that they discussed the operations of Bezler's group in great detail on a regular basis. Bezler addresses Geranin as Vasiliy Nikolayevich and uses the formal second person plural whereas Geranin addresses Bezler only by his first name Igor and uses the informal second person singular. Geranin starts the call by asking for an update on what happened to the body of a killed fighter. Then Bezler reports that his men downed a Ukrainian fighter jet<sup>27</sup> "thirty minutes ago" and are now attacking Ukrainian positions near the town of Rozivka. Geranin asks Bezler to send him photos via MMS and wants to know whether Bezler's men are using antitank missiles. Bezler then mentions that his men have seized Ukrainian RK-2 missiles. Geranin reminds Bezler that he has already told him to send these missiles to an unspecified location where unspecified people are waiting for them. Bezler replies that he needs three or four vehicles to transport all the missiles because his group seized a whole factory, but he also says that they are still looking for a launcher. Geranin tells Bezler to send only sample missiles and keep the rest. At the end of the call, Geranin asks if Bezler has made any progress commissioning propaganda banners.

There is convincing digital open source evidence to confirm Geranin's identity and corroborate the SBU's claim that he is a Russian intelligence officer. At the

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<sup>27</sup> The SBU and Bellingcat argue that this part of the conversation is referring to MH17. Bellingcat (2020c) suspects that Bezler had incomplete information. As a result, he incorrectly assumed that the downed plane was a Ukrainian fighter jet, and he also assumed that his men were responsible for the downing.

time the initial excerpt of the conversation was published by the SBU, the only verified photo of a “Colonel Vasily Geranin” was taken in April 2013 in Moscow at a roundtable titled “The War in Syria – Lessons for Russia.” The roundtable was organized by the Russian military news weekly *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (NVO). Geranin gave a talk on effective combat strategies against organized armed groups and his photo accompanied a writeup of his presentation in the newspaper’s print edition (NVO 2013, 6). A scan is available via the commercial online database PressReader. The photo’s caption did not specify in which military branch or agency Geranin was serving. The only tentative link to the events in the Donbas was the fact that Igor Girkin participated in the same roundtable. However, more evidence corroborating Geranin’s identity and his ties to Igor Bezler appeared in January 2020. This evidence was provided by Russian journalist Vyacheslav Nemyshev (2020), who published a video showing himself with Igor Bezler and another man captioned as “military consultant Vasiliy Makagonov” on a yacht in Crimea. In the video, Makagonov is wearing a T-Shirt with the caption “Syria” and looks strikingly similar to NVO’s 2013 photo of Geranin.

Additional evidence that Geranin and Makagonov are the same person comes from participants of Russia’s takeover of Crimea. On 10 March 2014, a Ukrainian Ministry of Defence spokesperson reported that a group of armed men, “who, according to our sources, are under the command of Russian Federation Colonel Makagonov,” had entered a Ukrainian military base in the Crimean town of Bakhchysarai (Ukrainska Pravda 2014d). Ukrainian journalist Levko Stek (2020, from 17:55) showed the footage of Makagonov on the yacht to a Ukrainian officer who was stationed at this Bakhchysarai base in March 2014. The officer confirmed that the man on the yacht and the man leading the Russian occupation of the base were the same person. Moreover, he confirmed that Igor Bezler also participated in the occupation under Makagonov’s command. Geranin’s leading role in the occupation of Crimea has also been confirmed by one of his own militiamen. Vadym Ilovchenko – a pro-Russian Cossack who would later join Igor Girkin in the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (see chapter five) – gave a short TV interview at the Bakhchysarai base a few days after its occupation (ITV 2014). A more in-depth interview with Ilovchenko features in a book published in 2019 by Andrii Saveliev, one of Ilovchenko and Girkin’s comrades-in-arms (AiF

2019; Saveliev 2019a, 102). In this longer interview, Ilovchenko says that he joined a paramilitary group under the command of “Colonel Geranin” in Simferopol on 7 March 2014 at the recommendation of Girkin.<sup>28</sup> According to Ilovchenko, Geranin’s nom-de-guerre at the time was Kanaris.

The pseudonym Kanaris leads to yet another piece of evidence confirming Geranin’s identity and his links to Bezler. In a public post on his social media page, Igor Girkin (2019) identified Kanaris in a video from 2019, which shows Vasiliy Makagonov/Geranin and Bezler on another boat trip. In this post, Girkin describes Makagonov/Geranin as a retired Russian intelligence service colonel who received three Orders of Courage for serving in Chechnya. In response to another user’s comment, Girkin added that Geranin’s credentials as a “military professional” are significantly stronger than his own because Geranin had been a “career special forces officer ‘from an early age.’” Taken together, these pieces of evidence suggest that it is *almost certain* that Kanaris, Vasiliy Makagonov, and Vasiliy Geranin are the same person – a colonel with a long service record in Russia’s intelligence apparatus. Furthermore, it is *almost certain* that Kanaris/Makagonov/Geranin was Bezler’s commander during the occupation of Crimea, that Bezler continued to report to him and receive orders from him during his time in the Donbas, and that they remained on friendly terms after Bezler left the Donbas and returned to Crimea.

Bezler’s links to Girkin’s group, his second identity provided by the Russian authorities, and his close contacts to senior Russian intelligence officer Vasiliy Geranin are cumulative evidence that Bezler acted in the Donbas on behalf of the Russian state. These three stages of Bayesian updating increase the probability of H2 in relation to Bezler to *almost certain*. As a result, the same reasoning that applied to Girkin’s group in chapter five also applies to Bezler and his men. Although Bezler may have enjoyed some degree of operational

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<sup>28</sup> Ilovchenko also claims that Geranin was not on active duty. However, Geranin’s formal employment status is of secondary importance if he played a leading role in the Russian annexation of Crimea. As I have argued in chapter five, the paramilitary forces that supported the Russian takeover should be considered informal state organs because they were under the control of the Russian security apparatus. Moreover, the fact that Geranin was able to enjoy himself on a yacht in Crimea in the winter of 2019-2020 is additional evidence that the Russian state approved his activities in relation to the Donbas conflict.

autonomy and relied on local recruits, the evidence discussed above suggests that Bezler's group was an informal organ of the Russian state. Therefore, it is *almost certain* that the actions of the Russian state were the primary cause of the attack on the Ukrainian Armed Forces near Volnovakha on 22 May 2014.

## **7.2. Donetsk and Surroundings: Boroday's "Volunteers"**

The death toll of the Volnovakha attack was surpassed on 26 May when a failed attempt to seize Donetsk Airport led to serious losses on the separatist side. Separatist forces briefly managed to occupy one of the terminal buildings but were forced into a chaotic retreat when the Ukrainian units that were holding the other terminal building opened fire and received air support. During the retreat, a truck carrying separatist fighters was destroyed by friendly fire, which considerably increased the number of casualties.

### *7.2.1. Russian Fighters in Donetsk*

There is considerable evidence that the group which attacked Donetsk Airport included many fighters from Russia. One day before the events, trucks with heavily armed men gathered for a separatist rally in central Donetsk. During this rally, a CNN (2014) correspondent spoke to two men who said that they were "volunteers" from Chechnya and confirmed that they had been "Kadyrovtsi" (militants under the command of Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov) in the past. A few days after the operation, on 29 May, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) openly acknowledged that a major part of the casualties of 26 May were, in fact, Russian citizens. DNR "Prime Minister" Aleksandr Boroday said in a press conference that about 60 separatist fighters had died and that 34 bodies of killed Russian citizens had been returned to Russia (Boroday and Pushylin 2014 at 17:53 and 13:25). Further evidence of Russian involvement emerged when fighters who had joined the Donetsk separatists from Russia and taken part in the 26 May operation talked about the events. One detailed account was published by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Gasparyan and Shakirov 2014) and another one by pro-separatist blogger El-Murid (2014). Although these two sources hold diametrically opposed views on the conflict, both eyewitness accounts are largely consistent. According to both, a group of 100-120 "volunteers," who had been recruited on social media, gathered in mid-May in an undisclosed location in Russia's Rostov Region. They received about two weeks

of military training from unidentified instructors and entered Ukraine a few days before the battle, led by a man with the nom-de-guerre Iskra.

There is additional evidence that the presence of fighters from Russia in and around Donetsk was not limited to the case of the Iskra Detachment. In his 29 May press conference, Boroday stated that the number of Russian “volunteers” in the ranks of the DNR “as of today” was “at least 200” (Boroday and Pushylin 2014 at 16:40). Subsequent first-hand reports by journalists suggest that at least some of these fighters were from Russia’s North Caucasus and had significant previous combat experience. On 1 June, the DNR’s Vostok Battalion allowed a group of journalists to visit their training camp near Donetsk. Vostok was the dominant separatist unit in Donetsk at the time. Its commander was former Ukrainian special forces officer Oleksandr Khodakovskiy, who had also played a coordinating role in the Donetsk Airport operation. Following the visit to Vostok’s training camp, journalist Max Avdeev (2014) reported that there were “far more locals” than foreign fighters at the camp but that “the foreigners are worth ten local volunteers.” He further reported that the foreign fighters he met were Ossetians who had fought in the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. This is consistent with the report of journalist Kateryna Serhatskova, who took part in the same visit. She reported that a leading figure in the Vostok Battalion was an Ossetian with the nom-de-guerre Mamay, who showed the journalists around the camp. Mamay was happy to pose for a photograph with eight other Ossetian “volunteers” (Serhatskova 2014). Mamay is also mentioned by journalist Mark Franchetti, who accompanied the Vostok Battalion on 5 June during a failed attack on the Marynivka border checkpoint 80 km southeast of Donetsk. According to Franchetti (2014), Mamay “rarely leaves Khodakovskiy’s side.” More information on Mamay became available when he died at the frontline near Donetsk on 17 May 2018. A day after his death, the DNR “Information Ministry” published a video captioned as “the last interview with Oleg Mamiyev (nom-de-guerre Mamay)” (Mamiyev 2018). In this interview, Mamay confirmed that he was from Vladikavkaz in Russia’s Republic of North Ossetia and that he had fought in the 2008 war with Georgia. He said he had left Vladikavkaz for Donetsk on 28 April 2014 after meeting three unidentified men from Donetsk, who were travelling Russia’s Caucasus republics in search for volunteers.

The evidence cited above suggests that it is *highly likely* that irregular fighters from Russia, many of whom came from Russia's Caucasus republics, arrived in Donetsk from late April or early May onwards. It is also *highly likely* that at least some of these fighters had gained combat experience during the recent wars in Chechnya and Georgia. Moreover, it is *almost certain* that more Russian fighters arrived with the Iskra Detachment in late May, which had received combat training on Russian territory before entering Ukraine. It is also *almost certain* that the failed 26 May attack on Donetsk Airport was mainly carried out by this detachment and *highly likely* that the number of Russian fighters in Donetsk still exceeded 200 by the end of the month. At the same time, it is *highly likely* that the leading role of Russian fighters in DNR units also extended to combat operations other than the Donetsk Airport attack. The most important examples from the time period in question are the Vostok Battalion's 23 May clash with the pro-Ukrainian Donbas Battalion in the town of Karlivka (Semenchenko 2014) and Vostok's 5 June attack on the Marynivka border checkpoint (Franchetti 2014). Even if Russian fighters were outnumbered by locals during these operations, their superior average combat experience *highly likely* meant that they were in a position of authority. After all, the most recent opportunity for Ukrainian citizens to engage in armed combat was the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan.

The central role of fighters from Russia in the separatist units fighting Ukrainian forces around Donetsk raises the question to what extent Russian volunteers can be considered state organs. The same question arose in chapter five as the result of Igor Girkin's claim that he had planned the Sloviansk operation himself and nobody had forced him to go. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that the Russian citizens fighting in Donetsk in May were deployed to the Donbas as regular members of the Russian security apparatus. Hence, it has to be assumed that their own personal motives were a necessary condition for their involvement in the war. However, it is entirely possible to be a volunteer with great enthusiasm for a war's cause and a state actor at the same time. Many regular soldiers choose to serve rather than being conscripted. Like in the case of Girkin's group, the key question is not whether the Russian volunteers in Donetsk had been forced to go but whether the Russian state's actions can be considered the primary cause of their presence. The reasoning here is similar to the reasoning in chapter five, and it leads to the same conclusion. Even under the assumption



that the recruitment and training of volunteers in Russia was conducted by private actors like veteran organizations, it can be considered *almost certain* that the Russian state was aware of these activities and could have stopped them. Recruiting a large number of Russian citizens, providing them with combat training, and sending them across the border would not have been possible without the approval of the authorities. Throughout the 2000s, the Kremlin increased the effectiveness of its security apparatus and successfully restricted civil society activity not compatible with its policy objectives. The current Russian regime neither lacks the capacity nor the determination to take action against undesirable paramilitary activity on its territory. Against this backdrop, the Kremlin's permissiveness towards paramilitary recruitment of Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine is more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the fact that volunteers were found.

Therefore, the evidence discussed so far turns the burden of proof in relation to the Donetsk area against H1. It increases the probability of H2 to *likely* and reduces the probability of H1 to *unlikely*. An important remaining source of uncertainty, however, is the question to what extent the Russian state maintained its control over the fighters once they had crossed the border and continued to be the primary cause of their actions. In the following section, I will discuss evidence that reduces this uncertainty.

### 7.2.2. Boroday and Surkov

Russian involvement in the armed clashes around Donetsk in late May 2014 was not limited to the presence of experienced Russian paramilitary foot soldiers. It also extended to the command structures in charge of the separatist units. *Smoking-gun* evidence for this is an October 2017 speech by Aleksandr Boroday at a gathering of the "Union of Donbas Volunteers" in Moscow (Boroday 2017; Butusov 2019). In this context, it is important to note that Boroday himself is a Russian citizen with close links to Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev (see chapter five), who assumed the role of DNR "prime minister" on 16 May 2014 and returned to Russia in August. In his October 2017 speech, Boroday identified the leader of the Iskra Detachment – which had arrived in Donetsk from Russia in late May 2014 and played a leading role in the 26 May attack of Donetsk Airport – as Boris Sysenko. According to Boroday, Sysenko was a "retired intelligence

officer” with the rank of lieutenant colonel, who died during the battle at the airport. Boroday said that he himself had instructed Sysenko with the formation of the Iskra Detachment before leaving Russia to become DNR “prime minister.” In addition to Sysenko, the Detachment’s leadership included two other “retired intelligence officers,” called Yura and Sergey. Moreover, Boroday blamed Vostok Battalion Commander Oleksandr Khodakovskiy for the separatists’ defeat at Donetsk Airport. Boroday claimed that Khodakovskiy had carried out the operation against his will:

Already back then, Aleksandr Sergeevich [Khodakovskiy] was well connected. I’ll be frank, he contacted my superiors in the leadership of the Russian Spring. Don’t get any ideas, this was not the Presidential Administration, not [Russian Presidential Adviser] Vladislav Surkov, not Russian Federation state officials. I can’t [inaudible]. Nevertheless, he received approval for this operation (Boroday 2017 at 12:00).

Particularly telling in this context is Boroday’s admission that, even though he was the “prime minister” of a self-proclaimed republic, the combat operations of this republic’s units were subject to the approval of unnamed “superiors.” Considering the Kremlin’s official denial of its participation in the Donbas conflict, it is a matter of course that Boroday denies any affiliation of these superiors with the Russian state. However, five considerations suggest that this denial is not only *almost certainly* a lie, but *highly likely* even a tongue-in-cheek confirmation of the contrary. Firstly, before he came to the Donbas as DNR “prime minister,” Boroday had played a coordinating role in the 12 April occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk – *almost certainly* on behalf of the Russian state (see chapter five). Secondly, leaked emails sent to one of Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov’s accounts, which are *highly likely* authentic, contain a message from 13 May 2014 with a list of suggested members for a new DNR “Government” (Digital Forensic Research Lab 2016; Hosaka 2019, 758; Shandra and Seely 2019, 26). The field for the post of “prime minister” was left blank. Three days later, a new DNR “Government” was formed – under the leadership of Boroday and with eight of the eleven people from the list in the suggested positions (Ostrov 2014n). Thirdly, on 16 June 2014, a Russian news website quoted Boroday as saying that he has “known Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov for a long time” (Aktualnyye Kommentarii 2014). Fourthly, an unnamed separatist activist from Donetsk told Russian sociologist Maksim Aljukov that Boroday introduced himself as Surkov’s envoy upon his arrival in Donetsk (Aljukov 2019, 127). Fifthly, the MH17 Joint Investigation Team (JIT 2019a; 2019b) verified and published two

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intercepted phone conversations between Boroday and Surkov from early July 2014. The cordial tone of these conversations suggests that the two men know each other well. Moreover, their detailed discussion of various aspects of the situation in the Donbas suggests that they have been talking about DNR affairs on a regular basis. In June 2021, Boroday and Surkov gave a joint YouTube interview, in which they gave the impression that they were good friends. During this interview, Surkov refused to confirm the authenticity of the intercepted conversations published by the JIT but confirmed that he and Boroday had been in contact in summer 2014 (Surkov and Boroday 2021 from 15:50).

Added to the evidence regarding the presence of Russian fighters, Boroday's (2017) statement and his documented links to Surkov further increase the probability of H2 in relation to the escalation of fighting around Donetsk in late May 2014. It is *highly likely* that the chain of command which Boroday described in the context of the Donetsk Airport operation reached far into the Russian state apparatus and had been in place at least since his 16 May appointment as DNR "prime minister." This implies that the Russian state did not only permit the influx of trained irregular fighters from Russia to Donetsk, but, at least from mid-May onwards, also coordinated the actions of their units. This assessment applies not only to the 26 May Donetsk Airport operation but to all combat activity of Donetsk-based separatist forces in late May and early June 2014. As result, the probability of H2 in relation to these events increases to *highly likely* while the probability of H1 decreases to *highly unlikely*.

### **7.3. Luhansk City: Where Wagner Meets Orion**

Parallel to the escalation of fighting in Donetsk Region, the city of Luhansk also witnessed separatist attempts to consolidate control over the city's surroundings by attacking facilities of Ukraine's security apparatus. From the separatists' perspective, these operations were a success. Ukrainian forces either withdrew, were disarmed and demobilized, or joined the separatists. On 28 May 2014, separatist forces stormed a base of the Ukrainian National Guard in a southeastern suburb of Luhansk. It came to a shootout in which one Ukrainian serviceman died. The Ukrainian authorities also claimed that several separatist fighters were killed (LB.ua 2014b; Memorybook.org.ua n.d.c). A Russian state TV correspondent reported from the scene that "there is at least one death on either

side” (LifeNews 2014c). On 29 May, separatist forces attacked a National Guard depot in Oleksandrivsk, a northwestern suburb of Luhansk. The depot caught fire and both sides had to withdraw. No casualties were reported. Separatist forces claimed that they detained several Ukrainian servicemen, which the National Guard denied (Bozhko 2014; LifeNews 2014d). More serious fighting occurred during the first four days of June when separatist forces besieged the Luhansk headquarters of the Ukrainian Border Service in a southwestern suburb of the city. Ukrainian forces withdrew on 4 June with four injured servicemen. They claimed that about ten separatist fighters had died (Zhyrokhov 2016c); the separatists admitted six losses (yadocent 2014). The events of early June also affected Luhansk’s civilian population and included potential violations of international humanitarian law. Russian state TV footage of the separatists’ siege of the border service headquarters clearly shows that separatist forces were attacking the base from adjacent residential areas (YouTube 2014aw). On the other hand, the Regional State Administration building in central Luhansk and the park in front of it were hit by missiles on 2 June. No military units were present at the site of the attack at the time. According to separatist sources, eight people died and 28 were injured (yadocent 2014). Although the Ukrainian authorities denied responsibility, there is consensus among both pro-Ukrainian and pro-separatist open source investigators that the attack was carried out by a Ukrainian Mi-25 jet, which was filmed launching missiles over Luhansk on the same day (Stopfake.org 2014; Giuretis 2014; Putin@war 2014; ds\_mok 2014).

Fighting escalated further towards mid-June. A first separatist attempt to attack Ukrainian paratroopers holding Luhansk Airport failed on 10 June. Sources in the Ukrainian Military claimed that one separatist was killed and 14 injured (TSN 2014c). Four days later, however, the separatists shot down a Ukrainian IL-76 cargo plane that was approaching the airport, carrying 40 soldiers and 9 crew members, all of whom died (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.d). This incident was the largest loss of life in a single day for the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the conflict so far. On 17 June, the Ukrainian Armed Forces sustained additional casualties while trying to advance towards Luhansk from the north and clashing with separatists between the towns of Shchastia and Metalist (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.e; Novosti Donbassa 2014m). These events of early to mid-June consolidated separatist control over the city of Luhansk and defined the airport, located 17 km

south of the city centre, and the area north of Luhansk towards the Siverskyi Donets river as battlefields for the coming months.

### *7.3.1. Paramilitaries and Mercenaries in Luhansk*

Like in the case of Donetsk, there is evidence that paramilitary fighters from Russia were present in Luhansk in late May to early June 2014. In autumn 2017, the SBU published a presentation claiming that it had established the identities of 72 Russian mercenaries who had entered Luhansk Region on 29 May 2014 and were responsible for the downing of the Ukrainian IL-76 on 14 June. It claimed that these men acted on behalf of Russia's intelligence agencies and that they were part of the Wagner Group – an unregistered Russian private military company (SBU 2017). This group's operations in Syria and several African countries gained global media attention more recently (Hauer 2018; Lee 2020; Sukhankin 2020a; 2020b). The SBU's claims regarding the Wagner Group's presence in Luhansk are corroborated by three other sources.<sup>29</sup> The first source is Yevstafiy Botvinyev, a Russian mercenary who gave an interview to a Russian news website in May 2018. Botvinyev claimed that he came to Donetsk on 23 May 2014 and later moved on to Luhansk, where he met the Wagner Group's leader, Dmitriy Utkin (nom-de-guerre Wagner), who arrived in June with a group of 80 men (Botvinyev and Dolgareva 2018). Secondly, an article by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from March 2018 cites three anonymous Wagner commanders, who claim that two groups of mercenaries consisting of "up to 250 men" gathered in Rostov-on-Don and moved on to the Donbas in June 2014. One of the groups was led by Dmitriy Utkin and later adopted Utkin's nom-de-guerre Wagner (Khasov-Kassiya 2018). Finally, a blogger with the username Mikhail Utov (2019) found several social media profiles under the names of Wagner mercenaries, who, according to the SBU, died in Luhansk Region in July and August 2014. Some of the screenshots of their accounts feature pictures posted by the men's relatives showing the characteristic black-cross medals that the Wagner Group sends to the families of mercenaries who died abroad (Leviev 2017a; 2017b; Nazarova and Barabanov 2018; Utov 2019). Moreover, the funeral of Vladimir Kalmanov, one of the men on the SBU's list, was covered in a local

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<sup>29</sup> I would like to thank Sergey Sukhankin for drawing my attention to these three sources. I was made aware of them through his Jamestown Foundation report on the activity of Russian private military companies in Ukraine (Sukhankin 2019).

TV news report in his hometown of Krymsk in Russia's Krasnodar Region. In this report, the presenter mentioned that Kalmanov had fought in Syria before joining the separatists in Ukraine (Elektron-Media 2014).

In addition to the Wagner Group's reported activities, the identity of two other Russian "volunteers" who played a leading role in the fighting north of Luhansk on 17 June has been established in a Russian courtroom. The two men appeared as witnesses for the prosecution during the trial against Ukrainian volunteer battalion member Nadia Savchenko, who had been captured by separatist forces near the town of Metalist on 17 June. Subsequently, Savchenko was brought to Russia and put on trial for the alleged killing of a Russian war correspondent. Shortly after her arrest on the battlefield on 17 June, she was filmed by Yegor Ruskiy, who later testified against her in court (Ruskiy 2018; Ruskiy and LifeNews 2018; Mediazona 2015a). Between his involvement in Ukraine and his court appearance, Ruskiy featured in a local TV report in his hometown of Ukhta in Russia's Komi Republic. In this report, the presenter disclosed that Ruskiy was a Russian Army veteran who fought in the 2008 war against Georgia (Planeta Novostey 2014). The other man who testified in court against Savchenko was Sergey Moiseyev. There is no further information about his background on openly available source, but he confirmed during the trial that he was a Russian citizen, who fought with the Luhansk separatists on 17 June 2014 (Mediazona 2015b).

In sum, the evidence discussed above suggests that it is *highly likely* that more than 100 paramilitary fighters from Russia, some of whom were mercenaries associated with the Wagner Group, joined the separatist forces in Luhansk Region in June 2014. It is also *highly likely* that these fighters used their superior combat experience to play a leading role in the combat operations at Luhansk Airport on 14 June and north of Luhansk on 17 June. Moreover, considering that Russian paramilitary fighters with combat experience started to arrive in Donetsk already between late April and early May, it is *likely* that at least some of their Luhansk counterparts were already present for the first smaller combat operations in Luhansk in late May. Analogous to the case of Donetsk, this evidence flips the balance of probability between H1 and H2, which means that the former becomes *unlikely* while the latter becomes *likely* – at least for the

events of mid-June. In the case of the first series of armed clashes in Luhansk in late May and early June, both H1 and H2 could be considered a *realistic possibility* at this stage.

### 7.3.2. Orion, Elbrus, and Pavel Karpov

Another similarity to the case of Donetsk is evidence that separatist militias in and around Luhansk were supervised by two Russian intelligence officers and a political consultant from Moscow. Like in the case of Donetsk, this evidence further increases the probability of H2. In his May 2018 interview, Russian mercenary Yevstafiy Botvinyev said that his group as well as the Wagner Group mercenaries who he met in Luhansk were not under the command of the local separatist leadership. Instead, he claimed that the mercenaries and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) "Defence Minister" Ihor Plotnytskyi both reported to the same superior – a man with the codename "Andrey Ivanovich" (Botvinyev and Dolgareva 2018). A variant of the same codename also features in the writing of an anonymous Russian "volunteer," who claimed that he offered logistical support for the Luhansk separatists from the very beginning of the conflict. According to this person's account, a Russian intelligence officer called "Andrey Ivanych," who was known for his "high-pitched voice," approved Plotnytskyi's appointment as LNR "defence minister" in late May in the first place (Nemezida-LNR 2016). A person captioned as "Andrey Ivanovich" with a distinct high-pitched voice also features in an SBU (2014e) phone intercept and a JIT (2016d) call for witnesses in the context of the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. According to the SBU and the JIT, the person in question was a Russian intelligence officer, who used "Andrey Ivanovich" as well as "Orion" as pseudonyms. In 2018, the Bellingcat research collective succeeded in establishing Andrey Ivanovich Orion's identity. Bellingcat searched for evidence in leaked Russian telephone, car registration, and residential address databases. On the basis of this research, Bellingcat concluded "with a very high degree of certainty" that Orion is, in fact, Oleg Vladimirovich Ivannikov, a Russian GRU officer who also used the fake identity of Andrey Ivanovich Laptev (Rakuszitzky et al. 2018). While it is not possible to verify the origin and reliability of the leaked data used, the report thoroughly explains every step of the investigation in a transparent manner. At the same time, Bellingcat has an impressive track record of conducting high-quality investigations. For these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that their

identification of Andrey Ivanovich Orion as Oleg Vladimirovich Ivannikov is *highly likely* correct.

In addition to Ivannikov-Laptev, the presence of two other men in Luhansk in early to mid-June points at Russian state control over the LNR leadership and its military. In both cases, the initial lead is the case of Nadia Savchenko. Firstly, during the trial against Savchenko, a separatist fighter with the nom-de-guerre Ilim presented his account of the 17 June events to Russian journalist Ilya Azar (2016). In this interview, Ilim mentions in passing that, after Savchenko had been arrested, her belongings were handed over to a person with the codename Elbrus, who was an “FSB adviser to the LNR authorities.” In April 2020, Bellingcat (2020a) published a report on Elbrus, drawing on open source material as well as leaked Russian databases. The report concluded that Elbrus was the codename of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Colonel Igor Anatolyevich Yegorov, who was the FSB counterpart of GRU officer Ivannikov in Luhansk in summer 2014. Secondly, Nadia Savchenko claimed during her trial that a Russian political consultant called Pavel Karpov had organized her transfer from Luhansk to Russia. Karpov’s presence is also remembered by local Luhansk journalists, who say that he summoned them to the Luhansk Regional State Administration on 10 June 2014 to demand their loyalty to the LNR authorities (Dobrov 2015). After Savchenko’s allegation, the Russian news magazine *Kommersant Vlast* contacted Karpov, who denied any involvement in the Savchenko case but confirmed that he had spent time in Luhansk in Summer 2014 (Tumanov 2016). Additional research by *Kommersant Vlast* and Luhansk anti-separatist newspaper *Realnaya Gazeta* revealed that Karpov was well-connected in Russian nationalist circles (Dobrov 2015; Tumanov 2016). In 2012, for example, he appeared with future DNR “Prime Minister” Aleksandr Boroday at a roundtable discussion hosted by the extreme-right-wing newspaper *Zavtra* (Karpov and Boroday 2012). Moreover, *Realnaya Gazeta* found evidence in publicly available Russian databases that Karpov was a board member of a pro-Kremlin youth organization that received a total of 10 million roubles of government grants in 2012 (Dobrov 2015). Until at least Autumn 2018, he was also a member of the Moscow Public Chamber – an advisory organ for the Moscow City authorities consisting of selected state-approved civil society representatives (Moscow Public Chamber 2018).



The evidence cited above suggests that it is *highly likely* that Russian GRU officer Oleg Ivannikov was in a position of authority in relation to the military units of the LNR in Luhansk by mid-June 2014. It is *likely* that Ivannikov had been in this position at least since late May and approved the appointment of Ihor Plotnytskyi as LNR “defence minister.” Furthermore, it is *highly likely* that, by mid-June, FSB officer Igor Yegorov and political consultant Pavel Karpov – an associate of DNR “Prime Minister” Boroday – had joined Ivannikov. Although there is no evidence of Yegorov’s and Karpov’s presence in Luhansk before mid-June, it is a *realistic possibility* that they assumed their respective roles earlier.

Added to the evidence regarding Russian mercenaries in Luhansk, the evidence relating to Orion (Ivannikov), Elbrus (Yegorov), and Karpov further increases the probability of H2 in relation to the events in Luhansk. As a result, it is *highly likely* that the actions of the Russian state were the primary cause of the 14 June IL-76 downing at Luhansk Airport and the 17 June fighting north of Luhansk. The evidence for Russian involvement prior to mid-June remains weaker. Nevertheless, after the second stage of updating, it is *likely* that the same causal mechanism applies to the first series of armed clashes in Luhansk in late May and early June.

#### **7.4. Small-Town Luhansk: Don Cossack Territory**

Luhansk and its immediate surroundings were not the first part of Luhansk Region to experience larger armed clashes. On 22 May, separatist units blocked the advance of Ukrainian forces at a bridge across the Siverskyi Donets river near the town of Rubizhne, 80 km northwest of Luhansk. The Ukrainian units were moving towards the town of Lysychansk but were unable to cross the bridge and also found the way back blocked with felled trees and angry local residents. What followed were hours of armed clashes alternating with negotiations. In the end, the Ukrainian units were allowed to retreat the way they came. By then, three Ukrainian soldiers were dead and at least two injured (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.b; Zhyrokhov 2016b). The separatists admitted the death of ten fighters (Shapovalov 2014). In early June, a third hotspot of fighting appeared in the far south of Luhansk Region near the Russian border. The Border Service of Ukraine reported attacks on its units near the village of Diakove on 30 May and 4 June.

According to the Ukrainian authorities, two attackers died and one was injured in the 4 June attack (LB.ua 2014c; 2014d). The local mayor reported further intense armed clashes near the village on 12-13 June (Glavkom 2014).

#### *7.4.1. Ataman Nikolay Kozitsyn and the “Cossack National Guard”*

While some uncertainty remains about Russia’s role in the armed clashes near Rubizhne, there is clear evidence linking the clashes in the south of Luhansk Region to the Russian state. The repeated attacks on the Russian-Ukrainian border near Diakove can be attributed to Russian Don Cossack leader Nikolay Kozitsyn. According to Kozitsyn’s (2016) own account published on the website of his “Cossack National Guard,” he led a group of Don Cossacks that went to Ukraine on 27 April and took control of the town of Antratsyt, 18km north of Diakove. Russian historian and Cossack expert Yuriy Soshin (2017), on the other hand, claims that Kozitsyn and his men entered Ukraine on 3 May on two trucks “armed with light weapons and a ZU-23-2 antiaircraft cannon.” Either way, it is undisputed that Kozitsyn and his men had arrived by 5 May, when videos showing three trucks driving past cheering locals in the centre of Antratsyt appeared on YouTube. Two of the trucks were carrying armed men wearing papakhas – fur hats characteristic of Cossack warriors (YouTube 2014aq; 2014ar). On 31 May, a YouTube channel linked to Kozitsyn’s “Cossack National Guard” posted a video captioned “Shelling of the Diakove Border Detachment” (KazakTV 2014). Moreover, members of the “Cossack National Guard” gathered in Diakove to commemorate the 5-year anniversary of the battle on 12 June 2019 (Antel-Plus Antratsit 2019).

Even though their “Cossack National Guard” was not officially registered with the Russian authorities, it is appropriate to consider Kozitsyn and his subordinates informal Russian state organs. The same reasoning that applies to the Russian fighters around Donetsk city and Luhansk city also applies to Kozitsyn and his men. His paramilitary group was allowed to operate within Russia’s tightly regulated NGO environment. After publicly declaring his support for separatism in Luhansk in early April (see chapter four), he was able to obtain military grade weaponry and travel to the Donbas undisturbed. Moreover, Kozitsyn’s “voluntary” paramilitary intervention in the Donbas, followed by a “voluntary” withdrawal to a quiet life in Russia, strongly resembles the stories of Igor Girkin, Igor Bezler, and

Aleksandr Boroday. All three are Russian citizens who claim to have come to the Donbas on their own initiative. However, chapter five and the present chapter have shown that all three have documented ties to Russian political elites and intelligence services. Given these precedents in Donetsk Region, it is *likely* that similar schemes were behind Kozitsyn's activities in rural Luhansk. For these reasons, the probability of H2 in relation to Kozitsyn's group should be considered *likely* as well.

#### 7.4.2. *Dromov and Mozghoyi*

Regarding the earlier armed clashes northwest of Luhansk, the evidence is more ambiguous. There is some evidence suggesting that some of the separatist fighters present in the so-called "triangle" – the urban agglomeration encompassing Rubizhne, Lysychansk, and Severodonetsk – were linked to Kozitsyn. On 26 May, Kozitsyn told a Russian newspaper that ten Cossacks had died in armed clashes in Luhansk Region. According to Kozitsyn all of these Cossacks were local residents and some were from Rubizhne, Lysychansk, and Severodonetsk (Shapovalov 2014). Moreover, there is evidence that some of the men fighting in Rubizhne were under the command of Pavlo Dromov, who affiliated himself with the pro-Russian Don Cossack movement. The funeral of five separatist fighters who died in Rubizhne on 22 May took place on 24 May in the town of Stakhanov, 50 km south of Rubizhne (YouTube 2014au). Pavlo Dromov was present at the funeral as one of Stakhanov's separatist leaders. A week later, Dromov appeared in Severodonetsk and introduced himself as the commander of the town's separatist forces. He was wearing a papakha (Dromov 2014). Two weeks later, on 16 June, Dromov gave another interview and said that he had just returned from a trip to the south of Luhansk Region, where he and his men had assisted Kozitsyn in the attack on the Diakove border checkpoint (Dromov, Lavin, and Veselovskiy 2014).

Another group of fighters with some documented links to Russia that was present in the area northwest of Luhansk on 22 May was the battalion of Oleksii Mozghoyi. This group arrived in Lysychansk on 20 May and established a base at a local manufacturing plant (Polemika 2014). Previously, it had undergone combat training at a camp which can be geolocated to the south of Luhansk Region near the area of operation of Kozitsyn's Cossacks. On 19 May, the BBC

aired an interview with Mozghovyi, recorded at a “secret training base not far from the Russian border” (BBC News 2014a). The report includes footage of separatist fighters bathing in a lake. In a 2020 interview, Mozghovyi’s former bodyguard, a man with the nom-de-guerre Tavr, mentioned in passing that the training base in question was located at a holiday camp in “Yaseny” in “Sverdlovsk District” (Girkin and Tavr 2020 at 3:03). A “Yaseny holiday camp” next to a lake in Luhansk Region’s southern Sverdlovsk District can be found on the cartographical platform Wikimapia (n.d.). It is located just over a kilometre away from the Russian border near the Dovzhanskyi border checkpoint. There is evidence that this location had been chosen to facilitate military supplies. When the BBC journalist asked Mozghovyi where his men had got their weapons from, Mozghovyi evaded the question and ironically replied that it was Barack Obama (BBC News 2014a at 1:42). Moreover, the BBC journalist noted that he had first met Mozghovyi a month earlier, when the latter “had just returned from meetings with officials in Moscow” (BBC News 2014a at 1:30). Given the proximity of his camp to the Russian border, his evasiveness regarding the origin of his weapons, and his recent trip to Moscow, it is *almost certain* that Mozghovyi received weapons supplies from the Russian state.

Nevertheless, the evidence for connections of Dromov and Mozghovyi’s groups with the Russian state is less clear than in the other cases examined in this chapter. Dromov’s identification with the pro-Russian Don Cossack movement and his mid-June trip to Diakove suggest that he cooperated with Nikolay Kozitsyn. However, even though it is *likely* that Kozitsyn acted on behalf of the Russian state, Dromov was one step removed from him. There is no direct evidence that he was under the command of Kozitsyn or other Russian actors at the time his fighters established footholds northwest of Luhansk. The same is the case for Oleksii Mozghovyi. Even though it is *almost certain* that his group received weapons from Russia before moving to Lysychansk, there is no direct evidence that he and his fighters were controlled by Russian actors.

However, it is reasonable to argue that the evidence for Russian involvement discussed in previous sections of this chapter, combined with the evidence discussed in chapter five, has shifted the initial burden of proof. In light of the strong evidence for Russian interference in other places, the claim that Dromov

and Mozghovyi's groups included fighters from Russia and reported to Russian state actors can no longer be considered particularly extraordinary. At the same time, the assumption that Dromov and Mozghovyi's groups were more independent from Russia than other groups fighting the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the region at the same time is no longer the most parsimonious explanation of events. Hence, the a priori distribution of probabilities between H1 and H2 in relation to Dromov and Mozghovyi's groups should be considered even, if not slightly tilted towards H2. Dromov's ties to Kozitsyn and the location of Mozghovyi's training base combined with his trips to Russia are *straw-in-the-wind* evidence that increases this tilt further. However, because all evidence remains relatively weak and circumstantial, both H1 and H2 should be considered *realistic possibilities* in relation to Dromov and Mozghovyi's groups.

### **7.5. The Role of Locals and Kremlin Infighting**

While the available evidence clearly supports H2, it also highlights two important caveats to Russia's role in the spread of fighting across the Donbas during the time period in question. Firstly, local actors did play an important auxiliary role in the escalation of violence. It is a fact that at least a vocal minority of local residents supported the separatist cause, which meant that Ukrainian units often had to operate in a hostile environment. What is more, it is *highly likely* that most separatist fighters were, in fact, locals. Although these local fighters were ultimately subject to Russian decisions and commands, and most of them had less combat experience than their Russian peers, they provided crucial support for Russia's actions. Like in the case of the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk (see chapter five), this local support was an important albeit secondary condition for the course of events.

Secondly, the findings of the present chapter do not imply Russian control in the sense of a single consolidated chain of command. It is *highly likely* that different actors within the Russian state apparatus entered separate and sometimes even competing relationships with agents on the ground. Strong evidence for this is one of the intercepted phone conversations between Boroday and Surkov, in which Boroday says that he needs "a solution to the problem with Bezler" who is allegedly destabilizing the DNR. Surkov promises to try but says that there is another person in an influential position who disagrees with Boroday's

assessment of the situation (JIT 2019b from 13:35). However, the fact that no open infighting broke out, even though Bezler stayed in Horlivka until November, suggests that Boroday, Bezler, and their respective superiors in Moscow came to some sort of agreement. Moreover, the fact that the influx of fighters from Russia and the activity of separatist groups intensified in the different places described in this chapter at around the same time suggests a certain degree of coordination. It is plausible that the Kremlin gave the go-ahead for further conflict escalation to destabilize the situation in Ukraine around the 25 May presidential election. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Kremlin was following a coherent long-term plan.

In any case, the findings of the present chapter suggest that the Kremlin signalled to its intelligence agencies and other actors in its orbit that they had permission to proceed with their destabilization projects. This would be in line with the principle of *otmashka* which I discussed in chapter five (Galeotti 2020; Grozev 2020; Kashin, Merkulova, and Solomin 2014; Pavlovsky 2016). The informality and implicitness that comes with this outsourcing of violence is supposed to create deniability and make the role of the Russian state more difficult to prove. However, the present chapter has also shown that this practice did not erase all traces of Kremlin involvement. Neither does it reduce Moscow's responsibility for the spread of fighting across the Donbas in late May to mid-June 2014.

## **7.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that the fourth critical juncture of the Donbas conflict – the spread of fighting beyond the conflict's two initial hotspots in late May and early to mid-June 2014 – was primarily the result of Russia's actions. It has illustrated that the critical juncture in question comprised four local episodes of conflict escalation, all of which left a legacy of violence and contributed to the emergence of territorial frontlines in the region. In all four cases, H2 – the hypothesis that the Russian state's actions were the primary cause of conflict escalation – is the most suitable explanation.

1. The 22 May attack on Ukrainian Forces near Volnovakha was carried out by separatist fighters under the command of Russian citizen Igor Bezler, the leader of the separatists in Horlivka. Bezler was *almost certainly* part of the

same network of Russian state agents that was responsible for the occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk on 12 April. Moreover, Russian state institutions *highly likely* provided him with a fake identity before or during his activities in the Donbas. In addition, it is *almost certain* that Bezler was in close contact with Russian intelligence officer Vasiliy Geranin before, during, and after his activities in the Donbas.

2. The 26 May attack on Donetsk Airport was *almost certainly* carried out by a detachment of Russian paramilitary fighters who had gathered and trained on Russian territory before moving to the Donbas. This operation was *almost certainly* approved by Russian state officials. Moreover, it is *highly likely* that experienced paramilitary fighters from Russia also played a leading role in the armed clashes in Karlivka on 23 May and the attack on the Marynivka border checkpoint on 5 June. It is also *highly likely* that these operations were subject to the same chain of command, which led via the DNR's Russian "Prime Minister" Aleksandr Boroday into the Russian state apparatus and included Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov.
3. Russian paramilitary fighters, some of whom belonged to a group which would later become known as the Wagner Private Military Company, *highly likely* played a leading role in conflict escalation around the city of Luhansk in mid-June. This episode involved the 14 June downing of a Ukrainian military transport aircraft at Luhansk Airport and the 17 June battle north of Luhansk and led to unprecedented losses on the Ukrainian side. Moreover, it is *highly likely* that at least two Russian intelligence operatives – Oleg Ivannikov and Igor Yegorov – and one political consultant from Moscow – Pavel Karpov – were in positions of authority in relation to the Luhansk separatists at that time. Regarding earlier incidents of conflict escalation around Luhansk in late May and early June, it is *likely* that at least some fighters from Russia as well as Ivannikov were already present.
4. Fighting in early June near the village of Diakove at the Russian-Ukrainian border in the south of Luhansk Region was led by Russian Cossacks under the command of Nikolay Kozitsyn, who was *likely* acting on behalf of the Russian state. Fighting on 22 May in the town of Rubizhne northwest of

Luhansk involved separatist units under the command of Pavlo Dromov and Oleksii Mozghovyi. The former had links to Kozitsyn's Cossacks while the latter had *almost certainly* received arms supplies from Russia. It is a *realistic possibility* that Dromov and Mozghovyi's groups were informal organs of the Russian state because the large body of evidence demonstrating Russian involvement across the Donbas has shifted the burden of proof. However, the lack of direct evidence for Russian control in the cases of Dromov and Mozghovyi suggests that there also remains a *realistic possibility* that they acted primarily independently.

These findings lead to the overall conclusion that H2 is more closely in line with the available evidence in the context of all four components of the conflict's fourth critical juncture. The only case in which the likelihood of H1 comes close to H2 is the case of the outbreak of fighting northwest of Luhansk. However, this was also the location with the weakest level of separatist control. Ukrainian forces retook Rubizhne, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk in late July 2014 (Svetikov 2017) and remain in control of the area at the time of writing.

The present chapter leaves the possibility open that the events of the conflict's fourth critical juncture were the result of ad hoc decisions in Moscow and not part of a sustained commitment to escalate violence in the Donbas. The following chapter will investigate whether the Kremlin stepped back and let the conflict evolve locally over the summer, or whether it further intensified its involvement. I will find that the latter was the case. Rather than leaving its informal troops to their own devices, Moscow supplied them with the heavy arms they required to turn the Donbas conflict into a full-scale war.



## 8. Tanks and Heavy Artillery

This chapter investigates the fifth critical juncture of the Donbas war – the appearance of tanks and heavy artillery across the conflict zone between mid-June and mid-July 2014. After the armed clashes discussed in chapter seven had established relatively clear frontlines between separatist-controlled areas and areas controlled by Kyiv, the emergence of heavy arms along these frontlines marked the further transformation towards regular warfare. This development had devastating consequences for the region and its inhabitants. The destructive potential of these weapons dramatically increased the number of military and civilian casualties and the damage to the region's infrastructure.

Much of the political messaging focusing on this phase of the conflict is aimed at blaming the opposing sides for civilian casualties. The separatists accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling residential areas, and the Ukrainian leadership accuses separatist forces of using civilians as human shields by placing artillery systems in precisely those areas. While the investigation of potential war crimes related to the use of heavy artillery in the Donbas is extremely important, it is not the primary focus of this chapter. Like my dissertation as a whole, the present chapter investigates the relative importance of domestic and external causes. For this reason, it focuses primarily on the origin of tanks and heavy artillery on the separatist side as the key factor determining the relative importance of domestic and external causes in relation to the critical juncture in question. I will start by discussing the general probability of separatists seizing heavy arms from the Ukrainian military compared to the general probability of arms supplies from Russia. I will then assess the available digital open source evidence surrounding the different instances in which tanks and heavy artillery in separatist hands first appeared across the different battlefields. I will conclude that it is *highly likely* that Russia supplied the vast majority of heavy arms used by the separatists, which means that Russia's role continued to be of primary importance during the critical juncture investigated in this chapter.

The key point of contention that I investigate in the present chapter can be captured in two opposing hypotheses. The first hypothesis assumes that Russia did not step up its involvement in the conflict beyond the level described in the previous chapter. This would not necessarily imply that Russia stopped sending

fighters to the Donbas or that the Kremlin cut its ties with the separatist leadership. However, it would leave this possibility open by suggesting that the Kremlin refused to get more deeply involved and left its irregular fighters in the Donbas to their own devices. The second hypothesis, on the other hand, would reaffirm the ties between the Russian state and the separatists documented in the previous chapters. It suggests that, rather than distancing itself from the paramilitaries fighting on its behalf, the Kremlin took its involvement to the next level by dramatically increasing their military capacities. As a result, the primary actors responsible for the conflict's further escalation in the context of the present critical juncture would be the Ukrainian military on the one hand and the Russian military on the other.

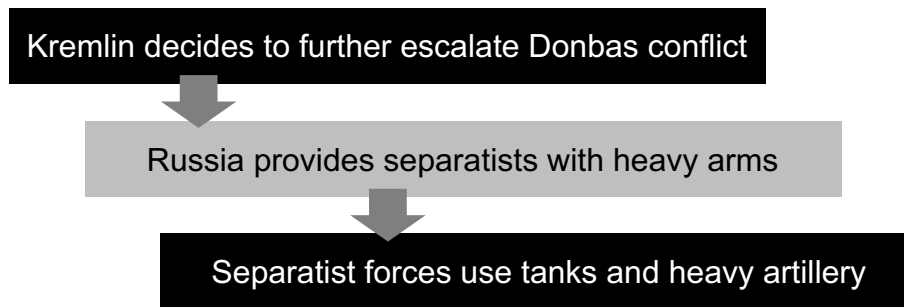
H1: Separatist forces in the Donbas gained access to tanks and heavy artillery as the result of an internal conflict dynamic because they captured these arms from the Ukrainian military.

**Figure 1. Internal Escalation Mechanism**



H2: Separatist forces in the Donbas gained access to tanks and heavy artillery as the result of Russian arms deliveries.

**Figure 2. External Escalation Mechanism**



On first sight, Oscam's razor and the Sagan standard suggest that H1 is the more likely hypothesis. Separatist forces seizing heavy arms from military facilities in areas under their control or from advancing Ukrainian forces appears like a more parsimonious and less extraordinary explanation than heavy arms deliveries from Russia. Moreover, H1 receives an additional initial boost from a report by the ARES arms and munitions consultancy (Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones 2014). This report found that the heavy arms observed in the hands of Donbas separatists in early Summer 2014 comprised Soviet-era models that were part of both the Russian and the Ukrainian arsenal. While this observation does not rule out the possibility that the separatists received this military hardware from Russia, it is a passed *hoop test* for H1 and strengthens the *prima facie* plausibility of this hypothesis.

### **8.1. Few Places to Rob: The Unavailability of Ukrainian Heavy Arms**

However, three other pieces of circumstantial evidence cancel out this head start for H1 and create an even balance of probabilities between the two hypotheses. The first piece consists of media reports on the geographical distribution of Ukraine's military units before the conflict. Maps produced by both Ukrainian and Russian media outlets indicate that the presence of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Donbas was weak. In March 2014, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, Harvard University Russia analyst Dmitry Gorenburg (2014) published two maps showing the locations where Ukrainian military units were stationed. He took these maps from a Russian military blog, but their inscriptions suggest that they were originally published by Russian daily newspaper *Kommersant* and its weekly sister publication *Kommersant Vlast*. The maps show that the units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces were generally concentrated in the west and centre of the country. What is more, they do not show any tank or artillery units in the Donbas at all. Similarly, a map published by *The Ukrainian Week* (2014)

illustrates the geographical distribution of Ukrainian military units in 2012 and shows an air defence artillery regiment as the sole unit stationed in the Donbas. Of course, it must be kept in mind that these maps were created by media sources and are not exhaustive. For example, they do not include the Artemivsk<sup>30</sup> tank depot which was a potential source of heavy arms for the separatists and will be discussed in further detail below. Nevertheless, the maps indicate that the number of potential sources for separatist tanks and heavy artillery within the territories under their control was limited to start with.<sup>31</sup>

The second piece of evidence is the lack of media reports on heavy arms in separatist hands prior to June 2014. Any seizure of military bases and heavy equipment would have been a great success for the separatist movement. Pictures or videos of seized military facilities and Ukrainian tanks under separatist control would have been an important propaganda opportunity. Footage of this kind would have had the potential to boost public confidence in the separatist movement and damage the morale of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. However, before early June, reports of seized Ukrainian equipment were rare. The only notable exception was the seizure of five armoured vehicles and one Nona artillery gun from a Ukrainian military unit in the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area on 15 April (Zhuchkovskiy 2018, 68). In this case, the separatists paraded the captured vehicles through Kramatorsk and Sloviansk and numerous videos showing these vehicles are available online (YouTube 2014an; 2014ao; 2014bv; 2017b). As I argued in the previous chapter, the further escalation of fighting across the region and the seizure of additional Ukrainian military facilities around Luhansk in late May to early June was also subject to intensive media coverage. Keeping the capture of Ukrainian tanks and heavy artillery on these occasions a secret would have been not only undesirable from a propaganda perspective but also difficult in practice. Nevertheless, no additional footage of seized Ukrainian heavy arms emerged in the aftermath of these clashes. This lack of documented instances reduces the probability that separatist forces had seized tanks and heavy artillery

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<sup>30</sup> A town north of Donetsk that was renamed Bakhmut during the Ukrainian authorities' 2016 decommunization initiative. Because, in 2014, all key actors still referred to the town as Artemivsk, I will do so as well to avoid confusion.

<sup>31</sup> The relative lack of military facilities in the Donbas also reflects the fact that Ukraine inherited its military structures from the Soviet Union, which was naturally more concerned with its western border than with the border region between the Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics.

from the Ukrainian Armed Forces before early June. Moreover, reports on Russian state-controlled media also concluded that, as of early June, the Donbas separatists were not in possession of tanks or heavy artillery. Pro-Kremlin newspaper *Izvestiya* reported that, as of 31 May, the separatists' arsenal included only a single heavy artillery gun – presumably the Nona shown in the footage from Kramatorsk and Sloviansk from mid-April – and about 10 armoured vehicles (Petelin and Raskin 2014). Russian state news agency *RIA Novosti* (2014a) reported on 6 June that the separatists were trying to restore an old Soviet tank from a World War II monument. The report claimed that this was the first tank of the separatists, who had previously only captured armoured vehicles from the Ukrainian military.

The third piece of evidence is the military situation in the conflict zone at the time when tanks and heavy artillery first appeared. By early June, the territory in which separatist units could operate freely had reached its all-time maximum. During the course of the month, the Ukrainian response to separatism in the Donbas became more determined. The Kyiv authorities deployed additional forces and pushed the separatists into a defensive position. This became particularly evident in the key hotbed of fighting around Sloviansk. On 6 June, the Ukrainian Armed Forces first confirmed that they had deployed tanks to the Sloviansk area (Segodnya 2014d). On 19 June, Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published a video appeal by Sloviansk separatist commander Igor Girkin. Looking tired and disillusioned, Girkin said that Ukrainian forces were attacking Sloviansk from all sides and that his forces were outnumbered and insufficiently equipped to withstand the attack. He finished by appealing to the Russian authorities to step in (Girkin 2014). On 5 July, Girkin's forces withdrew from the Sloviansk area to Donetsk. The fact that the military tide began to turn in this way from early June onwards decreases the probability that the separatists were able to seize additional Ukrainian military assets in the Donbas. It also reduces the probability that they were able to overrun Ukrainian positions and seize the tanks and heavy artillery that Kyiv deployed to the region in June.

These three pieces of evidence consist of general, high-level observations. For this reason, they cannot increase the probability of H2 far enough to justify the conclusion that most heavy arms under separatist control came from Russia.

However, they neutralize the initial probabilistic advantage of H1 and shift the burden of proof into a more balanced position. This means that, when it comes to the investigation of the origins of particular tanks or heavy artillery under separatist control, neither H1 nor H2 has a head start in terms of the burden of proof. In turn, the following sections will demonstrate that the available evidence relating to such individual items strongly tilts the balance of probabilities towards H2.

## **8.2. From Siberia to the Donbas: The 12 June Tank Convoy**

The first evidence of operational tanks under the control of separatist forces in eastern Ukraine emerged on 12 June. On this day, two videos appeared on YouTube. Both videos show the same convoy of three tanks and two trucks carrying people in camouflage. One of the trucks is towing an artillery gun. The first video's caption claims that it was filmed in the town of Torez,<sup>32</sup> 60 km east of Donetsk (YouTube 2014ba). This can be verified by geolocating the visible array of buildings and trees, which matches Google Earth satellite imagery of a square in the town's centre between Tytova and Nikolaeva Streets. The convoy is driving along the H21 highway from east to west towards Donetsk. The second video's caption points at Makiivka, a town adjacent to the northeast of Donetsk (YouTube 2014az). The distinctive buildings visible in this video make it possible to geolocate it to the intersection between the H21 Highway and Sverdlova Street in the town centre. The convoy continues to drive west towards Donetsk.

The fact that the three tanks are approaching Donetsk from the east is a first *straw-in-the-wind* indicator for their Russian origins. As of early June, the only reports of Ukrainian tank deployments referred to the Sloviansk area north of Donetsk. The only Ukrainian tank depot in the conflict zone that is documented in openly available sources was in Artemivsk, which is also north of Donetsk. Hence, the convoy could only be of Ukrainian origin if it had driven around Donetsk in a giant loop, or if the Ukrainian military had deployed and lost tanks much further east without either side reporting on it. A second piece of *straw-in-the-wind* evidence is the separatists' failure to provide a coherent explanation for

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<sup>32</sup> Before 1964, this town was known as Chystiakove. The Kyiv authorities restored this name during their 2016 decommunization initiative.

the three tanks' origin. On 9 June, a fringe Russian news website cited unspecified social media posts by Luhansk separatists who allegedly reported the capture of three Ukrainian tanks "in a suburb of Luhansk" after "a serious armed clash" with Ukrainian forces (Rossiiskiy Mirotvorets 2014). However, there are no other reports and no footage of armed clashes involving tanks near Luhansk from 9 June or the preceding days. Neither did the separatists provide additional information on the tanks' origins in the days that followed. On 12 June, a separatist spokesperson merely confirmed that the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) had "received" three tanks without providing any further details (RIA Novosti 2014b). Specifying the time and place of their capture and providing evidence of the tanks' origins would have been an easy and effective way to counter allegations of Russian meddling if the tanks had, indeed, been captured from Ukrainian forces.

*Smoking-gun* evidence for the tanks' Russian origin are a series of pictures and a video discovered by pro-Ukrainian investigative bloggers (Koshkin and Sobachkin 2016). The pictures were posted on 12 June 2014 on the social media account of a separatist fighter with the social media pseudonym Georgiy Krymskiy. This account was still active and publicly available at the time of writing. It features numerous pictures of Krymskiy with separatist fighters in 2014 – one picture shows him next to Igor Girkin and Aleksandr Boroday (Krymskiy 2014e). However, it also features newer pictures in different contexts. Some show Krymskiy in the company of what appear to be family members. Others show him partying with friends (Krymskiy n.d.). One picture shows him with Crimean "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov (Krymskiy 2018). Another one shows him wearing a Russian military uniform and the medal "For the Defence of Crimea" (Krymskiy 2015; Nagrady Rossiyskoy Federatsii n.d.). Although Georgiy Krymskiy is probably a pseudonym, the diversity and level of detail of the posted pictures leave only a *remote chance* that they are fake. The four pictures that are important for the present chapter were posted on 12 July 2014 and show Krymskiy and other separatist fighters on a tank (Krymskiy 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2014d). One of the pictures has a geolocation tag from the Donetsk Region town of Snizhne (Krymskiy 2014b), which is located just to the east of Torez. The picture also features a building with a distinct yellow façade. The blogger who discovered the pictures identified a similar yellow façade next to a little square on Lenin Street

in the centre of Snizhne. Moreover, other group photos posted by Krymskiy show features of a nearby industrial plant (Koshkin and Sobachkin 2016). This geolocation is convincing and verifiable through Google Earth.

Krymskiy's photos are important because a video posted on YouTube in autumn 2014 suggests that the tank in question was provided by the Russian Armed Forces. The video shows a tank being loaded onto an An-124 transport aircraft. The caption claims that the video was filmed on 31 May 2014 in Russia's Krasnoyarsk Region. It was posted by an account whose content focuses on aviation and parachuting events in this region (YouTube 2014bu). Ukrainian blogger Askai (2014) argues that the terminal and hangar buildings in the video, indeed, match the Yemelyanovo Airfield in Krasnoyarsk Region. Google Earth imagery of this airfield suggests that this assessment is correct. In addition, Koshkin and Sobachkin (2016) argue that the Yemelyanovo tank features the same stain marks as the tank on Georgiy Krymskiy's pictures from Snizhne. This assessment is convincing as well. Both the video from Yemelyanovo and Georgiy Krymskiy's pictures provide a close-up view of the armour plates on the left-hand side of the tank's body. In both cases, the armour plates feature the same random patterns of stains. There is only a *remote chance* that the same level of similarity could feature on two different tanks. At the same time, it would require significant video editing skills and efforts to seamlessly insert the complex staining pattern from the photos into the video of the tank. There is only a *remote chance* that pro-Ukrainian activists went to such lengths in autumn 2014, then managed to sneak the video into a YouTube account focusing on niche aviation-related content from Krasnoyarsk Region, but then waited until 2016 to reveal the similarity. It is therefore *almost certain* that a tank that had been loaded onto a transport aircraft in Siberia was photographed in Ukraine's Snizhne on 12 June 2014.

It remains unclear whether this tank is one of the three tanks that were filmed driving through neighbouring Torez or whether it is a fourth tank that went elsewhere. Either way, however, this tank's Russian origin, combined with the *straw-in-the-wind* evidence discussed above, suggests that it is *highly likely* that the three tanks and the howitzer that were filmed on the move to Donetsk on 12 June were all Russian.



### **8.3. Burning Vegetables: The 13 June Grad Attack on Dobropillia**

Evidence that the first Russian heavy arms deliveries to the Donbas in mid-June were not limited to tanks appeared in the aftermath of a missile attack on the town of Dobropillia, 55 km southwest of Sloviansk. On the morning of 13 June, a local news website reported that missiles had hit a vegetable market in Dobropillia and killed a security guard (Salnychenko 2014). This report is consistent with Google Earth satellite imagery from early July 2014, which shows four holes in the roof of a building in an industrial area at the southwestern end of town. On the crowdsourced annotated cartographic platform Wikimapia, this building is marked as the “Perspektiva vegetable market.” Moreover, the Google Earth imagery shows a burned-down side building and at least 19 impact craters in fields to the south and west of the site. The news report from 13 June also cites local residents who report ongoing fighting between Ukrainian and separatist forces near Nykanorivka, about 15 km east of the impact site. According to these residents, the separatist forces had approached the area from the northeast (Salnychenko 2014). In the early afternoon of 13 June, another news website published pictures of a damaged Grad multiple rocket launcher that is missing 26 of its 40 rockets (Segodnya 2014e). The array of buildings visible in one of the pictures makes it possible to geolocate it to the northeastern corner of the clay storage site at the Mertsalove railway station, just west of Nykanorivka. The same Grad launcher at the same location is visible in a video published on the same day. In this video, a Ukrainian serviceman tells a journalist that two separatist Grad launchers opened fire from this location, presumably targeting a Ukrainian checkpoint on the road between Dobropillia and Sviatohorivka but hitting the vegetable market instead. One of the launchers was withdrawn from the area while the other one broke down and was abandoned (YouTube 2014bb). This narrative is consistent with another video posted on YouTube on the following day, which can be geolocated to a location near the southwestern corner of the main building complex at the Mertsalove railway station. Two salvos of missile fire can be heard on the footage and, during the second salvo, at least twenty missiles can be seen flying from the direction of the alleged launch site towards the west (YouTube 2014bc). On the basis of this evidence, it can be considered a fact that the Grad missile launcher on the pictures had fired at Dobropillia as part of a failed separatist advance into the area.

Pictures supposed to prove the Russian origin of the abandoned Grad launcher were posted by the Ukrainian activist group Information Resistance (2014) on 14 June. In particular, one photo shows the cover page of a set of vehicle documents, which features a stamp with the Russian language inscription “Military Base 27777.” Another photo shows a faint symbol in the shape of a sliced rhombus inside a square on the launcher’s right door. According to Information Resistance, this symbol is an example of “poorly painted over insignia” which point at the launcher’s original Russian owners. An Internet search of “Military Base 27777” reveals that it is located in Chechnya and, in 2014, was the home of Russia’s 18th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade (Voyskovye Chasti Rossii n.d.). A long blog post on this brigade, published by a Russian military enthusiast in 2011, features pictures of trucks with rhombus-square insignia on their doors. It also features pictures of Grad launchers with a similar camouflage pattern to the launcher that attacked Dobropillia (Mokrushin 2011). Nevertheless, in the absence of additional material, the pictures of the document and the faded sign on the launcher’s door would only be *straw-in-the-wind* evidence for the launcher’s Russian origin, because both are relatively easy to fabricate. The document could have been taken from elsewhere, the camouflage pattern similarity could be a coincidence, and the symbol on the door could have been added after the launcher had been seized by the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

In the present case, however, there is additional evidence that only leaves a *remote chance* that the pictures are fabricated. This evidence consists of a video that was published on 11 June (YouTube 2014ay) but does not feature prominently in the media discussion of the Dobropillia incident. It can be found through a reverse image search of pictures of the Grad launcher near Dobropillia. One of the search results leads to the Lost Armour project – a website documenting pictures of destroyed or damaged military hardware in the Donbas. A user comment on this page from October 2015 contains the link to the video and suggests that it might show the same Grad launcher (Lost Armour 2015). The video shows three trucks driving through a location captioned as Luhansk (YouTube 2014ay). The slope and bend in the road in combination with the fence and the buildings next to it, make it possible to geolocate the footage to 1<sup>st</sup> Keramichna Street. The trucks are bypassing the city centre on its southern side while driving in an east-west direction. This would be part of a logical route from

the Russian border near Krasnodon<sup>33</sup> to the separatist-controlled areas north of Donetsk. The trucks' backs are covered by tarpaulins, so it is not possible to see what they carry. However, the camouflage pattern on the driver's cabin of the middle truck is identical to the driver's cabin of the Grad launcher that attacked Dobropillia. Moreover, the truck in Luhansk is missing its right rear light and has a towing hitch with two protruding pieces of metal – one silver and one white. These features are also visible on the Grad launcher near Dobropillia. The right-hand door of the middle truck is not visible on the footage from Luhansk, but the left-hand door of the rear truck is marked with a red rhombus-square symbol. It is entirely plausible that the middle truck carried the same symbol on its right-hand door and that an unsuccessful attempt to erase it left it grey and faint as it appears in the picture of the Grad launcher near Dobropillia.

The video from Luhansk turns the footage from Dobropillia into *smoking-gun* evidence. There is only a *remote chance* that Ukrainian forces altered footage of a captured Grad launcher within a day to match a video published two days earlier but then failed to point out the video's existence to the key media sources covering the story. It is therefore *highly likely* that the Grad launcher that fired at Dobropillia and the middle truck of the Luhansk convoy are the same vehicle. What is *almost certain* is that both vehicles are part of the same delivery of military hardware which comprised at least three vehicles that used to belong to Russia's 18th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade.

#### **8.4. Armour Patterns on a Russian Highway: The 19-21 June Tank Convoys**

More evidence of additional Russian tank deliveries to the separatists appeared just over a week later. It consists of a series of four videos which were discovered by Ukrainian blogger Askai (2014). The first video was posted on 20 June and shows two tanks, two armoured vehicles, and three trucks driving past an uncompleted building in a residential area. The video's description specifies its location as Horlivka Division Street in the town of Horlivka, 35 km northeast of Donetsk (YouTube 2014bf). A matching array of an uncompleted building between two residential buildings is clearly visible on Google Earth imagery of

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<sup>33</sup> Now renamed Sorokyne as part the Ukrainian authorities' decommunization initiative. The Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), which controls the town, still refers to it as Krasnodon.

Horlivka Division Street between the intersections with Yaroslavska Street and Zaporizkyi Lane. The video shows a distinct pattern of armour plates on the left-hand side of the tanks' bodies. The first tank features a line of plates which does not fully extend to the tank's rear. The first three plates are placed further apart and further down than the rest. Two single protruding plates are visible above the main row. The second tank has fewer armour plates. They are arranged in a straight line that has a gap towards the rear and only covers a small portion of the tank's side. The same patterns of armour plates are visible on two tanks photographed by Associated Press journalist Dmitry Lovetsky (2014) on 20 June. According to Lovetsky, the picture was taken near the town of Yenakieve, just southeast of Horlivka. This picture is important because it shows that the front tank has a blue number seven painted on its searchlight cover.

The second video shows two different tanks, three armoured vehicles, and three trucks, one of which is towing an artillery gun. The original account which posted the video had been deleted by the time of writing but reposts from 21 June 2014 and from February 2015 are still available (YouTube 2014bg; 2015a). The video's caption claims that it was filmed in Torez on 21 June 2014. The buildings visible on the footage are not specific enough to geolocate the video. However, the video also features a red van with a Donetsk Region numberplate. Moreover, the military vehicles do not carry numberplates or visible insignia, apart from one of the tanks, which is flying an orange and black St. George's flag – a separatist symbol. It also has a blue number ten painted on its searchlight cover, which is similar to the separatist tank observed in Yenakieve and Horlivka. It is therefore *almost certain* that the second video was taken in Donetsk Region and shows military vehicles under separatist control. The tank which is flying the flag has four rows of armour plates which do not fully extend to the front and rear but cover most of its left-hand side. The second tank only features three lone armour plates near the front of its left-hand side.

The third video was posted on 20 June and shows a column of six trucks carrying five tanks next to a major highway. The convoy is accompanied by a police van in the back and a police car and a silver 4x4 vehicle in the front (YouTube 2014be). Despite the low video quality, it is clearly visible that the armour plates on the two rear tanks are a perfect match for the two tanks filmed in Horlivka and

Yenakieve. The armour plate patterns on the two front tanks, on the other hand, are a perfect match for the tanks in the second video. As Askai (2014) points out, the blue stripe on the accompanying police vehicles matches the markings of Russia's Military Transport Police. This claim can be verified through a simple Google Image search of the term.

The fourth video shows the first three tank-carrying trucks of the same convoy as well as the 4x4 vehicle and the police car at the convoy's front (YouTube 2014bn). The video was posted on 11 July but its description claims that it was filmed on 19 June on the M4 highway in Russia's Rostov Region. This geolocation can be verified through a road sign indicating a highway exit towards the Rostov Region town of Gornyy that is visible on the video. The road lane layout, the patterns of trees and fields, and the service station next to the highway match Google Earth satellite imagery of the M4 highway exit two kilometres northwest of Gornyy. Moreover, the vehicles' numberplates match the layout of Russian numberplates and the letters RF (Russian Federation) are visible on the police car in front of the convoy. Although this fourth and final video was posted a few weeks after the event, this level of detail and geographical accuracy only leaves a *remote chance* that the geolocation markers were subsequently added to it.

Hence, the four videos discussed suggest that it is *almost certain* that four tanks transported along a highway in Russia's Rostov Region under the supervision of Russian military police were filmed under separatist control in the Donbas on 20 and 21 June. In turn, it is *highly likely* that the fifth tank of the Rostov Region convoy ended up in Ukraine as well and that the armoured vehicles, the trucks, and the artillery gun that accompanied the tanks in Ukraine also came from Russia.

### **8.5. The Artemivsk Tank Depot: An Implausible Source**

The appearance of the 20-21 June tank convoys coincided with a more specific attempt by the Donbas separatists to explain their possession of heavy arms. This attempt focused on a Ukrainian military base in the town of Artemivsk that acted as a storage facility for tanks. The tanks had been out of service for many years and their exact condition remains unclear, but it makes sense to assume that many of them were either still operational or easy to repair. On 19-20 June,

several pro-separatist media outlets claimed that separatist forces had captured the base (Novyy Den 2014; colonelcassad 2014a; Vesti.ru 2014). Although another separatist spokesperson denied this statement shortly after (Vesti.ru 2014), the Artemivsk tank base continued to feature as the supposed key source of captured tanks and heavy artillery in the separatist narrative (see, for example, Interfax 2019).

However, the Ukrainian Armed Forces deny that the separatists ever gained control of the base. Ukrainian military historian Mykhailo Zhyrokhov (2016a) spoke to several soldiers present at the base, who told him about several failed seizure attempts between mid-April and late June. The account of Zhyrokhov's sources is in line with reports published on a local Artemivsk news website on 20 and 27 June in the immediate aftermath of separatist attacks on the tank depot (Pyvovarova 2014a; 2014b). The website's correspondents published pictures of damage to adjacent buildings but reported that the base continued to be under the control of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Moreover, Sloviansk separatist commander Igor Girkin (2015) also confirmed in an interview that separatist forces never captured the Artemivsk base. He claimed that his own men made a first unsuccessful attempt shortly after they first seized Sloviansk. Girkin then said that subsequent attempts to seize the depot were made not by him but by Horlivka separatist commander Igor Bezler, who, rather than capturing any Ukrainian tanks, lost one of his own tanks in the process. Girkin did not specify the origin of Bezler's lost tank, but, given that two tanks of Russian origin were filmed in Horlivka on 20 June, his account is plausible. In any case, the consistent accounts of Ukrainian servicemen, local journalists, and Igor Girkin, combined with the absence of additional evidence to the contrary, leave only a *remote chance* that separatist forces seized any heavy arms from the Artemivsk depot.

### **8.6. The Separatists in Early July: Losing Territory but Gaining Arms**

In early July, the military pressure on the separatists increased further, which made the seizure of tanks and heavy artillery from the Ukrainian Armed Forces even more difficult. On 6 July, the separatists' window of opportunity to seize tanks in Artemivsk closed once and for all. On this day, Ukrainian forces took complete control over the town and the surrounding area (Ukrainska Pravda 2014o). A day earlier, Igor Girkin's forces had abandoned the Sloviansk/

Kramatorsk area north of Artemivsk and withdrawn to Donetsk (Interfax 2014). At the same time, Ukrainian forces advanced along the Russian-Ukrainian border south of Donetsk and reached the southeast of Luhansk Region (Zhyrokhov 2017). In the west of Luhansk Region, preparations began for an offensive that would force separatist units to withdraw from Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in the second half of July (Svetikov 2017).

However, as the military pressure on the separatists increased across the battlefield, so did their arsenal of heavy arms. Three videos posted on YouTube on 4 July show a convoy of five tanks passing through a residential neighbourhood in the northeast of the Luhansk Region town of Krasnodon, about 15 km away from the Izvaryne border crossing (YouTube 2014bh; 2014bj; 2014bi). A precise geolocation is possible because of a distinct little church in a field next to a roundabout with overhead wires for trolleybuses. On 13 July, a video was posted showing a large separatist convoy driving along Oboronna Street in Luhansk towards the north (YouTube 2014bo). Distinct buildings on the footage make a precise geolocation possible. The convoy consisted of five tanks, seven armoured vehicles, one Grad multiple rocket launcher, one truck-mounted anti-aircraft gun, and five towed artillery guns. On 15 July, a video was posted showing three tanks, three Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers, and one armoured vehicle near a petrol station north of Yenakievo (YouTube 2014bp). The tanks have the numbers 35, 38, and 36 painted in white on their searchlight covers. On 16 July, Russian state TV aired a report from a Vostok Battalion base at an undisclosed location “a few kilometres away from Donetsk” (YouTube 2014bq). The footage shows tanks with the numbers 30, 40, and 41 painted on their searchlight covers. It also shows a fourth tank with an illegible number as well as two Nona self-propelled artillery guns. It is possible that the 4 July footage from Krasnodon, the 13 July footage from Luhansk, and the 15/16 July footage from near Donetsk show the same tanks. However, the videos from near Donetsk alone show six distinct tanks. The armour plate patterns of these tanks and the numbers painted on them are different from the tanks filmed in late June. Moreover, it is *likely* that the tanks’ numbers were added by the separatists. Neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian armed forces are known to number their tanks in this way. Hence, it is *likely* that, by mid-July, the separatists had at least

41 tanks at their disposal. In addition, they possessed heavy artillery systems, including at least three Gvozdika howitzers.

There is no *smoking-gun* evidence that links the military hardware of early July to Russia. However, the clear evidence of Russian arms deliveries in mid- and late June and the unfavourable military situation of the separatists in early July have shifted the burden of proof. In the absence of evidence for the Ukrainian origin of separatist hardware, it must be considered *likely* that the separatists obtained their new arms of early July from Russia as well. Moreover, there is additional circumstantial evidence that speaks for a continuation and intensification of Russian arms deliveries in early to mid-July and tilts the overall balance of probabilities even further towards H2. This evidence will be presented in the final three sections of this chapter.

### **8.7. Civil Society's Tanks: Sergey Kurginyan in Donetsk**

On 7 July, Sergey Kurginyan, leader of the Russian Soviet restorationist movement Sut Vremeny<sup>34</sup> visited Donetsk. On this occasion, Kurginyan gave a press conference during which he entered a heated conversation with Donetsk "People's Governor" Pavlo Hubariev and two members of Igor Girkin's group, who had left Sloviansk two days earlier. The separatists complain about a lack of supplies from Russia. Kurginyan argues that such criticism is only partly justified. He admits that heavy arms deliveries organized by "Russian civil society" were initially rare and of poor quality but that "the situation improved significantly over the last two-three weeks" (YouTube 2014bk at 37:40). One of the separatists responds by saying that Girkin's group only received three tanks and three armoured vehicles while holding Sloviansk (YouTube 2014bk at 38:30). Kurginyan agrees that Russian support for the separatist cause is still insufficient and promises additional arms supplies (YouTube 2014bk at 43:00).

It remains unclear to what extent Kurginyan was personally involved in the organization of Russian arms deliveries and to what extent he was able to lobby the Kremlin in this regard. However, it is appropriate to assume that both he and

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<sup>34</sup> Some Sut Vremeni activists had been collaborating with separatist activists in Donetsk as early as April (see chapter four), and some were fighting in leading positions in the Vostok Battalion (YouTube 2014bm).



the separatists he talks to possess a certain degree of insider knowledge about such arms deliveries. At the same time, they all agree that Russian heavy arms deliveries picked up speed in June but need to be increased further in light of the dire military situation. Hence, their discussion further increases the burden of proof for those who argue that supplies of heavy arms for separatist units in early July did not come from Russia. The hypothesis that Russia acted in line with the separatists' pleas and Kurginyans predictions is a more plausible explanation than the hypothesis that Russia suddenly stopped its deliveries while the separatists suddenly started to succeed in seizing Ukrainian arms.

#### **8.8. *Appoint More Russians: The Separatist Administrations in Early July***

Additional evidence that Russia increased rather than decreased its involvement in the Donbas after the withdrawal from Sloviansk were the successive appointments of two Russian citizens to senior positions in both DNR and LNR. In Donetsk, "Prime Minister" Boroday introduced Vladimir Antyufeyev at a 10 July press conference as his new "first deputy prime minister." During the press conference, Antyufeyev confirmed that he had just arrived from Russia, and that he would be responsible for "state security, internal affairs, customs, and the courts" (YouTube 2014bl from 14:15). Antyufeyev's imminent arrival was also mentioned in an intercepted phone conversation between Boroday and Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov from 3 July (JIT 2019b from 10:16). Antyufeyev is a Russian citizen and a former Soviet riot police officer, who was "state security minister" of the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria between 1992 and 2012. According to the Russian news website *Nakanune.ru*, Antufeyev also admitted during an interview on DNR television on 16 July 2014 that he had participated in the Russian takeover of Crimea in March 2014 (Chernyshev 2014). This is consistent with information which the Moldovan investigative journalist collective RISE Moldova obtained from the Ukrainian authorities. According to this information, Antyufeyev travelled to Simferopol on 7 March 2014 (RISE Moldova 2019 at 5:30). Moreover, the journalists found an entry in a Russian company register, which suggests that, since 2013, Antyufeyev had been deputy general director of ODK – a company producing engine parts for the Russian Air Force and Navy (RISE Moldova 2019 from 10:07). Information published by the Russian Aviation Industry Workers Union (2017) confirms this. A report on the union's website on a March 2017 meeting between union officials

and the ODK leadership lists Antyufeyev as an ODR deputy director. The report also includes a photo of Antyufeyev, which proves that the ODR deputy director and the former DNR “first deputy prime minister” are the same person.

In Luhansk, another Russian citizen, Marat Bashirov, was appointed LNR “prime minister.” According to the Russian news website *Gazeta.ru*, Bashirov worked as a senior manager in the company empire of oligarch Viktor Vekselberg and specialized in political communication before his appointment in the Donbas (Dergachev 2014). Like Antyufeyev, Bashirov returned to Russia before the end of 2014 and continued to pursue a career in the orbit of state institutions. As of late 2020, he frequently appears as a political analyst and commentator on Russian state-controlled media (RIA Novosti n.d.; Radio Komsomolskaya Pravda n.d.).

Antyufeyev’s and Bashirov’s appointment to leading positions in the separatist “republics” was *almost certainly* approved by the Russian authorities. Evidence for this is their work for businesses with close links to the Russian state before their time in the Donbas and their successful careers in the orbit of the Russian state after their return. In turn, this further increase in Russian involvement in the DNR and LNR’s administrations is more compatible with a simultaneous increase in Russian weapons deliveries than with a sudden stop of such deliveries in July.

### **8.9. MH17**

An exceptionally well-documented case of a Russian heavy arms delivery in mid-July is the case of the BUK missile launcher that shot down Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the conflict zone. This tragedy is arguably the most scrutinized episode of the Donbas conflict. The death of 298 civilians led to an unprecedented level of political and media attention. At the same time, the case contributed greatly to the rise of journalistic digital open source investigations. In particular, it brought to fame the Bellingcat research collective, which, long before the results of any official investigation, presented evidence that a BUK missile launcher that had entered the region from Russia was responsible for the downing of the aircraft (Allen et al. 2014; Bellingcat 2015d; Allen et al. 2016). Later, the Joint Investigation Committee (JIT), consisting of law enforcement officials and forensic experts from the Netherlands, Australia, Malaysia, and

Ukraine, published several reports that confirmed Bellingcat's conclusions beyond reasonable doubt. It established that flight MH17 had been shot down by a BUK missile launcher belonging to Russia's 53rd Antiaircraft Missile Brigade. The launcher left the brigade's home base near Kursk on 23 June and was brought to a location near the Russian-Ukrainian border near the town of Millerovo. It probably entered Ukraine during the night of 16-17 July and was brought to Donetsk. On 17 July, it drove to a field near Snizhne where it fired the missile that downed the airliner. After the incident, the missile launcher was quickly evacuated back to Russia (JIT 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2018).

It is neither necessary nor appropriate to reassess the large volume of videos showing the missile launcher on its way to and from the launch site in clearly identifiable locations on both Russian and Ukrainian territory in this chapter. The same is the case for the large number of intercepted phone calls discussing the event. There is not even a *remote chance* that this extensive and diverse body of consistent and unequivocal evidence has been fabricated and that Bellingcat and the JIT did not notice this or actively participated in it. At the same time, a BUK is a more sophisticated weapons system than the tanks and artillery systems observed in the Donbas in mid- and late June. Hence, the BUK missile launcher that destroyed MH17 is additional *smoking-gun* evidence that Russia had stepped up rather than scaled down its arms deliveries to the Donbas by mid-July.

### **8.10. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has found overwhelming evidence that the Russian authorities were the key driving force behind the appearance of tanks and heavy artillery under separatist control between June and July 2014. It has established that it is *almost certain* that:

- A tank that was photographed in the Donbas town of Snizhne on 12 June was previously filmed while being loaded onto a Russian military cargo plane in Krasnoyarsk Region.
- A Grad multiple rocket launcher belonging to Russia's 18th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade fired at a vegetable market in Dobropillia on 13 June.

- Four tanks that feature on footage from the Donbas that was published on 20-21 June were previously filmed while being carried along a highway in Russia's Rostov Region with a Russian Military Transport Police escort.
- A BUK missile launcher belonging to Russia's 53rd Antiaircraft Missile Brigade shot down Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the conflict zone on 17 July.

In addition to these vehicles, footage from the Donbas from mid-June to mid-July features at least eight tanks, seven towed artillery guns, three Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers, one Grad multiple rocket launcher, and one truck-mounted antiaircraft gun. Although there is no direct evidence linking these vehicles to Russia, the cumulation of the following pieces of circumstantial evidence makes it *highly likely* that most if not all of them originated from Russia as well:

- The additional items appeared in the same time period as the vehicles that could be traced back to Russia.
- Although the separatists had a clear incentive to use the seizure of Ukrainian equipment for propaganda purposes, they did not provide any plausible explanation, let alone convincing evidence, for the origin of the military hardware discussed above. Their only elaborate justification attempt – the supposed seizure of hardware from the Artemivsk tank depot – is *almost certainly* false.
- Tanks and heavy artillery under separatist control appeared in the Donbas at a time when the Ukrainian military was starting to operate against the separatist forces in a more coordinated manner and pushed them into a defensive position. In these circumstances, the likelihood of separatist forces being able to overrun Ukrainian military units and seizing their equipment was lower than in April or May. And even in April and May, such equipment seizures had been rare and included only one Nona artillery gun and no tanks.
- Russian pro-separatist activist Sergey Kurginyan and separatist fighters openly discussed Russian heavy arms deliveries in Donetsk in early July.

- Russia further increased its direct involvement in the DNR and LNR's administrations in early July through the appointment of Vladimir Antyufeyev and Marat Bashirov – Russian citizens with links to Russia's defence industry and state-controlled media – to senior positions.

At the same time, the separatist forces also had a clear incentive to hide the true scale of their heavy arms supplies from Russia in order to maintain the image of a poorly equipped local insurrection. For this reason, it is *likely* that only a fraction of the supplied tanks and heavy artillery were caught on camera and that supply levels far exceeded the items listed above. One possible indicator of the scale of Russian arms deliveries are the numbers painted on tanks filmed in Donetsk in mid-July (YouTube 2014bq). The number 41 on one of the tanks suggests that, by mid-July, the separatists had received at least 41 tanks. However, this number, as well as the number of heavy artillery items, remains difficult to verify. But whatever the true number may be, for the reasons outlined above, it remains *highly likely* that Russia supplied the overwhelming majority of tanks and heavy artillery guns used by separatist forces in the Donbas in summer 2014. This means that, in the context of the critical juncture examined in this chapter, H2 can be considered confirmed while H1 should be discarded.

However, Russia's role in the escalation of the Donbas war did not end with the supply of tanks and heavy artillery to its own irregular forces. Throughout the course of July, Russia intensified its involvement further. First, it began to shell Ukrainian positions from across the border. Later, it sent regular military units to the Donbas to end the Ukrainian advance. But these events are part of another critical juncture and will be the subject of this dissertation's final empirical chapter.

## 9. The Tide Turns: The Ukrainian Defeat of August 2014

This chapter will investigate the final critical juncture in the Donbas war's formative escalation sequence – the defeat of the advancing Ukrainian forces in late August 2014. In particular, I will investigate to what extent Russia further intensified its involvement in the conflict during this critical juncture by deploying its regular armed forces to the Donbas. I will address claims of Russian cross-border shelling and the alleged deployment of paratroopers from Pskov to Luhansk in mid-August, before focusing on the three key battles lost by Ukrainian forces in late August. I will argue that there is overwhelming evidence for the presence of regular Russian forces in the Donbas at the time in question. Furthermore, I will argue that these regular Russian forces played more than just an auxiliary role in support of the Russian-led separatists.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the available evidence indicates that the involvement of regular Russian forces was the primary cause of the Ukrainian defeat.

Despite intense fighting and heavy losses during July and early August, Ukrainian forces continued to increase the pressure on the Russian-led separatists over the summer of 2014. By mid-August, the position of the two self-proclaimed republics looked increasingly precarious. In Luhansk Region, Ukrainian forces had not only retaken Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in late July but also Lutuhyne just south of Luhansk city (Svetikov 2017; informant.lg.ua 2014; colonelcassad 2014b). This meant that Luhansk was close to being surrounded, with Ukrainian forces positioned in its immediate surroundings to the north, west, and south. In Donetsk Region, Ukrainian forces were attacking Ilovaisk from the south and gained a foothold in the town's western part on 18 August (Donbas Battalion 2014). Taking Ilovaisk would have been an important step towards the encirclement of the Donetsk metropolitan area, and towards cutting off the supply chains from Russia.

Two weeks later, however, the situation had changed completely. By early September, Ukrainian forces had been forced to abandon their positions south

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<sup>35</sup> The cumulative evidence of Russian involvement outlined in chapters five, seven, and eight suggests that it is appropriate to describe the separatist forces that were fighting the Ukrainian military in summer 2014 as Russian-led.

and west of Luhansk. At Ilovaisk, Ukraine had suffered the most devastating defeat of the entire conflict. Its forces had been encircled in the town's southwestern surroundings. More than 350 soldiers and volunteer battalion members died<sup>36</sup> during the siege and the unsuccessful attempt to break out of it.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Ukrainian forces no longer controlled the southern and southeastern surroundings of Donetsk. In addition, a new front had opened on the southern coast, where Ukrainian forces had lost control of the border and the town of Novoazovsk and the enemy was advancing towards Mariupol. Against the backdrop of this dramatic military turnaround, Ukraine agreed to the terms of the First Minsk Agreement on 5 September.

The Ukrainian military claimed that its resounding defeat in late August was the result of a large-scale invasion by Russia's regular armed forces (Ostrov 2014t; Segodnya 2014g) – a claim which Russia denied and continues to deny at the time of writing. Against the backdrop of these claims and the findings of the previous chapters, a process tracing analysis of the Ukrainian defeat in late August 2014 should test the following three hypotheses:

H1: Irregular Russian-led separatists defeated the advancing Ukrainian forces without Russian involvement that exceeded the level described in the previous chapters.

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<sup>36</sup> For a thorough discussion of different casualty estimates, see Teslenko and Tynchenko (2019). Yaroslav Tynchenko is the deputy director of Ukraine's National Military History Museum and a co-founder of the Memory Book for Ukraine's Fallen volunteer project – the most authoritative source on Ukraine's losses in the Donbas at the time of writing. According to Tynchenko, a total of 366 Ukrainian soldiers and volunteer battalion members died in the Ilovaisk area from 7-31 August 2014. Most of them, a total of 254, died during the failed attempt to leave the area on 29 August.

<sup>37</sup> The exact circumstances of the withdrawal attempt on 29 August continue to be a contentious topic. Two participants of the events – journalist Rostyslav Shaposhnikov and Ukrainian officer Serhii Naselevets – blame the commander of Ukraine's forces around Ilovaisk – General Ruslan Khomchak – for the tragedy (Shaposhnikov 2014). They argue that Khomchak ordered his forces to break out of the encirclement while negotiations with the enemy regarding a safe passage corridor were still ongoing. Khomchak – who was appointed head of Ukraine's General Staff in May 2019 – refuses to publicly comment on the details of the events. However, he confirms that the Russian military demanded that his forces surrender all weapons before withdrawing, which, according to him, was an unacceptable condition (Khomchak 2019 from 23:12).

**Figure 1: No Involvement of Regular Russian Forces**



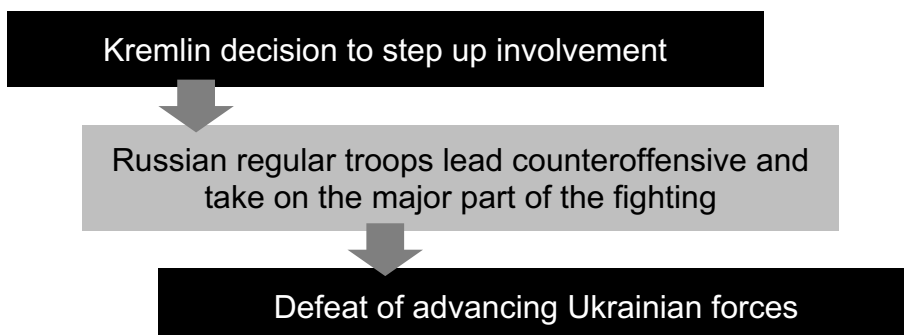
H2: Russia stepped up its involvement by sending some regular troops to Ukraine, which played an auxiliary role in the Ukrainian defeat.

**Figure 2: Limited Involvement of Regular Russian Forces**



H3: Russia stepped up its involvement and engaged its regular armed forces to an extent that was decisive for the Ukrainian defeat.

**Figure 3: Decisive Involvement of Regular Russian Forces**





### **9.1. Prologue I: Cross-Border Artillery Shelling**

Allegations that Ukrainian forces became the target of artillery shelling from Russian territory throughout July and August are a first *hoop test* for H1. Regardless of the degree to which they contributed to the Ukrainian defeat in late August, attacks of Ukrainian positions by units operating from Russian territory would represent an escalation of the conflict beyond its previous limits. Also, it is *almost certain* that cross-border combat operations of this kind would have to involve regular Russian forces.

The first major case of an alleged cross-border artillery attack was the shelling of Ukrainian positions near the Luhansk Region village of Zelenopillia on 11 July (Ukrainska Pravda 2014p). This attack killed 36 Ukrainian servicemen – the second largest loss of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in a single incident during the conflict so far.<sup>38</sup> In January 2015, pro-Ukrainian conflict analyst DajeyPetros published a blog post in which he claimed that the origin of the Zelenopillia attack was visible on Google Earth satellite imagery (Ukraine@war 2015). He correctly points out that, on satellite imagery from mid-August, burn marks are visible in a field south of the village of Klunykov, just a few hundred metres inside Ukrainian territory. Moreover, several vehicle tracks are visible in the field between these burn marks and the Russian border. The marks on the ground are arranged in a row and their shape is compatible with the traces left by fire from Grad multiple rocket launchers or similar missile systems. The marks' shape, with a narrower end in the northeast and a wider end in the southwest, suggests that the missiles were fired towards the northeast. Moreover, an imaginary line that extends the burn marks' approximate axis of symmetry to the northeast points directly at the destroyed military camp near Zelenopillia.

Additional investigations suggest that the Zelenopillia attack was followed by hundreds of other incidents of cross-border shelling. Bellingcat (2015c, 19–21) confirmed DajeyPetros' findings regarding the Zelenopillia attack in a report that primarily focused on cross-border vehicle tracks on satellite imagery of the

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<sup>38</sup> Up to 11 July, the only single incident with a higher death toll had been the downing of a Ukrainian IL-76 military transport plane near Luhansk Airport on 14 June, in which 49 servicemen died. The casualty data for both incidents was taken from the Memory Book for Ukraine's Fallen project (Memorybook.org.ua n.d.a).

conflict zone. In addition, it also published two separate reports dedicated exclusively to the analysis of Russian artillery shelling of Ukrainian positions along the border (Bellingcat 2015b; Case and Anders 2016). In these reports, Bellingcat analysed the shape and location of impact craters on satellite imagery to match them with “likely firing positions.” In total, the researchers identified 279 such positions, 262 of which were located on Russian territory and 17 on Ukrainian territory within 2km of the border (Case and Anders 2016, 16). Bellingcat then visualized these findings, using the carto mapping tool to link likely firing positions and targets on a map (Bellingcat n.d.b). This visualization shows that cross-border artillery attacks focused on two areas southeast of Donetsk – around Amvrosiivka and Marynivka. A smaller number of attacks took place in the southeastern corner of Luhansk Region near the town of Dovzhansk. This was the area in which the Ukrainian attempt to secure the entirety of the border by advancing along it ground to a halt (Zhyrokhov 2017).

There is no reason to doubt Bellingcat’s findings. Due to space and time constraints, it was not possible to use Google Earth to check the accuracy of all their assessments in this dissertation. However, considering the group’s elaborate description of its methodology and internal peer review process as well as its record of providing high-quality digital open source investigations, it is appropriate to have a high degree of confidence in the reports’ findings. Moreover, even if Bellingcat was wrong more than 50% of the time, this would still leave more than 100 cases of cross-border artillery attacks. It is therefore appropriate to conclude that the artillery of the Russian Armed Forces *almost certainly* attacked Ukrainian forces from across or just within the border in a regular and systematic manner from mid-July onwards.

The presented evidence for Russian artillery attacks means that H1 can be discarded. It suggests that, even before the battles of late August, Russia had stepped up its involvement beyond the level described in the previous chapters. By doing so, it inflicted damage on Ukrainian positions and made it more difficult for Ukrainian forces to establish control over strategically important areas along the border. There can be no doubt that this contributed to the eventual Ukrainian defeat, at least to a certain extent. However, it is *highly unlikely* that Russian cross-border shelling was the decisive factor. Since most fighting in late August

took place further away from the border, the presented evidence of cross-border shelling does not affect the balance of probability between H2 and H3.

## **9.2. Prologue II: The Pskov Paratroopers**

The first convincing evidence of systematic Russian troop deployments deeper into Ukrainian territory relates to armed clashes south of Luhansk on 19-20 August. On the morning of 22 August 2014, the Ukrainian news website *Espresso TV* reposted images from the Facebook page of Ukrainian war correspondent Roman Bochkala (Ostafiichuk 2014). The images showed an armoured vehicle, Russian bank cards and identity documents, a personnel list with 60 names and ranks, as well as other equipment. Bochkala claimed that these items were left behind after an armed clash near the village of Heorhiivka, located between Lutuhyne and Luhansk Airport. He also claimed that the vehicle and the documents belonged to a paratrooper unit from the Russian town of Pskov. The *Espresso TV* report further specified that the unit in question was Russia's 76th Guards Air Assault Division based in Pskov. It also claimed that it had found the social media profiles of 17 soldiers whose names featured on the lists and documents found in Heorhiivka.

These claims from Ukrainian sources were subsequently confirmed by Russian journalists. On 25 August, correspondents of the Russian newspapers *Pskovskaya Guberniya* and *Novaya Gazeta* visited the cemetery in the village of Vybuty near Pskov (Petlyanova 2014; Semenov 2014). They wanted to investigate rumours that Russian soldiers who had died in Ukraine would be buried there. The journalists saw numerous soldiers gathered for a memorial service and found the fresh graves of two men – Leonid Yuryevich Kichatkin and Aleksandr Osipov. The photos of Kichatkin's grave published by the journalists feature a picture of a young man in military uniform. According to the inscription on the grave, he died on 19 August. The photos of Osipov's grave feature a wreath with a dedication from his fellow paratroopers. His date of death is given as 20 August. Osipov's name does not seem to feature in the documents published in Ukraine several days earlier. The name Leonid Yuryevich Kichatkin, however, features as number 15 on the personnel list published by Roman Bochkala after the armed clash near Heorhiivka.

The claims were also confirmed by Russian journalists' sources in the Russian Armed Forces. *Pskovskaya Guberniya* editor in chief Lev Shlosberg (2014) was told by sources in the Russian military that Kichatkin and several of his comrades had left for Ukraine on 15-16 August. According to Shlosberg's sources they had terminated their contract with the Russian military "by mutual agreement" and signed a new contract with an unknown third party before setting off.<sup>39</sup> Research by Russian opposition TV channel *Dozhd* (2014) over the following weeks established the identities of four other servicemen of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division who had died in unknown circumstances. *Dozhd* also found three other servicemen of the same division, who had stopped responding to relatives and friends in mid-August and only got back in touch after rumours started that they had died in Ukraine. In addition, in early September, *Pskovskaya Guberniya* (2014) published transcripts of what it claimed were recorded conversations between members of the Russian military after the events. The newspaper said it had no reason to doubt the veracity of these transcripts. The transcripts refer to rumours that 90 Russian soldiers fought in Heorhiivka and that only ten survived. However, the people speaking do not seem to be sure about the exact figures, so they may well be exaggerations even if the transcripts are authentic.

The sum of this confirmatory evidence from Russian media sources suggests that there is less than a *remote chance* that the Ukrainian military fabricated the evidence featured in the 22 August *Espresso TV* report. In turn, it is *almost certain* that several soldiers serving in Russia's 76th Guards Air Assault Division were fighting against Ukrainian forces at Heorhiivka on 19-20 August and it is *likely* that their actual number amounted to several dozens. Like the evidence of cross-border artillery shelling, this evidence is incompatible with H1 because it indicates a degree of Russian involvement that had not been observed previously. However, since this initial deployment of paratroopers turned out to be unsuccessful, it cannot affect the balance of probability between H2 and H3, either.

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<sup>39</sup> Regardless of its veracity, this claim does not affect the categorization of the men in question as regular Russian soldiers. Even under the assumption that they signed corresponding paperwork and went to the Donbas of their own free will, the Russian military still tolerated the fact that its regular soldiers went to Ukraine on a combat mission. The argument that Russian servicemen "took leave" or "resigned" just before their deployment to the Donbas war should be rejected as a legalistic attempt to cover up state responsibility.

### **9.3. The Battle of Ilovaisk**

The first convincing evidence for H3 and against H2 emerges in the context of the Battle of Ilovaisk. As the most devastating defeat of Ukraine's armed forces and its volunteer battalions, this battle is the most important component of the critical juncture investigated in this chapter. At the same time, it is also the part of the critical juncture that has been subject to highest level of public interest and journalistic scrutiny. As a result, a large quantity of information on this battle is available online.

This evidence has been gathered, verified, and visualized in 2018-2019 by the Forensic Architecture research agency as part of a project that documented the course of the battle and Russia's role in it (Forensic Architecture 2019b). I was one of two Ukraine specialists who worked on the project and who were responsible for gathering, cross-checking, and geolocating evidence. Our final catalogue included just over 200 primary pieces of evidence in the form of videos, photos, and eyewitness testimony. We then linked these sources to a series of 135 events. Forensic Architecture's software developers placed these events and the underlying source material on an interactive online platform, which features a map, a timeline, and the opportunity to filter the evidence in line with certain themes (Forensic Architecture 2019a). By locating these events in time and space, the platform turns a loose conglomerate of claims into an interconnected grid. The links between the different points on this grid strengthen the credibility of the underlying evidence and create a clear picture of Russia's involvement in the battle.

Due to space constraints, it is not possible to describe the whole dataset of evidence and events in the present chapter. However, the key takeaways of Forensic Architecture's Ilovaisk project are the following:

- Video and photo material showed several damaged or destroyed tanks in the surroundings of Ilovaisk after the battle. Forensic Architecture's visual modelling specialists used a 3-D computer model to identify four of these tanks as T-72B3s – a recent modification of the T-72, which, at the time of the battle, was used exclusively by the Russian Armed Forces. Moreover,

independent military experts identified another two destroyed tanks as T-72BA or T-72B Obr.1989 – previous modifications of the T-72, which had never been exported to Ukraine, either.

- During the Battle of Ilovaisk, Ukrainian forces captured 17 servicemen, who said they were members of the Russian Armed Forces. Russia's military leadership claimed that some of these soldiers had lost their way and entered Ukraine by accident while others had supposedly left the armed forces and fought in Ukraine as volunteers. However, the soldiers' own testimony, their social media profiles, as well as reports on Russian media contradict this claim and suggest that several of them resumed their military service after their return to Russia.
- Ukrainian forces advanced towards Ilovaisk from the south and established a foothold on the western edge of the town. Positions of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) were located towards the north and in the town itself. On 24 August 2014, Ukrainian forces around Ilovaisk were attacked from the rear and encircled. All territory in this direction had previously been under Ukrainian control – right up to the nearby Russian border. After Ukrainian forces suddenly lost control over this territory, Google Earth satellite imagery caught pictures of military convoys moving between the area south of the line of encirclement and a remote stretch of the Russian-Ukrainian border. Additional vehicles as well as traces of camps were visible directly across the border on Russian territory.

Given that the Battle of Ilovaisk involved several thousand soldiers and several hundred pieces of armour, the presence of six destroyed or damaged Russian tanks and 17 captured Russian servicemen would theoretically be compatible with both H2 and H3. However, the overall losses that Ukrainian forces managed to inflict on the enemy during the Battle were relatively small. In addition to the six Russian tanks, only a handful of destroyed armoured vehicles which did not belong to Ukrainian forces were documented around Ilovaisk, and there were no reports of captured or killed separatist fighters of Ukrainian origin in the area. Hence, H2 could only be true if regular Russian forces lost a far higher share of their men and hardware than the Russian-led separatists they supported. In light

of Russia's military superiority and the defeats separatist forces had suffered over the weeks preceding the battle, this appears *highly unlikely*. In terms of Bayesian updating, this consideration shifts the overall balance of probabilities towards H3, but not to an extent that renders H2 entirely implausible.

However, the satellite imagery of troop movements between the Russian border and the battlefield is *smoking-gun* evidence that shifts the balance of probabilities even further towards H3. The Russian cross-border supply line is clearly visible on Google Earth, even though the imagery's coverage of the relevant time window is patchy. There are only three available snapshots of the area south of Ilovaisk – one from 26 August, one from 31 August, and one from 3 September. The 3 September footage alone, however, shows two large convoys comprising a total of 138 vehicles moving through Ukrainian territory towards the Russian border. Considering the patchiness of the footage, it is *highly likely* that the Russian invasion force was considerably larger than these two convoys and that most Russian troop movements were not caught on Google Earth. In turn, this suggests that the total size of the Russian invasion force comprised several hundred vehicles and far outnumbered both Ukrainian and DNR forces in the area. As a result, the probability of H2 decreases to a *remote chance*. At the same time, it becomes *almost certain* that it was the actions of regular units of the Russian Armed Forces, which crossed the border in large numbers and attacked Ukrainian positions from the rear, that led to the Ukrainian defeat at Ilovaisk.

#### **9.4. The Battle of Luhansk**

The evidence for Russia's role in the defeat of Ukrainian forces south of Luhansk is similar to the evidence found around Ilovaisk. Even though no Russian servicemen were captured around Luhansk, social media footage indicates that tank units of the Russian Armed Forces were present in the area. In October 2014, a VK account under the name Vitalek Marakasov posted a photo of a man in camouflage pointing at a road sign. At the time of writing, the account is no longer publicly available. However, screenshots of the account and a thorough analysis of the posted content have been published by the Ukrainian investigative blogger Askai (2015) and by the Ukrainian open source research collective Inform Napalm (2014). Askai points out that, in the foreground of the picture, the loading device of the anti-aircraft machine gun of a T-90A battle tank can be seen. Indeed,

the components on the picture are an exact match for the components on the T-90A, as photographed by military blogger Vitaliy Kuzmin (2014) during a Russian arms exhibition. The T-90A is a Russian tank model that entered service during the 1990s and is not used by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At the same time, the road sign in the background proves that the picture was taken in Ukraine, near a junction of the M04 highway south of Luhansk. It features the letters M04 and indicates two highway exits - one to the right, going north towards Luhansk, and another to the left, going south towards Krasnyy Luch. In addition, Askai and Inform Napalm present other screenshots from Marakasov's profile, which suggest that he is, in fact, a tankist from Russia's 136 Motor Rifle Brigade – a unit that is equipped with T-90As. This evidence is consistent with a video that appeared on YouTube in November 2016 and shows three tanks, at least one of which can be clearly identified as a T-90A (YouTube 2016b). The video's description claims that it was filmed near the village of Lyse, southeast of Luhansk, on 25 August 2014. As Askai (2016) points out, the video features several geolocation markers – masts, pipework, trees, pollards, and a railway crossing – that are a perfect match for Google Earth satellite imagery of a location just southeast of Lyse.

On its own, this evidence is not able to shift the balance of probability decisively towards H3. The material in question was published long after the events and lacks clear indicators of the time the footage was taken. This somewhat decreases its credibility, even though late August 2014 remains the most plausible time and it remains *highly unlikely* that detailed and consistent evidence of this kind has been fabricated. More importantly, however, the presence of a few Russian T-90A tanks and their crew around Luhansk is not sufficient to prove that Russia played the decisive role in the Ukrainian defeat.

In the case of Luhansk, the *smoking-gun* evidence that shifts the balance of probability decisively towards H3 consists of two videos of military convoys. On 2 September, a video filmed by a trolleybus passenger driving past a large military convoy appeared on Youtube (2014bs). The convoy includes at least 116 military vehicles – 13 tanks, one self-propelled artillery gun, 47 armoured vehicles and 55 trucks. Several tanks in the convoy can be identified as either T-72BA, T-72 Obr.1989, or T-72B3 – the same newer Russian tank models that were identified



near Ilovaisk. The convoy also includes tanker trucks with Russian-language fire hazard warnings. The video's description on YouTube claims that it was filmed on the road between Krasnodon and Molodohvardiisk in Luhansk region and points out a road sign that is visible 40 seconds into the video. This road sign features the number M04 against a blue background above the number E40 against a green background. The latter number designates the European Route E40 leading from Calais in France to Ridder in Kazakhstan. The only place where this international route follows a national highway numbered M04 is in the Donbas between Debaltseve and the Russian border east of Krasnodon. Moreover, the long straight stretch of road on the video with trolleybus masts and trees on both sides, followed by fields, trees in the distance, and a gentle bend, matches Google Earth imagery of the M04/E40 highway directly southeast of Molodohvardiisk. This location suggests that the convoy was driving back from Luhansk towards the Russian border after Ukrainian forces had been defeated and forced to abandon their positions south of the city. Given that the video was published shortly after the events in question, there is only a *remote chance* that it is an elaborate fabrication. The same is the case for another video filmed by a car dashcam and showing a convoy of 24 military vehicles – two tanks, 13 armoured vehicles and nine trucks (YouTube 2014bt). Again, the two tanks can be identified as either T-72BA, T-72 Obr.1989, or T-72B3. The dashcam footage shows the exact time and coordinates of the recording – 3 September 2014 on a small road between the Luhansk Region villages of Pidhirne and Sievero Hundorivskiyi. The long straight road with trees on both sides is consistent with Google Earth footage of the location. The convoy is driving south towards the Russian border, which is less than five kilometres away. The road used by the convoy is part of an alternative, more rural route from the battlefield south of Luhansk to the Russian border.

Like in the case of Ilovaisk, general probabilistic considerations suggest that it is *highly unlikely* that the Russian invasion force only consisted of two convoys both of which happened to be caught on videos that were then uploaded to YouTube. In turn, this suggests that, in the case of Luhansk, the Russian invasion force also consisted of several hundred vehicles. This updates the probability of H3 in the case of Luhansk, like in the case of Ilovaisk, to *almost certain*.

### **9.5. The Battle of Novoazovsk**

A third, smaller battle in which Ukrainian forces suffered a defeat around the same time took place near the southern coast around the town of Novoazovsk. On 25 August, a resident of Novoazovsk told a *Reuters* correspondent that a military convoy including at least seven tanks was attacking the town (Lowe and Tsvetkova 2014). A day later, a *Vice News* camera team visited Novoazovsk (VICE News 2014, from 5:09). It filmed smoke plumes and machine gun salvos in the town's eastern surroundings as well as damaged buildings. The journalists also spoke to Ukrainian soldiers stationed in Novoazovsk. The soldiers confirmed that the area was being attacked by tanks and heavy artillery. On 27 August, the journalists returned and found that Ukrainian forces had left Novoazovsk (VICE News 2014, from 10:21). On 5 September, the Ukrainian military acknowledged that its forces had been pushed back as far as Shyrokyne, 10 kilometres east of Mariupol (Liga.Novosti 2014b).

Like in the cases of Ilovaisk and Luhansk, there is clear evidence that a Russian invasion force was responsible for the Ukrainian defeat in the Novoazovsk area. This evidence can be divided into three parts. The first part focuses on a piece of military hardware, identified and geolocated on both sides of the border by Bellingcat (Case et al. 2015, 53–54; Higgins 2015). The vehicle in question is a Msta-S self-propelled 152 mm howitzer. This howitzer features two distinct stains on its left side as well as the number N2200, painted in a specific way. It first appears in a video uploaded to YouTube on 30 July 2014. The account that posted this video was subsequently deleted, but Bellingcat (2015a) saved a copy of the original. Because of the Rostov Region numberplates of the cars and the shops in the background, Bellingcat was able to geolocate the video to the intersection of the Taganrog-Mariupol highway and Solovynaya Street in the northwest of Rostov-on-Don. At the time of writing, the same shops are still visible on Google Street View (2021). An Msta-S with the same distinct features appears in a 5 September *Al Jazeera* (2014 at 0:24) report from Novoazovsk. In this report, the howitzer drives past a blue single storey building with a damaged façade and a pole in front of it. The same building is visible on a 2012 dashcam video which filmed the entire section of the Taganrog-Mariupol highway between the Russian border and Mariupol (YouTube 2012, at 11:44). Based on this video, the Msta-S in the *Al Jazeera* report was filmed at the northern edge of

Novoazovsk, just east of the intersection between the Taganrog-Mariupol highway and the road from Novoazovsk to Telmanove. It was driving westwards. The exact location of the footage is important because there is no major road from the north between the intersection in question and the Russian border. At the same time, there is no plausible reason for hypothetical DNR reinforcements from the north to use dirt tracks near the Russian border rather than the Telmanove-Novozovsk road on 5 September, given that Ukrainian forces had already retreated from the area. It is therefore *highly unlikely* that the Msta-S in question was filmed in Rostov-on-Don, taken north, and handed over to Russian-led separatist forces which then took it back south. In turn, it is *highly likely* that the Msta-S in question was part of a Russian invasion force that entered the Novoazovsk area directly from Russia. This finding is incompatible with H1 but equally compatible with H2 and H3 because it does not specify the size of the Russian invasion force. Neither does it prove that the initial assault that started on 25 August and drove the Ukrainian forces out of Novoazovsk had come from Russia.

The second part of the evidence consists of cross-border vehicle tracks in the area northeast of Novoazovsk near the villages of Shcherbak and Markyne discovered by Bellingcat on openly available satellite imagery (Case et al. 2015, 33–35). These tracks are also visible on images from Google Earth Pro's historical satellite database, which contains images of the area taken in October 2013 and October 2014. The tracks are absent on the former and clearly visible on the latter image before they slowly fade on images from subsequent years. The same is the case for another major cross-border track further south, which is highlighted in another report (Bellingcat 2015c, 46–49). This track was located just 600 meters north of the official border checkpoint on the Taganrog-Mariupol highway in a location that is hidden from the main road by a line of trees. The prominence of the tracks suggests that it is *highly likely* that a major cross-border incursion directly into territory controlled by Ukrainian forces took place in the area. Even though the time of the first incursion cannot be determined by the satellite imagery, it is *likely* that it happened on 25 August, when a local resident and Ukrainian soldiers reported the sudden appearance of tanks in the area. Hence, in the absence of evidence to the contrary that would indicate significant

separatist troop movements towards the south on 24-25 August, the cross-border vehicle tracks tilt the balance of probabilities in favour of H3.

The third part of the evidence in the Novoazovsk case consists of the area's geographic location almost 90km south of the nearest previous separatist positions around Donetsk. Not only is there no evidence of separatist troop movements towards the south but such movements would not have made any strategic sense, either. Novoazovsk is located less than 15km west of the Russian border and around 65km south of the Russian line of encirclement near Ilovaisk. The area was therefore far more accessible to invading Russian troops than to separatist forces. This finding further increases the probability of H3 and makes it *almost certain* that Russian troops were the key driving force of the Ukrainian defeat on this battlefield as well.

### **9.6. Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that the decisive Ukrainian defeat of late August 2014 was primarily caused by a large-scale invasion of Russia's regular army. This invasion was preceded by more than a month of Russian artillery attacks on Ukrainian positions from Russian territory or from locations inside Ukraine in the immediate vicinity of the border. It is *almost certain* that the invasion of late August took place in three different theatres simultaneously. In the east of Donetsk Region, Russian forces invaded from the south and attacked the rear of the Ukrainian forces that were trying to seize Ilovaisk. In Luhansk Region, Russian units approached Luhansk from the southeast and ended Ukrainian attempts to encircle the city. In the south of Donetsk region, Russian troops crossed the border and drove Ukrainian forces back along the coast towards Mariupol.

With this invasion of regular forces, Russia escalated the conflict further beyond the confines that had previously defined it – and to the highest level of violence observed throughout its course. Throughout the previous stages of the conflict, Russia had delegated the war to irregular formations which it controlled and which it equipped with old military hardware. In late August, it sent its regular armed forces on modern military hardware to save these irregular units from looming defeat. By doing so, Russia paved the way for the First Minsk Agreement and for

the conflict that continues to simmer in the Donbas to this day. The level of violence has decreased in recent years and the frontline is no longer subject to major changes. Nevertheless, the fact that there still is a frontline and that people continue to die fighting along this frontline is the direct result of the critical juncture analysed in this chapter.

## **10. Conclusion**

This dissertation has used digital forensic process tracing to establish that the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region in April-August 2014 was primarily the result of the Russian state's actions. Domestic factors played a secondary, auxiliary role. My starting point was the premise that finding the causes of war is an important objective of social science research and that modern information technology presents new challenges but also new opportunities in this context. Based on this premise, my dissertation proceeded in four steps. Firstly, I highlighted the importance of case-study research on the causes of individual wars as an essential component of the search for the causes of war in general. I illustrated the need for such research with the divide in the academic literature regarding the primary cause of the Donbas conflict. I argued that the theoretical and methodological foundations of this literature are currently not strong enough to underpin any comparative research or policy decisions that depend on a classification of the conflict as primarily internal or primarily interstate. Secondly, I used escalation theory and the concept of critical junctures to construct an escalation sequence model of the Donbas war's formative phase. In addition, I introduced the concept of delegated interstate war to represent a theoretical causal pathway to war between states that had been missing from previous typologies. Thirdly, I proposed digital forensic process tracing as the methodology of choice for further empirical research on the escalation of war in the social media age. I showed how digital forensic process tracing can harness the power of digital open source information (DOSI) to evaluate competing hypotheses on the causes of war in the Donbas and elsewhere. Fourthly, and most importantly, I used my theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the causes of the Donbas conflict through a step-by-step investigation of the six critical junctures comprising its formative escalation sequence.

Throughout these steps, my dissertation has made several original contributions. In terms of theory and concepts, my dissertation has proposed a new way to model a war's escalation sequence by using escalation theory and the concept of critical junctures. It has also proposed a new four-way typology of armed conflict. In terms of methodology, I have improved process tracing by making it fit for the social media age through the incorporation of DOSI analysis. In terms of its empirical case-study analysis, my dissertation has addressed the question of

the nature of the Donbas conflict. Naturally, not every scholar may agree with my conclusions. However, my dissertation's approach and its findings can steer the divisive academic debate on the causes of the Donbas conflict into a more constructive and transparent direction that makes it clearer how scholarly assessments converge and differ. The different contributions of my dissertation will benefit any political scientist, historian, or area studies specialist working with process tracing, armed conflict typologies, or escalation theory. They will also benefit any scholar from these disciplines working on Ukraine's recent history in general or the Donbas war in particular.

### ***10.1. Conceptual Contribution Part I: Reviving Escalation Theory***

My dissertation has further contributed to the theoretical foundations of social science research on war by combining conflict escalation theory and the concept of critical junctures to create an escalation sequence model of the Donbas war. This model specifies and limits the scope of my dissertation's subsequent digital forensic process tracing analysis. As far as possible, the escalation sequence model remains agnostic about the war's causes. Based on a large dataset of media reports containing both pro-Western and pro-Russian sources, the model does not feature events or causal connections that are disputed by a conflict party or the academic literature. As a result, the model does not rule out hypothetical explanations of the war. Instead, it acts as a benchmark. Whether an explanation focuses on grievances within the local population, the actions of local elites, or Russian interference, its suitability can be measured by the extent to which it can explain the events in the escalation sequence model.

The model forces researchers investigating the war's causes to focus on the process of conflict escalation instead of second-guessing the conflict's nature by analysing circumstantial conditions like the region's history, local public opinion, or geopolitical constellations. It also prevents researchers from choosing a theoretical framework that avoids the question or predetermines the result. For these reasons, the model can facilitate an explanation of the Donbas conflict that is transparent, comprehensive, and theory-guided. As a result, an explanation based on my escalation sequence model can feed into a higher-level discourse and inform both comparative research and policymaking.

These advantages are by no means limited to the specific controversy surrounding the case of the Donbas. They can be easily transferred to other cases beyond my dissertation because the roadmap that I use to create the escalation sequence model is universally applicable. The creation of an escalation table containing the different thresholds which crossed conflict-defining limits of violence and the subsequent identification of critical junctures among these thresholds can be repeated for any other war. This applies to contemporary conflicts as well as historical cases. A detailed escalation sequence model could, for example, shed additional light on the role of different rebel groups, government forces, and either side's foreign sponsors during the war in Syria. At the same time, a model like the one proposed in my dissertation could also be used to revisit the age-old debate on the causes of World War I. Moreover, the present escalation model can translate different methods of data collection into a common framework. Depending on the information environment that surrounds a particular conflict, a variety of data sources can be used to identify escalation thresholds and critical junctures. My dissertation uses DOSI by exploiting a dataset of online news media as well as videos of relevant events uploaded to social media. Other studies may create escalation tables and escalation graphs on the basis of eyewitness interviews, archival documents, secondary accounts of historians, or a combination of different sources.

As a result, the creation of escalation sequence models for a number of different conflicts could create promising new opportunities for comparative research on the causes of war. Even though every case of conflict escalation has its own case-specific nuances, it is possible that the comparison of different conflict escalation models will show certain similarities between them. To use Dessler's (1991, 342–44) thunderstorm metaphor, each conflict escalation model provides an insight into the processes inside gathering storm clouds during the formation of a specific storm. Although the processes at work in the escalation of armed conflict are *highly unlikely* to follow laws of nature in a way that is comparable to thunderstorm formation, certain patterns and common features may still become apparent. Potentially, a comparison of these processes could reveal certain commonalities that could feed into something resembling Dessler's idea of a "causal theory of war." Naturally, the case-specific conflict escalation sequence model proposed in my dissertation is only a small step in this direction.



Nevertheless, it is an avenue worth pursuing. Moreover, even if its application to other cases does not directly lead to generalizable findings regarding the causes of war, the theoretical framework proposed in my dissertation will remain an important case-focused supplement to comparative research. It builds a bridge between the focus on case-specific circumstances, which characterizes the work of most historians and area studies specialists, and the need for generalization and streamlining in comparative social science research. In addition to building this bridge between the specific and the general, the proposed model facilitates comparison and communication among scholars who focus on the relative importance of and the interactions between different explanatory factors within case-studies. Academic research on the causes of war can only benefit from a common frame of reference of this kind.

### ***10.2. Conceptual Contribution Part II: Delegated Interstate War***

In addition, my dissertation has contributed to the conceptual understanding of war in the social sciences by introducing the concept of delegated interstate war. It has argued that current armed conflict typologies run the risk of underestimating the complexity of interstate conflict and its role in the modern world. It has discussed the difference between third-party intervention and third-party delegation in armed conflicts, using the work of Salehyan (2010) and the Nicaragua Judgement of the International Court of Justice (ICJ 1986). It has then shown that current academic research fails to pay sufficient attention to this differentiation. The armed conflict typologies of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and the Correlates of War project (COW) both reflect and exacerbate this lack of attention. Based on this discussion, my dissertation has proposed the introduction of delegated interstate war as a new subcategory of interstate conflict. This subcategory should include conflicts where one state engages in combat on the territory of another state via irregular armed groups, which the foreign state controls to such an extent that they effectively act as one of its state organs.

My dissertation has illustrated the usefulness of delegated interstate conflict as a category by relating it to the academic controversy around the categorization of the Donbas war. It has argued that researchers must acknowledge that an interstate war in the Donbas does not necessarily have to consist of an open

invasion of Ukraine by Russia's regular armed forces. Researchers could also categorize the Donbas war as interstate based on the conclusion that eastern Ukraine's separatist militias are not a local rebel force but, in fact, an organ of the Russian state, waging a delegated war on the Kremlin's behalf.

However, the usefulness of delegated interstate war is by no means limited to research on the Donbas. Other conflicts in the post-Soviet space that feature potential cases of delegation are the wars in Transnistria, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. A historical example worth further investigation could be the relationship between the Soviet State and Sheng Shicai's forces in Xinjiang in the 1930s. It might also be worth investigating to what extent recent conflicts in Africa and the Middle East featured armed groups that could be considered organs of foreign states. The role of Uganda and Rwanda in the creation and further activity of the Rally for Congolese Democracy could be particularly interesting in this context. Estimating the overall frequency of delegated interstate conflict would require a thorough review of all cases that UCDP and COW currently classify as internal or internal internationalized. It is *highly unlikely* that such a review would find that the prevalence of non-interstate conflict since the end of World War II is due to a large number of wrongly categorized delegated interstate conflicts. However, even a change in the categorization of a small number of cases could have an impact on the findings of comparative research on interstate war because this type of war has become such a rare occurrence.

Regardless of the outcomes of such investigations, a four-way typology of armed conflict – consisting of interstate, delegated interstate, internationalized internal, and internal – would create a more symmetrical typology that better reflects the different roles governments can play in armed conflict. It would also integrate the *abnormalism* principle (Roberts 1996, 95–99) in the causal analysis of war by allowing the possibility that a foreign state's actions were more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the actions of local rebels. As a result, the four-way typology I propose would improve confidence in the findings of case-study research as well as the quality of conflict data used for quantitative research on various past, present, or future conflicts.

### **10.3. Methodological Contribution: Digital Forensic Process Tracing**

The methodological part of my dissertation has demonstrated how social scientists can use online media to gain a better understanding of the causes of war. It has argued that the Internet is a treasure trove of information rather than just a propaganda dump. Online sources have provided conflict studies researchers with access to valuable primary data from conflict zones at an unprecedented scale. This information has the potential to greatly improve case-study research on the causes of war. Harnessing this potential, however, requires methodological rigour and argumentative transparency. This means that process tracing research on armed conflict needs to pay additional attention to source criticism and Bayesian updating.

For this purpose, my dissertation has proposed a forensic approach to process tracing that incorporates DOSI analysis into the methodology. This incorporation of DOSI analysis shifts the investigative focus of process tracing to source criticism and Bayesian updating. Furthermore, my approach uses Occam's razor, the Sagan standard, and *abnormalism* as guiding philosophical principles that can further strengthen the methodology, as well as the PHIA Probability Yardstick as a system to verbalize approximate probabilities. The result is digital forensic process tracing – a methodological innovation that enables transparent and methodologically rigorous case study research and can deliver reliable findings even in murky information environments. It sheds light on causal processes while making use of the Internet's full potential as an access route to primary information from conflict zones.

The forensic methodology proposed in my dissertation has potential far beyond the case of the Donbas. It can be used to research causal processes in any conflict that has been subject to extensive first-hand coverage on the Internet. An obvious example is the war in Syria, where digital forensic process tracing could be used for a variety of purposes: to identify shifts in the composition and strategy of different rebel groups, to evaluate the impact of foreign involvement on the course of the conflict, or to track the use of chemical weapons. A large quantity of potentially useful DOSI has already been gathered and catalogued by the Syrian Archive project and could form a useful empirical basis for such research. Similarly, digital forensic process tracing could yield valuable insights into the

alleged operations of Russian state-sponsored mercenaries in several African countries. Another topical case is the escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh in autumn 2020, which was subject to intense media scrutiny while Armenia and Azerbaijan and their respective allies were pushing contradicting accounts of events. This list of potential cases is by no means exhaustive.

Finally, the use of elements of digital forensic process tracing at the data gathering stage of a research project may also benefit scholars who use frequentist approaches. The use of source criticism and informal Bayesian analysis could significantly improve the quality of event data on war. Treating data points as mini case studies would enable more precise coding and the inclusion of a wider range of sources in conflict datasets. Naturally, this would also increase the workload involved in the creation of such datasets. However, the combination of abundance and murkiness that characterizes information on armed conflict in the social media age could make this effort worthwhile.

Naturally, the online information space surrounding armed conflict is subject to continuous change. The emergence of so-called deepfakes has decreased the *prima facie* credibility of video evidence in recent years. At the same time, improved mobile Internet coverage and phone camera capabilities have improved livestreaming opportunities and video quality while the quality and availability of satellite imagery has improved as well. In reaction to the multitude of online media reports exposing Russian soldiers' involvement in Ukraine in 2014-2015, the Russian Armed Forces imposed social media bans, and an increasing number of social media users restrict access to their profiles. At the same time, new platforms such as TikTok have led to a new surge in openly available video content. Adapting to these changes and staying on top of the ongoing transformation of modern information technology is a key challenge for the further development of digital forensic process tracing. However, the Internet's dominance over the information environment in which armed conflict takes place is *highly unlikely* to disappear, which means that the importance of digital forensic process tracing for research on war will only grow.

#### **10.4. Empirical Contribution: A War between Russia and Ukraine**

Returning to the case of the Donbas, my escalation sequence model highlights six critical junctures which are the key stepping-stones in the genesis of this war:

1. The first armed building occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk in early April;
2. The appearance of armed men and the outbreak of fighting in the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area in mid-April;
3. Armed clashes in Mariupol between mid-April and mid-June;
4. The sudden spread of fighting across several other parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions from late May to mid-June;
5. The use of tanks and heavy artillery across the different battlefields from mid-June onwards; and
6. The defeat of the advancing Ukrainian forces in late August.

The remaining empirical chapters of my dissertation have assessed the two main hypotheses that divide the political and academic debate on the causes of the Donbas war against the extent to which they can explain this escalation sequence. For each critical juncture, I have evaluated the extent to which the available digital open source evidence supports the claim that the events were primarily the result of a domestic dynamic or primarily the result of Russia's actions.

My dissertation has found that the primary cause of conflict escalation in the Donbas between April and August 2014 were the actions of the Russian state. A step-by-step analysis of the six critical junctures in the conflict's initial escalation sequence showed that Russian state-actors played the dominant role in four of them. Moreover, the two critical junctures that do not feature convincing evidence for a primary role of the Russian state are also the ones that featured the least violence. All key developments that turned the Donbas conflict into a full-scale war with thousands of casualties feature de facto Russian state organs as the key opponent of Ukrainian forces.

##### *10.4.1. Donetsk and Luhansk in early April*

Chapter four has shown that the conflict's first critical juncture was still primarily a domestic phenomenon. It is *likely* that the key actors behind the armed and permanent building occupations in Donetsk and Luhansk in early April were local

pro-Russian activists. Even though it is *almost certain* that these activists received some support from the Russian state, there is not enough evidence to conclude that Russian state actors were in control of events or the key driving force behind them. The available evidence suggests that the Kremlin and groups acting on its behalf were only one of several actors supporting the separatist movement at this initial stage. It is *likely* that the local activists behind the building occupations also received support from business networks surrounding Ukraine's former President Viktor Yanukovich. The region's most influential oligarchs – Rinat Akhmetov and Oleksandr Yefremov – also played at least an enabling role by refusing to take action against separatism. In this context, the degree of Russian involvement that can be deduced from the available evidence does not stand out as a factor that was more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the actions of locals. Hence, it is appropriate to speak of Russian-backed or pro-Russian separatism in the Donbas when referring to the events of early April. However, it is important to note that these events did not yet involve any armed clashes. Two buildings had been occupied and barricaded, but the Ukrainian Armed Forces had not yet been deployed to the Donbas and, so far, nobody had died as a result of militarized violence.

#### 10.4.2. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk

Chapter five has shown that the initial crossing of the threshold between peace and armed conflict in the Donbas with the conflict's first battle-related casualty was the direct result of an incursion by irregular Russian forces. Igor Girkin and his group of armed men had assisted the Russian state in the takeover of Crimea before they moved to the Donbas and turned the Sloviansk/Kramatorsk area into the conflict's first battlefield. Their incursion was financed and supervised by Russian oligarch and Kremlin ally Konstantin Malofeyev and Crimean "Prime Minister" Sergey Aksyonov who, according to Russian law, was a Russian state official. Igor Girkin and many members of his group returned to Russia after their engagement in the Donbas. Neither they nor their Russian sponsors were punished by the Russian state for their actions. In the context of this evidence, it is *almost certain* that Igor Girkin's group acted as an informal organ of the Russian state and carried out an incursion into Ukrainian territory on the Kremlin's behalf. The actions of Girkin's group *almost certainly* depended on the Kremlin's knowledge and approval. It is of secondary importance whether this knowledge

and approval came in the shape of a formal order or in the shape of an implicit signal. Either way, the Kremlin's willingness to let the armed paramilitaries that supported its annexation of Crimea attack mainland Ukraine was more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than the fact that Girkin and his men were happy to continue fighting. It was also more *disruptive* than the fact that Girkin's group received a certain degree of local support.

#### *10.4.3. Mariupol*

Chapter six has shown that, in the southern port city of Mariupol, the domestic resource and support base of the separatist movement was sufficient to cause some militarized violence but insufficient to cause a full-scale war. Evidence of Russian involvement in the Mariupol events is limited. Even though it is *likely* that the city's separatists received a certain degree of Russian support, it is *unlikely* that they were controlled by Russia to an extent that justifies characterizing them as organs of the Russian state. However, these local separatists failed to consolidate their control over the city, despite the Ukrainian military's withdrawal after the armed clashes of 9 May. Separatist forces faced competition from the local police and volunteer squads of workers from oligarch Rinat Akhmetov's local steelworks. These forces did not actively oppose the separatists but did not subordinate themselves, either. As a result, the separatists failed to establish a monopoly of violence over the city and were removed by the returning military in a relatively bloodless operation in mid-June. The events in Mariupol illustrate how the Donbas conflict could have developed if Russia had limited itself to supporting a domestic separatist movement rather than taking the lead and assuming control over it. However, in other parts of the region, Russia chose to play a more active role and did exactly that.

#### *10.4.4. The Fighting Spreads*

Chapter seven has shown how armed conflict spread from the initial two hotspots of Sloviansk/Kramatorsk and Mariupol to other parts of the Donbas in late May and early to mid-June. It argued that, in at least four of the five new theatres of armed conflict, the Ukrainian military was facing forces under Russian control. Near Volnovakha, the Ukrainian military clashed with Igor Bezler and the Horlivka-based group of fighters under his command. Bezler was a Russian military veteran, who had lived in Ukraine for many years. However, his

participation in the annexation of Crimea, his second identity provided by the Russian authorities, and his documented communication with Russian intelligence officer Vasiliy Geranin suggest that he was *almost certainly* an agent of the Russian state. In Donetsk, a unit of fighters that was *almost certainly* recruited and trained in Russia unsuccessfully tried to seize the city's airport. Moreover, the battle-hardened core of the Vostok Battalion, which was the key opponent of Ukrainian forces in other clashes in the Donetsk area, *highly likely* consisted of Russian citizens from Ossetia. At the same time, it is *almost certain* that the new "prime minister" of the Donetsk People's Republic, Aleksandr Boroday – a Russian citizen himself – closely coordinated his actions with Russian Presidential Adviser Vladislav Surkov. In Luhansk, it is *highly likely* that Russia's Wagner private military company played a leading role in attacks on Ukrainian military facilities and that separatist fighters in the city were supervised by Russian intelligence officer Oleg Ivannikov (call-sign Orion). In the south of Luhansk Region, forces led by Russian Cossack commander Nikolay Kozitsyn, who was *likely* acting with the knowledge and approval of the Russian state, were engaging the Ukrainian border forces. The only theatre of armed conflict in which Russia's leading role is merely a *realistic possibility* is the northwest of Luhansk Region, where armed men under the command of Pavlo Dromov and Oleksii Mozghovyi blocked the advance of the Ukrainian military. Although it is *almost certain* that Dromov and Mozghovyi enjoyed Russian support, there is not enough evidence to establish with a high degree of confidence that they acted as informal organs of the Russian state. However, the probability of this explanation is still slightly higher than the probability of them acting primarily independently. Moreover, along the frontlines that emerged in late May and early to mid-June, the northwest of Luhansk Region was the area that witnessed the least violence, and, in late July, Dromov and Mozghovyi were forced to retreat.

#### 10.4.5. Tanks and Heavy Artillery

Chapter eight has argued that Russian deliveries of tanks and heavy artillery to the Donbas from mid-June onwards indicate continued Russian control over the separatist movement. There is strong photo and video evidence from this time period, which shows the same individual tanks first in Russia and then in the Donbas. At the same time, there is no evidence for large-scale seizures of Ukrainian heavy arms by separatist forces. As a result, it is *highly likely* that



Russia supplied most if not all the separatists' heavy arms. By doing so, Russia reaffirmed that the Russian fighters and commanders in the Donbas were acting on its behalf. Rather than distancing itself from these fighters, the Russian military dramatically increased their capabilities by providing them with more powerful weaponry.

#### *10.4.6. Ukraine Defeated*

Chapter nine has shown that the involvement of Russia's regular armed forces was decisive in the final critical juncture in the conflict's initial escalation sequence. This critical juncture was of particular importance because it paved the way for the static, low-level violence that continues in the Donbas at the time of writing. After cross-border shelling had slowed the Ukrainian advance throughout July and August, Ukrainian forces were decisively defeated in three battles at the end of August. They had to abandon the siege of Luhansk, lost control over all areas southeast of Donetsk, and faced a new enemy offensive along the southern coast. In all three cases, there is convincing evidence for the involvement of Russian regular forces. This evidence consists of photos and videos of new Russian tank models and Russian servicemen on Ukrainian territory. Additional evidence for the size of the invasion force are videos and satellite imagery showing large military convoys on the move between the battlefields and the Russian border. Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that it is *almost certain* that an invasion by Russia's regular armed forces was the primary cause of the Ukrainian defeat in late August 2014.

#### *10.4.7. Implications for Further Research*

In summary, the available digital open source evidence suggests that organs of the Russian state were the key drivers behind at least four of the six critical junctures that define the genesis of the Donbas war. Removing these critical junctures from the escalation sequence would leave a number of armed men occupying administrative buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and a short period of fighting in Mariupol. In a counterfactual domestic conflict scenario, the building occupations in Donetsk may or may not have ended peacefully and the situation in Mariupol may or may not have developed in the same way without the Sloviansk precedent. The Ukrainian government may have refrained from launching an "antiterrorist operation" and may have been able to come to an

agreement with local elites and separatist activists. However, even in a worst-case counterfactual scenario, in which militarized violence would still have occurred, there is no plausible way in which this violence could have got anywhere near the level that the region experienced in reality. It is a *realistic possibility* that a domestic insurgency by pro-Russian rebels with limited support from Russia would have crossed the UCDP's armed conflict threshold of 25 casualties. At the same time, however, it is *almost certain* that an insurgency of this kind would have been defeated by early summer. It is also *almost certain* that such an insurgency would have involved only a tiny fraction of the death and destruction that Ukraine witnessed in 2014 and the years that followed. The lion's share of violence in the Donbas would not have been possible without people like Bezler, Boroday, Girkin, Kozitsyn, Mamiyev, and Utkin and the irregular Russian forces under their command. Neither would it have been possible without the supplies of tanks and heavy artillery from Russia; without cross border artillery shelling; and without the invasion of Russia's regular armed forces in late August. All this means that Russia should be seen as a primary rather than secondary conflict party in the Donbas. Russia's actions proved to be far more *disruptive* to the normal course of events than local manifestations of separatism. The scale of its involvement goes far beyond the internationalization of an internal conflict. Rather than supporting local rebels, Russia used a local fringe movement with negligible military capabilities as a cover for its own military actions against Ukraine with its own irregular and regular troops. For this reason, it is appropriate to label the Donbas conflict a delegated interstate war within a four-way typology consisting of internal, internationalized internal, delegated interstate, and interstate conflict. In the context of a two-way typology consisting of civil and interstate war, the Donbas conflict should be labelled as interstate.

The findings of my dissertation generally confirm the arguments of scholars who have previously expressed support for the invasion hypothesis. They confirm Wilson's (2016) argument that the domestic situation in the Donbas in 2014 could explain a certain degree of "civil conflict," but not a "civil war." They confirm Laryš and Suleimanov's (2021) argument that Russian involvement ruined the attempts of local elites to keep separatist activity contained and use it for political bargaining. They confirm Kuromiya's (2019) argument that the regional history of the Donbas does not provide a suitable explanation for the outbreak of war and

Galeotti's (2016, 286) argument that Russia's intelligence services played an important role. They confirm Hosaka's (2021, 107–9) argument that the labelling of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) as non-state actors is misleading. And they confirm Mitrokhin's (2015) argument that the conflict was a Russian attack that proceeded in phases. Russia increased its involvement when there were signs that its previous measures were insufficient to keep the conflict going. My dissertation underpins the conclusions of these scholars and others who explicitly support the invasion hypothesis with solid methodological, conceptual, and empirical foundations. It also adds additional nuances by outlining how Russian involvement varied not only over time but also across different theatres of the conflict. Moreover, my dissertation vindicates the numerous scholarly works that implicitly support the invasion hypothesis by focusing on Russia's role or by using terminology that suggests an interstate conflict.

In turn, the findings of my dissertation disprove the hypothesis that Russia played a secondary role in a primarily internal conflict. They contradict the findings of scholars who explicitly make this argument (Davies 2016; Katchanovski 2016; Kudelia 2016; Loshkariov and Sushentsov 2016; Matsuzato 2017; Matveeva 2016; 2018; Nitsova 2021; Robinson 2016; Sakwa 2015; 2017b; Tsygankov 2015). Kudelia (2016, 5) sums up his argument by saying that Russia "exploited" domestic developments in the Donbas, "but did not play a determining role in them." I have shown that the exact opposite is the case. Russia did play the determining role in the process that turned separatist unrest into militarized violence and then into full-scale war. The fact that Russia exploited domestic factors during this process does not change its determining role. For this reason, the findings of my dissertation contradict the way in which the conflict is currently coded by the UCDP and the COW (Pettersson and Öberg 2020, 608; Dixon and Sarkees 2020b; Palmer et al. 2020). At the same time, my findings call into question the use of the Donbas war as an internal conflict case study by Rauta (2016), Schram (2021), and Sambanis et al. (2020). They also challenge Boyd-Barrett (2017) and Barthel and Bürkner's (2020) claims regarding an alleged anti-Russian bias in Western media coverage. Moreover, my findings contradict Schneckener's (2021, 46–47) suggestion that the war developed an internal momentum that led to a "fragmentation of violent actors" who, at least for some

time, escaped Russian control. On the contrary, my dissertation suggests that Russia successfully adjusted its actions to steer events in the desired direction, and I found no evidence for any loss of control. However, this finding does not contradict Schneckener's more general critique of hybrid war as a label for the conflict and of geopolitics as an explanatory framework for it. Neither does my dissertation invalidate the findings of the numerous works that implicitly support the civil war hypothesis by focusing on domestic causes of the war or by using terminology that suggests an internal conflict. There can be no doubt that domestic causes contributed to the escalation of violence in the region. As my dissertation has pointed out, there was a certain degree of domestic support for separatism and Russia's actions, and many of the separatist fighters were locals. Researching these aspects of the conflict and their causes remains an important objective as long as this research is framed in an appropriate way. It simply has to make clear that what is being investigated are auxiliary causes that enabled an interstate conflict and not the primary causes of a civil war. Other potentially misleading terminology should be changed accordingly. Speaking of "Russian-led separatists" or "separatist forces controlled by Russia" instead of "pro-Russian separatists" or "Russian-backed separatists," for example, would go a long way towards changing the framing of many research projects without compromising their findings.

Regarding the way forward, the findings of my dissertation suggests that further research into the primary causes of the Donbas war should focus on Russia's foreign and security policy. This does not mean that societal divisions within Ukraine and its domestic politics do not merit further research. On the contrary, such research can offer important additional insights into why the Russian-Ukrainian war took place in the Donbas and why certain parts of the local population were willing to fight in the ranks of irregular Russian forces. The primary reason why such forces appeared in the first place, however, can only be found in Moscow. For this reason, future comparative and quantitative research should treat the Donbas conflict as a case of interstate rather than civil war. At the same time, future research should not treat Ukraine as a case of state failure and interethnic conflict but as a case of a country that was invaded by its neighbour. Russia, in turn, should be treated as an actor that is prepared to use military aggression to achieve perceived tactical gains in its neighbourhood.

What remains largely obscure and requires additional attention, however, are the exact decision-making processes within Russia's political elite. My dissertation has not been able to establish whether the actions of Russian state actors in the Donbas were the result of formal and explicit orders from the Kremlin. It leaves open the possibility that the relevant actors instead responded to informal signalling which indicated that they were free to or expected to act in a certain way. Neither does my dissertation address the motivation and reasoning behind Russia's action or potential disagreements within the state's inner leadership circle on the right course of action. Due to their secretive nature, both the decision-making processes within the Russian elite and the motivations that underly these processes are challenging research topics that cannot be addressed through digital forensic process tracing alone. Nevertheless, as far as data availability permits, these topics are worth pursuing. A better understanding of Kremlin decision-making processes and motivations could improve future academic research and also help policymakers to find ways of convincing Russia to end the Donbas war.

#### *10.4.8. Policy Implications*

My dissertation has shown that the keys to conflict resolution in the Donbas and to the prevention of similar conflicts in Russia's near abroad can be found in Moscow. It was Moscow's choice to start an armed conflict in the spring and summer of 2014 and to establish the DNR and LNR as its satellite entities within Ukraine. It was also Moscow's choice to refrain from conquering the whole of the Donbas and to settle for a semi-frozen, low-level conflict along a mostly static contact line instead. Whether this conflict comes to an end and whether Ukraine will regain control over the whole of the Donbas comes down to Moscow's choice as well. Of course, reintegration of the DNR and LNR would be a serious challenge for Ukrainian politics. It would require elaborate reconciliation and transitional justice efforts as well as a sizable reconstruction programme. However, it must be kept in mind that several theatres of war analysed in my dissertation – Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, Mariupol, Lysychansk, and Severodonetsk – were liberated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in summer 2014 and have remained quiet ever since. Militant separatism has vanished not only from these places but from all Ukrainian-controlled parts of the Donbas. There

are no pro-Russian partisan groups fighting the Ukrainian security forces, even though the area would be a promising breeding ground for such underground activity in theory. Indoctrination or repression of the local population is virtually non-existent while support for the political forces that hold power in Kyiv remains low. The pro-Russian Opposition Platform for Life with its campaign focus on peace and pre-war nostalgia continues to be popular with the local electorate. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be any appetite whatsoever to re-join the self-proclaimed republics. On the contrary, residents of the DNR and LNR continue to cross the contact line to collect their Ukrainian pensions or visit relatives on a regular basis – at least until pandemic-related restrictions made travel difficult. Combined with these observations, the findings of my dissertation suggest that the domestic challenges for peace and reintegration are minor compared to the fundamental obstacle to conflict resolution, which is Russia's military and political control over the DNR and LNR. In turn, this means that, in order to end the war in eastern Ukraine, the international community has to focus its efforts on ways to convince Russia to let the Donbas go. Just like local separatism was an important but secondary cause of the conflict, domestic Ukrainian reconciliation measures are an important but secondary component of its solution. The war started, first and foremost, because of Russia's involvement. If it comes to an end, it will be, first and foremost, because of Russia's withdrawal.

At the time of writing, however, there are no signs that such a withdrawal is in sight. On the contrary, the Russian troop build-up of April 2021 in Crimea and along the Ukrainian border led to fears of another escalation of violence in the Donbas. The findings of my dissertation suggest that such fears were not unfounded, and that Ukraine has reasons for continued concern. They suggest that the international community does not only need to think about ways to convince Russia to return the Donbas but also about ways to prevent it from engaging in further conflict escalation in Ukraine or elsewhere in its neighbourhood. Moreover, it needs to prepare measures that are ready for implementation if preventative measures fail. Even if further conflict escalation by Russia is considered *unlikely* or even *highly unlikely* for the time being, the experience of 2014 has shown that its probability is by no means low enough to justify unpreparedness.

While my findings suggest that Russia is responsible for various breaches of international law in relation to its action in the Donbas, it does not vindicate all actions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The right to self-defence cannot justify breaches of international humanitarian law, which need to be investigated no matter which side commits them. Such investigations need to focus on the circumstances of individual cases and must be separated from the overarching question of responsibility for the war as a whole.

### **10.5. On Multicausality: Concluding Remarks**

My dissertation has investigated questions of causality throughout all its sections. Any study of causality has to deal with fundamental questions that go deep into the philosophy of science. The methodology section of my dissertation has discussed these questions in depth and some of the empirical chapters have revisited them. However, to better illustrate and summarize my dissertation's findings, it is worth revisiting a question of particular importance once more in this final section, namely the question how to rank simultaneously occurring necessary causes according to their importance. If both domestic separatism and Russian interference were necessary conditions for the escalation of violence, how can one be more important than the other? How is it possible to differentiate between intervention and delegation if both the Russian leadership's actions and local mobilization were necessary components of the separatists' military success? And how is it possible to decide whether the Russian imperialists at the heart of the separatist formations were acting on behalf of the state if both their personal motivation and the state's approval were necessary conditions for their actions?

My dissertation has used the philosophical paradigm of *abnormalism* as summarized by Roberts (1996, 95–99) to tackle this challenge. In his summary, Roberts uses the example of different outbreaks of fire to explain the necessity and appropriateness of ranking different necessary conditions according to the extent to which they *disrupt* the normal course of events. These examples can be developed further and turned into an allegory for the escalation of the Donbas conflict. Of course, this allegory is far from perfect, but it summarizes my dissertation's key argument in a concise and accessible way.

My allegory consists of two scenarios. In the first scenario, large parts of a half-timbered house burn down after one of its inhabitants deliberately sets fire to a curtain. The person in question did not like their new landlord and thought that a fire would enable the owner of the neighbouring property to buy the house cheaply. The owner of the neighbouring property, who is known for his unscrupulousness and also holds a personal grudge against the arsonist's new landlord, encouraged the arsonist and secretly fanned the flames once the fire got going. In this scenario, it makes sense to emphasise the arsonist as the main cause of the damage to the house. It is the action of this person that is most *disruptive* to the normal course of events. The neighbour plays an important role that should be mentioned in any comprehensive account of events. However, even if the arsonist would not have set fire to the curtain without the neighbour's encouragement and even if the house would not have burned properly without the neighbour fanning the flames, the neighbour's role remains secondary. The arsonist's act of setting fire to their own home is more *abnormal* and *disruptive* than the neighbour's act of taking advantage of the situation, especially in light of what is known about the neighbour's character. Finally, the house's structural features could be mentioned as a contributing condition if space and time permit, but this is optional. While the house may not have burned if it had not been constructed with a timber frame, it would be inappropriate to single out this feature as the fire's primary cause. After all, many other half-timbered houses do not catch fire.

In the second scenario, the initial conditions are mostly the same, but the house is constructed in a way that prevents the curtain fire from reaching the timber frame. Instead, the initial fire causes only superficial damage. The neighbour reacts by handing several Molotov cocktails to a pyromaniac with a history of arsonism and tells him that it would be a shame if anything happened to the semi-timbered house next door. The pyromaniac throws a Molotov cocktail. As a result, one of the rooms catches fire while the resident of the house causes further superficial damage to another room by lighting another curtain. When the poorly equipped and inexperienced fire brigade arrives, the pyromaniac throws his remaining Molotov cocktails into several other rooms and orders the resident to join him in fanning the flames. While the fire brigade tries to attend to the multitude of burning rooms, the neighbour personally adds gasoline to all fires. When the



fire brigade is about to contain them anyway – by using controversial methods that also cause damage to the structure of the building – the neighbour personally cuts the fire brigade’s water supply and destroys most of its equipment. In this second scenario, it would no longer be appropriate to focus on the resident’s behaviour as the main cause of the fire. This conclusion holds even under the assumption that the neighbour would not have acted without the resident’s initial arson attempt and that the damage would have been smaller had the resident not obeyed the command to fan the flames. Either of these actions by the resident are clearly less *disruptive* and *abnormal* than what the neighbour did. At the same time, the actions of the pyromaniac in this scenario are also less *disruptive* and *abnormal* than the fact that the neighbour enabled a known arsonist to set fire to a house. Hence, any credible account of the fire would have to start with the neighbour’s actions. Investigations of the resident or the pyromaniac and their motives would have to emphasise that their actions represented secondary, auxiliary causes. Finally, the structure of the house merits even less attention than in the first scenario. It withstood the initial arson attempts, whereas a variety of other building types would also have succumbed to the combined power of Molotov cocktails, gasoline, and sabotage of the fire brigade’s efforts.

This allegory provides a simplified illustration of my dissertation’s findings. It also provides a justification for my dissertation’s actor-based approach and my weighting of causal factors. The first scenario is the civil war hypothesis, and the second scenario is the invasion hypothesis. My dissertation has shown that, according to the available DOSI evidence, events in the Donbas in April-August 2014 resembled the latter scenario rather than the former. The house is the Donbas, the building structure is the region’s history and society, the fire is armed separatism, the resident represents local pro-Russian activists and their local supporters,<sup>40</sup> and the neighbour is the Russian state. The two burned curtains are the initial building occupations of early April and the events in Mariupol. The pyromaniac represents irregular Russian fighters, the Molotov cocktails are these fighters’ armed incursions into Ukraine, the gasoline represents Russian tanks

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<sup>40</sup> For simplicity’s sake, I refrained from introducing local elites as a separate actor in this allegory. However, they could be depicted as a corrupt property management company that underestimates the destructive potential of the fire and does little to stop it because it hopes to profit from refurbishment works.

and heavy artillery, and the fire brigade is the Ukrainian army. My dissertation has argued that it was the interplay of all these components that was necessary for events to unfold in the way they did. However, the presence of such a multitude of necessary conditions does not mean that all these conditions are of equal importance. My dissertation has found that, according to the *abnormalism* paradigm, the most important cause of the war in the Donbas were the actions of the Russian state. This does not mean that other conditions do not deserve political attention or academic scrutiny. However, it does mean that attempts to study the conflict's origins or search for potential solutions need to at least acknowledge the central importance of Russia's actions. Moreover, it also means that the Donbas war is not an internal Ukrainian conflict but primarily a war between Russia and Ukraine.

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## Appendix 1: Academic Articles Focusing on the Donbas Conflict's Causes

Year	Author	Title	Category	Journal Title	Journal Type
2016	Davies, Lance	Russia's 'Governance' Approach: Intervention and the Conflict in the Donbas	1	Europe-Asia Studies	Area Studies
2018	Giuliano, Elise	Who supported separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and popular opinion at the start of the Ukraine crisis	1	Post-Soviet Affairs	Area Studies
2016	Katchanovski, Ivan	The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine?	1	European Politics and Society	Area Studies
2016	Kudelia, Serhiy	The Donbas Rift	1	Russian Politics & Law	Area Studies
2016	Loshkariov, Ivan D; Sushentsov, Andrey A	Radicalization of Russians in Ukraine: from 'accidental' diaspora to rebel movement	1	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies
2017	Matsuzato, Kimitaka	The Donbas War: Outbreak and Deadlock	1	Demokratizatsiya	Area Studies
2016	Matveeva, Anna	No Moscow stooges: identity polarization and guerrilla movements in Donbass	1	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies
2021	Nitsova, Silviya	Why the Difference? Donbas, Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk After Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution	1	Europe-Asia Studies	Area Studies

2016	Robinson, Paul	Russia's role in the war in Donbass, and the threat to European security	1	European Politics and Society	Area Studies
2017	Sakwa, Richard	The Ukraine Syndrome and Europe: Between Norms and Space	1	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies
2016	Sotiriou, Stylianos A	The irreversibility of history: the case of the Ukrainian crisis (2013-2015)	1	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies
2016	Strasheim, Julia	Power-sharing, commitment problems, and armed conflict in Ukraine	1	Civil Wars	Interdisciplinary
2015	Tsygankov, Andrei	Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy	1	Post-Soviet Affairs	Area Studies
2019	Aliyev, Huseyn	The Logic of Ethnic Responsibility and Progovernment Mobilization in East Ukraine Conflict	2	Comparative Political Studies	Political Science
2020	Aliyev, Huseyn	"Unlikely Recruits": Why Politically Irrelevant Ethnic Minorities Participate in Civil Wars?	2	Studies in Conflict & Terrorism	Interdisciplinary
2020	Aliyev, Huseyn	Pro-government Anti-government Armed Groups? Toward Theorizing Pro-government "Government Challengers"	2	Terrorism & Political Violence	Interdisciplinary

2021	Aliyev, Huseyn	When neighborhood goes to war. Exploring the effect of belonging on violent mobilization in Ukraine	2	Eurasian Geography & Economics	Area Studies
2020	Barthel, Martin; Bürkner, Hans-Joachim	Ukraine and the Big Moral Divide: What Biased Media Coverage Means to East European Borders	2	Geopolitics	International Relations
2017	Boyd-Barrett, Oliver	Ukraine, Mainstream Media and Conflict Propaganda	2	Journalism Studies	Journalism Studies
2017	Donaldson, Robert H.	The Role of NATO Enlargement in the Ukraine Crisis	2	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies
2019	Kudelia, Serhiy	How they joined? Militants and informers in the armed conflict in Donbas	2	Small Wars & Insurgencies	Interdisciplinary
2019	Kudelia, Serhiy; van Zyl, Johanna	In My Name: The Impact of Regional Identity on Civilian Attitudes in the Armed Conflict in Donbas	2	Nationalities Papers	Interdisciplinary
2018	Malyarenko, Tatyana; Wolff, Stefan	The logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the conflict in Donbas	2	Post-Soviet Affairs	Area Studies
2016	Malyarenko, Tetyana; Galbreath, David J	Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine: beyond integration and abolition	2	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies

2018	Matsuzato, Kimitaka	The Donbas War and politics in cities on the front: Mariupol and Kramatorsk	2	Nationalities Papers	Interdisciplinary
2018	Pechenkina, Anna O; Bausch, Andrew W; Skinner, Kiron K	The Pitfalls of List Experiments in Conflict Zones	2	Civil Wars	Interdisciplinary
2016	Rauta, Vladimir	Proxy agents, auxiliary forces, and sovereign defection: assessing the outcomes of using non-state actors in civil conflicts	2	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies
2020	Sambanis, Nicholas; Skaperdas Stergios; Wohlforth, William	External Intervention, Identity, and Civil War	2	Comparative Political Studies	Political Science
2020	San-Akca, Belgin; Sever, S. Duygu; Yilmaz, Suhnaz	Does natural gas fuel civil war? Rethinking energy security, international relations, and fossil-fuel conflict	2	Energy Research & Social Science	Interdisciplinary
2021	Schram, Peter	Hassling: How States Prevent a Preventive War	2	American Journal of Political Science	Political Science
2016	Zhukov, Yuri M	Trading hard hats for combat helmets: The economics of rebellion in eastern Ukraine	2	Journal of comparative economics	Economics



2017	Aleprete Jr., Michael E.	Minimizing Loss: Explaining Russian Policy Choices during the Ukrainian Crisis	3	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies
2020	Åtland, Kristian	Destined for deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the unfulfilled Minsk agreements	3	Post-Soviet Affairs	Area Studies
2019	Bukkvoll, Tor	Fighting on behalf of the state-the issue of pro-government militia autonomy in the Donbas war	3	Post-Soviet Affairs	Area Studies
2020	Harris, Erika	What is the Role of Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Russia–Ukraine Crisis?	3	Europe-Asia Studies	Area Studies
2016	Karagiannis, Emmanuel	Ukrainian volunteer fighters in the eastern front: ideas, political-social norms and emotions as mobilization mechanisms	3	Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies	Area Studies
2016	Kolsto, Pal	Crimea vs. Donbas: How Putin Won Russian Nationalist Support-and Lost it Again	3	Slavic Review	Area Studies
2019	Kostyuk, Nadiya; Zhukov, Yuri M	Invisible Digital Front: Can Cyber Attacks Shape Battlefield Events?	3	The Journal of Conflict Resolution	Political Science
2018	Mölder, Holger; Sazonov, Vladimir	Information Warfare as the Hobbesian Concept of Modern Times - The Principles, Techniques, and Tools of Russian Information Operations in the Donbass	3	Journal of Slavic Military Studies	Area Studies

2020	Pertile, Marco; Faccio, Sondra	Access to water in Donbass and Crimea: Attacks against water infrastructures and the blockade of the North Crimea Canal	3	Review of European Comparative & International Environmental Law	Law
2020	Risch, William Jay	European Dreams and European Nightmares in Prewar Donetsk	3	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies
2018	Saressalo, Teemu; Huhtinen, Aki-Mauri	The Information Blitzkrieg - "Hybrid" Operations Azov Style	3	Journal of Slavic Military Studies	Area Studies
2018	Stebelsky, Ihor	A tale of two regions: geopolitics, identities, narratives, and conflict in Kharkiv and the Donbas	3	Eurasian Geography & Economics	Area Studies
2017	Van de Graaf, Thijs; Colgan, Jeff D.	Russian gas games or well-oiled conflict? Energy security and the 2014 Ukraine crisis	3	Energy Research & Social Science	Interdisciplinary
2019	Buckley, Cynthia J.; Clem, Ralph S.; Herron, Erik S.	An assessment of attributing public healthcare infrastructure damage in the Donbas five years after Euromaidan: implications for Ukrainian state legitimacy	4	Eurasian Geography & Economics	Area Studies
2016	Bukkvoll, Tor	Why Putin went to war: ideology, interests and decision-making in the Russian use of force in Crimea and Donbas	4	Contemporary Politics	International Relations

2019	D'Anieri, Paul	Magical realism: assumptions, evidence and prescriptions in the Ukraine conflict	4	Eurasian Geography & Economics	Area Studies
2020	Gentile, Michael	Diabolical Suggestions: Disinformation and the Curious Scale of Nationalism in Ukrainian Geopolitical Fault-line Cities	4	Geopolitics	International Relations
2019	Kleinschmidt, Jochen	Offensive realism, differentiation theory, and the war in Ukraine	4	International Politics	International Relations
2019	Kuzyk, Petro	Ukraine's national integration before and after 2014. Shifting 'East–West' polarization line and strengthening political community	4	Eurasian Geography & Economics	Area Studies
2019	Landwehr, Jakob	No way out? Opportunities for mediation efforts in the Donbas region	4	East European Politics	Area Studies
2020	Osiichuk, Maryna; Shepotylo, Oleksandr	Conflict and well-being of civilians: The case of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war	4	Economic Systems	Economics
2020	Sanders, Deborah; Tuck, Christopher	The Ukraine Conflict and the Problems of War Termination	4	Journal of Slavic Military Studies	Area Studies
2019	Umland, Andreas	Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaydan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the "Azov" Battalion in 2014	4	Terrorism & Political Violence	Interdisciplinary

2019	Bowen, Andrew S	Coercive diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian strategy in Eastern Ukraine	5	Journal of Strategic Studies	International Relations
2016	Galeotti, Mark	Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'?	5	Small Wars & Insurgencies	Interdisciplinary
2019	Hosaka, Sanshiro	Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War	5	Nationalities Papers	Interdisciplinary
2019	Kuromiya, Hiroaki	The War in the Donbas in Historical Perspective	5	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies
2019	Kuzio, Taras	Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiia failed	5	Communist and Post-Communist Studies	Area Studies
2021	Larys, M; Souleimanov, EA	Delegated Rebellions as an Unwanted Byproduct of Subnational Elites' Miscalculation: A Case Study of the Donbas	5	Problems of Post-Communism	Area Studies
2020	Melnyk, Oleksandr	From the "Russian Spring" to the Armed Insurrection: Russia, Ukraine and Political Communities in the Donbas and Southern Ukraine.	5	Soviet & Post-Soviet Review	Area Studies

2020	Mykhnenko, Vlad	Causes and Consequences of the War in Eastern Ukraine: An Economic Geography Perspective	5	Europe-Asia Studies	Area Studies
2016	Wilson, Andrew	The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War	5	Europe-Asia Studies	Area Studies

### Coding Rules

1: Explicitly supports civil war hypothesis. 2: Implicitly supports civil war hypothesis. 3: Remains neutral. 4: Implicitly supports invasion hypothesis. 5: Explicitly supports invasion hypothesis

## Appendix 2: Example of Python Code Used to Compile Media Dataset

### Step 1: Compiling List of *Novorosinform* Articles for Scraping

```
import requests
from bs4 import BeautifulSoup as bs
headers = {"User-Agent": "Mozilla/5.0 (Macintosh; Intel Mac OS x 10_9_5)
AppleWebKit 537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome"}
import pandas as pd

sites = []
for number in range(10907,10926):
    sites.append('https://novorosinform.org/page/'+str(number)+'?s')
sites

search_results = []
for site in sites:
    page = requests.get(site, headers=headers).text
    soup = bs(page, "html.parser")

    items = soup.findAll("div", {"class": "item-details"})
    for item in items:
        search_results.append(item)

datetimes = []
urls = []
headlines = []
excerpts = []
dates = []
times = []
for x in search_results:
    datetime = x.find('time').getText()
    datetimes.append(datetime)
    ctitle = x.find("a")
    title = ctitle.get('title')
```

```

headlines.append(title)
if ctitle.get('href')[0] == '/':
    link = 'https://novorosinform.org'+ctitle.get('href')
else:
    link = ctitle.get('href')
urls.append(link)
excerpt = x.find('div',{'class':'td-excerpt'}).getText()
excerpts.append(excerpt)
for y in datetimes:
    y = y.split(',')
    dates.append(y[0])
    times.append(y[1])

df = pd.DataFrame()
df = df.append(pd.DataFrame({"Date": dates, "Time": times, "Headline":
headlines, "Excerpt":excerpts, "URL":urls}), ignore_index = True)

#Truncating all fields to enable Excel export
df = df.apply(lambda x: x.str.slice(0, 32767))

df.to_excel('NovorossiyaLinks2.xls', encoding = 'utf-8', index = False)

```

## Step 2: Scraping Article Bodies:

```

import requests
from bs4 import BeautifulSoup as bs
headers = {"User-Agent":"Mozilla/5.0 (Macintosh; Intel Mac OS x 10_9_5)
AppleWebKit 537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome"}
import pandas as pd

df = pd.read_excel('NovorossiyaLinks2.xls')

bodies = []
all_links = list(df['URL'])

```

```

links = all_links
len(all_links)

counter = 0
for site in links:
    try:
        page = requests.get(site, headers=headers).text
        soup = bs(page, "html.parser")
        try:
            body_raw = soup.find_all('p')
            ctext = []
            for paragraph in body_raw:
                if paragraph.text != "":
                    ctext.append(paragraph.text)
            body = '\n\n'.join(ctext)
            bodies.append(body)
        except:
            bodies.append("")
    except: bodies.append('Error')
    counter = counter+1
    print((str(counter)+'of'+str(len(links))), end="\r")

len(bodies)

df["Body"] = bodies

df = df[['Date', 'Time', 'URL', 'Headline', 'Body']]

df.to_excel('Novorossiya_CombinedSearch2014_Complete2.xls', encoding =
'utf-8', index = False)

```



### Appendix 3: Initial Donbas Conflict Escalation Ladder and Search Terms

Escalation Threshold	Keywords
1. Antimaidan protests	протест* OR митинг*
2. Formation of "self-defense units"	ополчен* OR отряд* AND самооборон* OR территориальн* AND громад* OR дружин* OR Луганск* AND гварди*
3. Occupation of administrative buildings	штурм* OR ворва* OR баррикад* OR прорва* OR захват* [in headline or subhead only]
4. Protests lead to casualties	(протест* OR митинг*) AND (избил* OR избивал* OR избит* OR драк* OR телесные**повреждения OR скорая**помощь OR пострада* OR убил* OR ранен* OR погиб OR погибли OR погибла OR погибло OR убит OR убита OR убиты OR убил*)
5. Authorities arrest protest leaders	задерж* AND (организатор* OR лидер* OR народн*)
6. Appearance of armed militias	автоматы OR автоматов OR автоматам OR автоматами OR автоматах OR миномет* OR пулемет* OR ПЗПК OR человек*
7. Military is deployed	АТО OR антитеррор*
8. Armed clashes	(бойц* OR боевик* OR АТО OR батальон* OR карател* OR силовик* OR террорист* OR наемник*) AND (бой OR боя OR бою OR боем OR бое OR бои OR боев OR боям OR боями OR боях OR обстрел* OR перестрел* OR столкновен* OR уничто*) AND (ранен* OR погиб OR погибли OR погибла OR погибло OR убит OR убита OR убиты OR уничто*)

9. Attacks on border checkpoints	(погранотряд* OR погранич* OR пункт* AND пропуск*) AND (штурм* OR атак* OR напад* OR захват*)
10. Use of air force	авиация OR авиацию OR авиаудар* OR Су-* OR истербител* OR сби* AND (авиа* OR самолет* OR вертолет*)
11. Use of tanks and heavy artillery	танк* OR артиллер* OR Т-* OR Торнадо OR Град [in headline or subhead only]
12. Cross-border shelling	обстрел AND (со**стороны** РФ OR из**РФ OR с**территории** РФ OR со**стороны**России OR из**России OR с**территории**России)
13. Encirclement of major cities	(Нацгварди* OR ВСУ* OR АТО OR батальон* OR карател* OR силовик*) AND (окруж* OR перерез* OR разъедин* OR изоляц* OR зачистк* OR в***кольцо OR взя* AND под***контроль OR освобо* OR вошли**в OR наступ* OR вытес* OR отступ*) [in headline or subhead only]
14. Invasion of regular Russian troops	(регулярны* OR кадровы*) AND росси* AND (военн* OR войс* OR подразделен* OR арми* OR сил*)

#### Appendix 4: Academic Articles Using Process Tracing to Study War

Year	Author	Title	Benchmark Met	Journal Title
2021	Atkinson, Douglas B	The issues are the issue: Intangible salience and war duration	Yes	International Interactions
2021	Barma, Naazneen H.	Do petroleum rents fuel conflict in developing countries? A case study of political instability in Timor-Leste	Yes	Energy Research & Social Science
2017	Bateson, Regina	The socialization of civilians and militia members: Evidence from Guatemala	Yes	Journal of Peace Research
2015	Ceccorulli, Michela; Coticchia, Fabrizio	Multidimensional Threats and Military Engagement: The Case of the Italian Intervention in Libya	Yes	Mediterranean Politics
2021	Codjo, Juste	Confronting Rebellion in Weak States: Government Response to Military Mutiny in Benin	Yes	African Studies Review
2017	D'Amato, Silvia; Del Panta, Gianni	Does rentierism have a conditional effect on violence? Regime oil dependency and civil war in Algeria	Yes	The Extractive Industries and Society
2021	Dawson, Grant	"No future for Libya with Gaddafi": Classical realism, status and revenge in the UK intervention in Libya	Yes	Cambridge Review of International Affairs

2019	Eisenman, Joshua	China's Vietnam War Revisited: A Domestic Politics Perspective	Yes	Journal of Contemporary China
2019	Ghais, Suzanne	Consequences of Excluding Armed Groups from Peace Negotiations: Chad and the Philippines	Yes	International Negotiation
2020	Goodman, Joshua R.	"In the Wider View": The Geostrategic Determinants of Counterinsurgency Strategy and Adaptation, Evidence from the Arab and Jewish Rebellions in the Palestine Mandate	Yes	Security Studies
2021	Grech-Madin, Charlotte	Water and Warfare: The Evolution and Operation of the Water Taboo	Yes	International Security
2020	Hafez, Mohammed M.	Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars	Yes	Terrorism and Political Violence
2019	Holtermann, Helge	Diversions Rebel Violence in Territorial Civil War	Yes	International Studies Quarterly
2019	Holtermann, Helge	Blinding the Elephant: Combat, Information, and Rebel Violence	Yes	Terrorism and Political Violence
2020	Idler, Annette	The Logic of Illicit Flows in Armed Conflict: Explaining Variation in Violent Nonstate Group Interactions in Colombia	Yes	World Politics

2018	Jenne, Nicole	When conquest would have paid: domestic mobilization and political constraints in the Thai-Cambodian border conflict 2008–2011	Yes	Global Change, Peace & Security
2021	Mendelsohn, Barak	The Battle for Algeria: Explaining Fratricide among Armed Nonstate Actors	Yes	Studies in Conflict & Terrorism
2019	Mosinger, Eric S.	Balance of Loyalties: Explaining Rebel Factional Struggles in the Nicaraguan Revolution	Yes	Security Studies
2020	Pedersen, Rasmus Brun; Reykers, Yf	Show them the flag: status ambitions and recognition in small state coalition warfare	Yes	European Security
2020	Schenoni, Luis L.; Braniff, Sean; Battaglino, Jorge	Was the Malvinas/Falklands a Diversionary War? A Prospect-Theory Reinterpretation of Argentina's Decline	Yes	Security Studies
2018	Schwartz, Rachel A; Straus, Scott	What drives violence against civilians in civil war? Evidence from Guatemala's conflict archives	Yes	Journal of Peace Research
2021	Winward, Mark	Intelligence Capacity and Mass Violence: Evidence From Indonesia	Yes	Comparative Political Studies
2018	Biberman, Yelena	Self-Defense Militias, Death Squads, and State Outsourcing of Violence in India and Turkey	No	Journal of Strategic Studies

2019	Day, Christopher R.	“Survival Mode”: Rebel Resilience and the Lord’s Resistance Army	No	Terrorism and Political Violence
2015	Forney, Jonathan Filip	Who Can We Trust with a Gun? Information Networks and Adverse Selection in Militia Recruitment	No	Journal of Conflict Resolution
2019	Gürcan, Efe Can	Political geography of Turkey’s intervention in Syria: underlying causes and consequences (2011-2016)	No	Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research
2020	Hartwig, Jason	Composite Warfare and Civil War Outcome	No	Terrorism and Political Violence
2016	Holtermann, Helge	How Can Weak Insurgent Groups Grow? Insights From Nepal	No	Terrorism and Political Violence
2020	Isani, Mujtaba Ali	Religion, rationalism and civil war: The case of Algeria	No	African Security Review
2020	Johais, Eva; Bayer, Markus; Lambach, Daniel	How do states collapse? Towards a model of causal mechanisms	No	Global Change, Peace & Security
2021	Lobell, Steven E.	Preventive military strike or preventive war? The fungibility of power resources	No	Cambridge Review of International Affairs

2020	Lundgren, Magnus	Causal mechanisms in civil war mediation: Evidence from Syria	No	European Journal of International Relations
2016	Meyer, Christoph O.; Otto, Florian	How to warn: 'Outside-in warnings' of Western governments about violent conflict and mass atrocities	No	Media, War & Conflict
2018	Recchia, Stefano	The Paradox of Safe Areas in Ethnic Civil Wars	No	Global Responsibility to Protect
2018	Sample, Susan G.	Anticipating War? War Preparations and the Steps-to-War Thesis	No	British Journal of Political Science
2018	Siegel, David	The State and the Opposition: Change and Transformation in Tajikistan's Civil War	No	Current Politics and Economics of Northern and Western Asia
2019	Tabaar, Mohammad Ayatollahi	Factional politics in the Iran–Iraq war	No	Journal of Strategic Studies
2017	Tang, Shiping; Xiong, Yihan; Li, Hui	Does Oil Cause Ethnic War? Comparing Evidence from Process-tracing with Quantitative Results	No	Security Studies
2021	Tezcür, Güneş Murat; Horschig, Doreen	A conditional norm: chemical warfare from colonialism to contemporary civil wars	No	Third World Quarterly

2019	Tunçer-Kılavuz, Idil	Success or Failure in the Peace Processes of Aceh and Sri Lanka: A Comparative Study	No	Terrorism and Political Violence
2020	Warnecke, Andrea	Can Intergovernmental Organizations Be Peacebuilders in Intra-State War?	No	Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding
2021	Waterman, Alex	Counterinsurgents' use of force and "armed orders" in Naga Northeast India	No	Asian Security