Studia Administracji i Bezpieczeństwa
nr 19 (2025)
s. 163–178

ISSN 2543-6961
e-ISSN 2720-3093
LICENCJA: CC BY-NC

Sanshiro Hosaka
ORCID: 0000-0002-3258-0455
International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn (Estonia)

Misrepresenting Agency: The Fiction of "Non-State Actors" in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, 2014-2021

Fałszywe przypisywanie sprawczości: fikcja „aktorów niepaństwowych" w inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę w latach 2014–2021

Abstract
Although Russia's full-scale invasion since 2022 is clearly an interstate war, conflict-resolution programs still classify the 2014–2021 fighting in eastern Ukraine as an intrastate civil war between Kyiv and the self-proclaimed Donbas republics. Current Correlates of War criteria require proof that an intervening state is the primary combatant—leading most battlefield operations and causing the most battle deaths—to reclassify a conflict as interstate. Such evidence is difficult to obtain in contexts of plausible deniability and disinformation, as in Russia's undeclared involvement before 2022. The article argues for moving beyond quantitative indicators and examining the political agency of alleged non-state actors: who they are, how they emerge, and whether they are linked to local elites.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, Correlates of War, plausible deniability, non-state actors

Abstrakt
Choć pełnoskalowa inwazja Rosji od 2022 r. jest jednoznacznie wojną międzypaństwową, programy zajmujące się rozwiązywaniem konfliktów nadal klasyfikują walki wschodniej Ukrainy z lat 2014–2021 jako konflikt wewnętrzny między Kijowem a samozwańczymi republikami donbaskimi. Obecne kryteria projektu Correlates of War wymagają dowodu, że państwo interweniujące jest głównym stroną konfliktu, prowadzi większość operacji i zadaje przeciwnikowi największą liczbę ofiar, aby uznać konflikt za międzypaństwowy. Takie dowody są trudne do uzyskania w warunkach wiarygodnego zaprzeczania i dezinformacji, jak w przypadku niejawnego udziału Rosji przed 2022 r. Artykuł postuluję odejście od wyłącznie ilościowych wskaźników i analizowanie politycznej sprawczości rzekomych aktorów niepaństwowych: kim są, jak powstają i czy są powiązani z lokalnymi elitami.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, Correlates of War, wiarygodna zaprzeczalność, aktorzy niepaństwowi

Introduction

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, which began in 2014, had already claimed over 14,000 lives, including civilians, and displaced 1.5 million people[1], making it one of the largest the wars in post-WWII Europe and the post-Soviet space.

International documents broadly recognize the 2014-2021 armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as Russian aggression, involving the deployment of both mercenaries and regular troops. The International Criminal Court Prosecutor's report and the resolutions by the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe confirm the presence of Russian armed forces on Ukrainian territory[2]. The 2023 report by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) on the downing of MH17 concluded that the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" (DPR) operated under the "overall control" of the Russian Federation[3]. Notably, self-proclaimed DPR "Prime Minister" Aleksandr Borodai referred to a Russian government official as his "boss" during a phone conversation and followed detailed Kremlin instructions[4].

However, academic interpretations of the nature of the war vary: some scholars frame it as a "civil war" rooted in local grievances, while others emphasize Russian intervention and manipulation.[5] Several scholarly studies and international conflict resolution programs continue to classify the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine until 2021 as intrastate war.

This ambiguity may stem from methodological challenges that observers face in classifying wars. Proof of external intervention alone is not sufficient to designate a conflict as interstate, since two-thirds of post-WWII intrastate

[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on 8 Years since the Beginning of Russia's Armed Aggression against Ukraine*, February 21 2022. https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/zayava-mzs-ukrayini-do-8-ih-rokovin-pochatku-zbrojnoyi-agresiyi-rosiyi-proti-ukrayini [date of access: 15.03,2025].

[2] O. Merezhko, *International Legal Aspects of Russia's War Against Ukraine in Eastern Ukraine* [In] *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, edited by S. Sayapin, E. Tsybulenko, Hague 2018, pp. 115-116.

[3] Openbaar Ministerie and JIT MH17, *Report: Findings of the JIT MH17 Investigation into the Crew Members of the Buk TELAR and Those Responsible in the Chain of Command. Report: Findings of the JIT MH17*. Openbaar Ministerie / JIT MH17, 2023, https://www.politie.nl/binaries/content/assets/politie/onderwerpen/mh17/report_jit-mh17_8-februari-2023_eng.pdf [date of access: 15.03.2025].

[4] Ibidem, p. 10.

[5] Some scholars argue that Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine together constitute a single international armed conflict. Furthermore, the 2019 Kerch strait incident is viewed as another act of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, this article focuses on the more controversial aspect of the conflict in scholarly interpretation: the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, or the Donbas war, in which Russia denies being a party and instead presents itself as a mediator, See. Hauter J., (ed.) *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, Stuttgart 2021.

conflicts involved external interventions.[6] According to the current criteria of the Correlates of War (COW) project—the most comprehensive database of international and intrastate conflicts—conflicts in which an intervening state covertly recruits, co-opts, militarizes, and installs collaborators, while presenting them as indigenous separatists or non-state actors, may still be classified as "internationalized civil wars." For such a conflict to be reclassified as interstate, it must be proven that the intervening state acts as the "primary combatant," leading the bulk of fighting on the battlefield and "causing the greatest number of battle deaths" to the opposing side. However, in cases involving plausible deniability and disinformation—such as Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine—substantiating these criteria poses significant methodological challenges.[7]

In the literature, "non-state actors" are defined as "organized political actor[s] not directly connected to the state, but pursing aims that affect vital state interests[8]". The DRR and the LPR do not meet this definition. First, they lack agency inherent in political actors. Second, while they are not affiliated with Ukraine – the state in whose territory they operate – they are under the control of Russia, which is a direct stakeholder in the conflict.

To distinguish these spurious "non-state actors" from genuine separatist movements and to limit the excessive use of the civil war label, this article proposes that scholarship should move beyond solely quantitative assessments and examine the political agency of purportedly indigenous entities: how they were constituted and whether they genuinely represent local political forces.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. It begins by reviewing how conflict studies scholarship has continued to portray the 2014-2021 armed conflict. Next, it examines the methodological challenges posed by plausible deniability, proposing political agency as an alternative analytical criterion. The subsequent section argues for the necessity to examine the presence of

---

[6] Out of 150 armed internal conflicts that resulted in at least 200 fatalities between 1944 and 1999, 101 conflicts had external interventions, See. P. M. Regan, *Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution" 2002, 46 (1), pp. 55–73.

[7] The COW also classifies the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as a "civil war over local issues". In the COW intrastate war database (v 5.1), the entry 993, "Donbas War of 2014-present," lists "Ukraine and Russia" as Side A and "Separatists" as Side B. I submitted an inquiry to the authors of the dataset regarding this apparent contradiction but have not received a response to date, S. Hosaka, *Enough with Donbas 'Civil War' Narratives? Identifying the Main Combatant Leading 'the Bulk of the Fighting.*' [In] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, edited by J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835, [date of access: 25.03.2025], Correlates of War "Intra-State War Data (v5.1), April 6 2020, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-State-Wars-v5.1.zip [date of access: 25.03.2025]

[8] W. Pearlman, Cunningham K., *Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution" 2012, 56 (1), p. 3.

institutionalized economic and political discriminations–rather than group identities – as drivers of political mobilization in contexts like Ukraine, where ethnic-linguistic boundaries are fluid. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for international conflicts and ethnopolitical studies.

1. Continued Problems in Classifying the DPR and LPR

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) initially categorized the war as an intrastate conflict or civil war, noting "accusations of Russian support (including with troops)" but treating the DPR and "Lugansk People's Republic" (LPR) as independent actors. The UCDP further claims that the DPR and the LPR created the "United Forces of Novorossiya":

Ukraine and DPR reached a ceasefire on 5 September [2014], that soon proved to be insufficient. In order to further their military offensive and have a better voice in the negotiations, DPR and another separatist group, Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) created a new, unified group called the United Forces of Novorossiya on 16 September, changing their incompatibility to a new territory, Novorossiya, encompassing much larger swathes of land[9].

The UCDP notes that "the Novorossiya project was put on hold in May 2015, and on 9 June the DPR and LPR became de facto independent actors again[10]". After a long deadlock over the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, the UCDP acknowledges a shift of the conflict to interstate nature in 2022:

> When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the intrastate conflict over Novorossiya terminated as DPR and LPR were integrated to the Russian forces. Russian officers have been found to act as the highest commanders of the militias, indicating that they are part of the Russian military's command structure[11].

However, according to Ukrainian sources and open-source intelligence (OSINT) reports, no independent DPR and LPR armed forces existed. After hostilities subsided in 2015, Russian mercenaries and local militias–not the Russian regular troops crossing the border in August 2014–in the occupied part of the Ukrainian Donbas were reorganized into the 1st and 2nd Army Corps under Russia's Southern Military District. These units were equipped with weapons and ammunition supplied by Russia and commanded exclusively Russian officers[12].

[9] UCDP. n.d. Government of Ukraine – DPR., UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data, https://ucdp.uu.se/statebased/14124 [date of access: 21.03.2025]

[10] UCDP. n.d. Ukraine: Novorossiya., UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/13306 [date of access: 21.03.2025]

[11] Ibidem.

[12] J.R. Schindler, *Russia's 'Secret Army' in Ukraine*, August 28 2015, https://www.interpretermag.com/

The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research similarly categorized the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine as intrastate, defined as a conflict "between a state's central government and one or more nonstate actors." Like the COW, it also acknowledges that "other state or non-state actors might be involved as supporters or as interveners" [13]. It views the "Ukraine (Donbas)" conflict as the struggle over "secession," "ideology/system," and "resources"[14]. Only in 2022 did it reclassify the war as interstate:

> With the Russian invasion into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the conflict merged into 10231 [Russia – Ukraine], as it became an interstate conflict and the actors became part of it (as pro-Russian separatists became part of the Russian armed forces, the main items were not secession and system/ideology within Donetsk and Luhansk anymore but territory, system/ideology and resources of all of Ukraine, and international power)[15].

These classifications, which frame the conflict as initially intrastate and only later as interstate, closely align with Russia's disinforming narrative about a Ukrainian "civil war" and its declared "special military operation" in 2022. However, as Hauter[16] argues, Russia was the "primary conflict driver" as it introduced its regular armed forces in August 2014.

The COW's typology allows various non-state actors allegedly fighting over local issues to be recognized as parties to civil wars.[17] The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine—where the Ukrainian government faced off against the DPR and LPR, which were prima facie non-state actors operating within Ukraine and ostensibly

russias-secret-army-in-ukraine/ [date of access: 23.03.2025], D. Tymchuk, Y. Karin, K. Mashovets, V. Husarov, *Vtorhnennya v Ukrainu: Khronika Rosiis'koi Ahresii,* Kyiv 2016, InformNapalm, Intelligence Data on 1st and 2nd Army Corps of Russian Federation in Occupied Donbas, August 9 2020, https://informnapalm.org/en/intelligence-data-on-1st-and-2nd-army-corps-of-russian-federation-in-occupied-donbas/ [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[13] Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "Codebook for the Conflict Barometer 2014 Dataset" May 20 2015, https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en# [date of access: 25.03.2025]

[14] Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "HIIK Dataset 2014." May 20 2015. https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en# [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[15] Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "Conflict Barometer Codebook 2022." Version 30. May 12 2023, https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en# [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[16] J. Hauter, *Forensic Conflict Studies: Making Sense of War in the Social Media Age*, "Media, War & Conflict" 4 August 2021, p. 160.

[17] According to the revised COW typology, wars that are not fought between members of the international system and take place predominantly within the recognized territory of a state fall under the newly established category of "intrastate wars." These are further subdivided into "civil wars," "regional internal wars," and "intercommunal wars," depending on the type of the combatants involved. Civil wars may be initiated either "for control of the central government" or "over local issues", and are defined as fought between the national government on one side and a non-state actor on the other. Non-state actor may include "regional geopolitical units" as well as "nonterritorial entities", See. Sarkees M., *Codebook for the Intra-State Wars v.4.0. Definitions and Variables*, 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-StateWars_Codebook.pdf [date of access: 25.03.2025].

pursuing secession—appears to meet the criteria of a civil war. However, the status of the DPR and the LPR as non-state actors require a thorough examination of the origin of these purportedly local entities[18].

Table 1. The COW's Typology of War

Revised and Expanded Typology
1) Interstate wars (type 1) 2) Extrastate wars a) Colonial – conflict with colony (type 2) b) Imperial – state vs. nonstate (type 3) 3) Intrastate wars a) Civil wars b) for central control (type 4) c) over local issues (type 5) d) Regional internal wars (type 6) e) Intercommunal wars (type 7) 4) Non-state wars a) In non-state territory (type 8) b) Across state borders (type 9)

Source: Adapted from: Sarkees M., *Codebook for the Intra-State Wars v.4.0. Definitions and Variables*, 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-StateWars_Codebook.pdf.

Between 2014 and 2021, Russia did not seek the secession of the Ukrainian Donbas, but pursued a "Trojan Horse" strategy – the reintegration of its controlled entities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts back into Ukraine's constitutional system, on Moscow's terms, through the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, or Minsk II[19]. This strategy aimed to institutionalize a veto over Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations through the Moscow-controlled entities[20]. A handful of authentic local secessionists were sidelined by Moscow in favor of loyal figures executing the Trojan Horse strategy. The Kremlin had no serious intention to promote the agenda of Russian nationalists in Ukraine, but just tactically promoted Novorossiya – later the circumstances forced it to replace Novorossiya with Donbas – to give false credibility to "separatists" who would

[18] Hosaka, S., *Enough with Donbas 'Civil War' Narratives? Identifying the Main Combatant Leading 'the Bulk of the Fighting.'* [In] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, edited by J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war--interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835, pp. 107-109 [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[19] A. Potočňák, M. Mares, *Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy*, "Problems of Post-Communism" 2023, 70 (4), pp. 341–51.

[20] A. Shandra, *Leaked Kremlin Emails Show Minsk Protocol Designed as Path to Ukraine's Capitulation – Euromaidan Press Report*, "Euromaidan Press" 25 October 2019, https://euromaidanpress.com/2019/10/25/leaked-kremlin-emails-show-minsk-protocol-designed-as-path-to-ukraines-capitulation-euromaidan-press-report/ [date of access: 15.07.2025].

block any attempts of Ukraine's westward drift in its stead[21]. Moscow abandoned this strategy on February 21, 2022 – three days before the launch of its full-scale invasion – by recognizing the independence of the DPR and the LPR.

2. Conflict Classification Challenges and Political Agency

As noted earlier, the COW classification focuses on identifying the "primary combatant" – that is, the actor responsible for "the bulk of the fighting" among multiple participants including non-state actors. However, as Sarkees[22] acknowledges, determining which party caused the greatest number of battle-deaths is more complex than simply counting casualties.

A key challenge researchers face is the availability of reliable data on the active combat contingent and weaponry responsible for inflicting significant losses. Intervening states are likely to make every effort to deny or obscure their direct participation to avoid legal and political consequences. The secretive nature of foreign interference makes it difficult to determine the nature of the relationship between rebel forces and the intervening power[23].

For example, Russia not only denied its participation in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine but also portrayed its August 2014 invasion as a DPR-led counteroffensive. DPR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko ostensibly announced the reorganization of the DPR "militia" into "a regular army" and the launch of a counteroffensive shortly before regular Russian troops crossed the border[24].

Official casualty figures are also often unreliable, either underreported to deflect blame or exaggerated to elicit sympathy[25]. In response, researchers have increasingly relied on OSINT to collect reliable data[26]. Initiatives such as InformNaplam, Bellingcat and the Forensic Architecture Ilovaisk Project have

---

[21] S. Hosaka, *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 2019, 47 (5), p. 766.

[22] M. Sarkees, *Codebook for the Intra-State Wars v.4.0. Definitions and Variables*, 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-StateWars_Codebook.pdf [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[23] J. Hauter, *Delegated Interstate War: Introducing an Addition to Armed Conflict Typologies*, "Journal of Strategic Security" 2019, 12 (4), p. 92.

[24] S. Hosaka, *Putin the 'Peacemaker'? – Russian Reflexive Control During the 2014 August Invasion of Ukraine*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies" 2019, 32 (3), pp. 340-41.

[25] M. Sarkees, The COW Typology of War: Defining and C.ategorizing Wars (Version 4 of the Data), 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/COW-Website-Typology-of-war.pdf [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[26] J. Hauter, *Forensic Conflict Studies: Making Sense of War in the Social Media Age*, "Media, War & Conflict" 4 August 2021, S. Hosaka, *Leaked Email Data: A New Source for the Study of Authoritarian Regimes*, "Digital War" 2025, 6 (1); A. Schmidt, S. Hosaka, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Countering Simplistic Narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War with Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)* [In] *Studying Russia Anew*, edited by A. Makarychev, Y. Kurnyshova, Leiden, forthcoming.

analyzed publicly available photos and videos to estimate the actual scale of Russian military involvement, including timelines and locations of their activities.

Nevertheless, such high-quality OSINT is not always available in other conflict zones. In the absence of such data, examining the political agency and origins of alleged non-state actors may offer a more viable approach to assessing the primary drivers of conflict.

Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan[27] in their Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset to the UCDP Dyadic Dataset, propose a set of variables to identify non-state actors – such as affiliation with political organizations, troop numbers, mobilization capacity, arms procurement, command structure, and the type and degree of external assistance. However, non-state actors are unlikely to disclose sensitive military data that could expose their combat capabilities and vulnerabilities. By contrast, political affiliations are more visible, as rebels and separatists seek legitimacy by aligning themselves with local political elites. Both rebels and separatists fight for political causes – rebels often for independence or minority rights, and separatists for control over a specific territory[28]. Separatist movements are often grounded in the discrimination of ethnic groups and formation of active ethnic elites[29]. These groups typically establish political wings to rectify perceived systemic discrimination of their collective rights, as illustrated by the close association between the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Fein party[30].

In the Ukrainian Donbas, however, such political foundations were notably weak. Early DPR and LPR "governments" and "parliaments" included few experienced local politicians, aside from a handful of communists[31]. Most indigenous politicians – including former Party of Regions deputies – contrary to the stereotype of being "pro-Russians," were "deadly afraid of any presence of Russia"[32] and fled the occupied regions after the escalation of the conflict, choosing instead to work in the Ukrainian government-controlled areas.

[27] D. Cunningham, K. Gleditsch, I. Salehyan, *Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset*, "Conflict Management and Peace Science" 2013, 30 (5), pp. 516–531.

[28] E. Tsybulenko, J. Francis, *Separatists or Russian Troops and Local Collaborators? Russian Aggression in Ukraine: The Problem of Definitions*, [In] *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law: Jus Ad Bellum, Jus In Bello, Jus Post Bellum*, edited by S. Sayapin, E. Tsybulenko, Hague 2018, p. 129.

[29] Y. Matsiyevsky, Internal Conflict or Hidden Aggression? [In] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020* edited by J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, pp. 169-170.

[30] D. Cunningham, K. Gleditsch, I. Salehyan, *Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset*, "Conflict Management and Peace Science" 2013, 30 (5), p. 521.

[31] K. Matsuzato, *The Donbass War: Outbreak and Deadlock*, "Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization" 2017, 25 (2), pp. 190–191.

[32] S. Hosaka, *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 2019, 47 (5), p. 757.

By contrast, those who assumed leadership roles in the "republics" – such as political technologist Aleksandr Borodai and former FSB officer Igor Girkin – were Russian nationals with no local political background and relied on coercion and violence[33]. According to Matveeva[34], the only individuals with the baggage of political careers on the rebel side were former Ukrainian parliamentarian Oleg Tsaryov and Luhansk mayor Manolis Pilavov.

Some local leaders, such as self-proclaimed "people's governor" Pavel Gubarev, were trained by "Coordinator of Donbas" Konstantin Goloskokov, an alleged GRU officer. Their uprisings were orchestrated by Sergei Glazyev, Russian presidential adviser overseeing Ukraine policy[35]. The Kremlin picked Alexander Zakharchenko – a Donetsk native known for smuggling operations on the Luhansk-Russia border – as "prime minister" of the DPR to succeed Borodai, who left Donetsk in August 2014[36].

The creators of these so-called rebels sit back in Moscow, issuing detailed instructions[37]. The Kremlin not only controlled human, financial, and media resources in the "People's Republics," but also helped fabricate their quasi-territorial ideologies, political myths, and founding documents. For example, the "Declaration on the Establishment of the Union of People's Republics," known as *Novorossiya*, was drafted in the Kremlin as early as May 2014, well before it was announced publicly[38].

3. Group Coherence and Discrimination

Scholarship of ethnopolitical conflict studies highlights ethnic group cohesion and discrimination as key drivers of ethnopolitical mobilization[39]. However, ethnic group identity has not proven analytically useful in explaining the political dynamics of post-Soviet Ukraine[40]. References to "Russians" or "Russia-speaking population" lack precision in the Ukrainian context[41]. In the Donbas region,

[33] N. Mitrokhin, *Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass*, "Journal of Soviet and Post--Soviet Politics and Society" 2015, 1 (1), pp. 221-222.

[34] A. Matveeva, *Through Times of Trouble. Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within*, „Lanham" 2018, p. 138.

[35] S. Hosaka, *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 2019, 47 (5), pp. 755-758.

[36] Hosaka S., *Leaked Email Data: A New Source for the Study of Authoritarian Regimes*, "Digital War" 2025, 6 (1), p. 6.

[37] Politie. Witness Appeal June 2019: Chain of Responsibility in the Russian Federation 4 (8), 18 June 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPGmFJH2ZO8 [date of access: 15.03.2025].

[38] S. Hosaka, *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 2019, 47 (5), p. 759."

[39] B. Harff , T. R. Gurr, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, „Emeryville 1994, pp. 83-85.

[40] V. Kulyk, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Beyond Brubaker*, "Journal of Ukrainian Studies" 2001, 26 (1–2), pp. 197–221.

[41] Brik T., *The Donbas and Social Science: Terra Incognita?* [in:] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, edited by J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, p. 202, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835.

self-identified ethnicity has not been a decisive factor in shaping individuals' geopolitical orientations. For example, a 2013 survey in Luhansk found that respondents who identified as both Ukrainian and Russian were, contrary to common wisdom, more West-oriented than those identifying solely as Ukrainian[42]. Although correlations between ethnic identity and historical memory are observed, they are weak. In 2015, approximately 20% of ethnic Ukrainians gravitated towards Soviet–Russian historical narratives, while over 30% of Russians living in Ukraine embraced Ukrainian historical memory[43]. Political and cultural identities in Ukraine are not clearly divided between east and west but are instead fluid and movable[44].

Unlike group identities, which are often subjective, elusive, and susceptible to manipulation, political and economic discrimination is more observable and analytically useful for assessing potentials of political agency. Harff and Gurr[45] identify several indicators of group-based discrimination, including:

- public policies that restrict the economic activities or roles of group members,
- low income, poor housing, and high infant mortality rates compared with other groups in the society,
- limited group access to education, especially higher education,
- proportionally few group members in commercial, managerial, or professional positions,
- public policies that limit the group's participation in politics and access to political office,
- low participation in politics compared with other groups in the society,
- proportionally few group members in elective offices, civil service, or higher-ranking police and military positions.

Similarly, the older COW typology (pre-2010) used institutionalized discrimination as a criterion for classifying civil wars between a state's metropole and a non-integrated periphery. A periphery was considered non-integrated if it was subject to constitutional restrictions of participation in the government and other restrictive provisions based on ethnicity, race or religion[46].

[42] M. Gentile, *West Oriented in the East-Oriented Donbas: A Political Stratigraphy of Geopolitical Identity in Luhansk, Ukraine*, "Post-Soviet Affairs" 2015, 31 (3), pp. 201–23.

[43] Hosaka S., *Hybrid Historical Memories in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2019, 71 (4), pp. 551–578.

[44] P. Kuzyk, *Ukraine's National Integration before and after 2014. Shifting 'East–West' Polarization Line and Strengthening Political Community*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics" 2019, 60 (6), pp. 709–735.

[45] B. Harff , T.R. Gurr, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, Emeryville 1994, p. 93.

[46] M. Sarkees, The COW Typology of War: Defining and Categorizing Wars (Version 4 of the Data), 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/COW-Website-Typology-of-war.pdf [date of access: 25.03.2025].

In the case of Ukraine's Donbas region, despite historical, linguistic, and economic differences, it was not subjected to any types of systematic political discrimination. In the 1991 referendum, 83.9% voters in the Donetsk region and 83.86% in the Luhansk region supported Ukraine's independence. Between 1992 and 2014, the absence of conflict on the ethnic, confessional and linguistic grounds was noted by the UN, OSCE, and PACE[47].

In terms of political representation, presidential candidates favored by Donetsk won four national elections (totaling 17 out of 22 peaceful years in office), those favored by Luhansk won three (12 years). Donbas voters preferred nationwide political parties established in Kyiv to regional ones, and deputies from these regions were fully represented in the national parliament. No significant political forces supported by the voters of the two regions advocated separatism nor unification with Russia[48].

Discrimination against Russians or Russian speakers was rare not only institutionally but also in term of subjective perception. A December 2014 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that only 4.4% of respondents in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine feared discrimination based on language and ethnicity. A March 2014 survey by the International Republican Institute yielded similar results[49]. For voters in the Donbas, language was not a primary concern for political mobilization; in a 2005 survey in Donetsk, only 2.2 % of Viktor Yanukovych's supporters cited the status of the Russian language as a key motivation for their vote[50]. Finally, the designation of the Ukrainian language as the state language did not displace Russian, which remained dominant in media and cultural consumption[51].

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War witnessed a growing number of localized conflicts associated with the challenges of state building and ethnopolitical tensions. In response, scholars increasingly turned to societal-level explanations for conflict,

[47] J. Sherr, *A War of Narratives and Arms* [In] *The Russian Challenge*, edited by K. Giles, A. Wood, P. Hanson, Chatham House Report, London 2015.

[48] M. Balaban, *Donbas in Flames: Guide to the Conflict Zone. Security environment research center*, "Prometheus. 2017", pp. 25-26, https://prometheus.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Donbas_v_Ogni_ENG_web_1-4.pdf [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[49] Y. Matsiyevsky, *Internal Conflict or Hidden Aggression?* [In:] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, ed. J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, pp. 169–170.

[50] Ar. L. Osipian, A. L. Osipian, *Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010*, "East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures" 2012, 26 (3).

[51] V. Kulyk, *Language Policy in the Ukrainian Media: Authorities, Producers and Consumers*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2013, 65 (7), pp. 1417–1443.

emphasizing ethnic identity and group grievances[52]. However, in the case of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, conventional theoretical models have proven poorly suited[53]. Many experts claim expertise on Ukraine based more on theoretical frameworks than on empirical knowledge, often stretching evidence to fit theoretical expectations[54].

For example, Kulyk[55] cautioned against the simplistic application of Roger Brubaker's "triadic nexus" framework to post-Soviet Ukraine, which treats Ukraine as a nationalizing state, Russians in Ukraine as a national minority, and Russia as the external homeland. Brubaker himself acknowledged Ukraine's unique context, particularly the emergence of a non-ethnic, civic identity among "Russians in Ukraine" – not a clearly bounded group who speak Russian but feel rather affiliated with the political Ukrainian nation. This nuanced view led Brubaker to conclude, "Were this prevailing self-understanding of Russians in Ukraine, there would be no Russian 'national minority'[56]".

Despite these insights, many scholars continue to frame the conflict as a type of ethnopolitical struggle, often treating "Russians" or the "Russian-speaking population" as an actor consolidating around their alleged collective identity and pursuing their own political agenda. This interpretation oversimplifies the triadic nexus and fails to account for Ukraine's' complicated political realities and fluid ethnic and linguistic identities[57].

Dominant theories and practices in conflict resolution studies – primarily designed to explain civil wars – are also ill-suited to understanding the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine[58]. Common models, such as those based on violence and escalation spirals, struggle to capture the realities on the ground. For example, Schneckener[59], drawing on conflict sociology, argues that the DPR and LPR

[52] J. S. Levy, *The Causes of War and Conditions of Peace*, "Annual Review of Political Science" 1998, 1 (1), pp. 139–65.

[53] T. Brik, *The Donbas and Social Science: Terra Incognita?* [in:]*Civil War?*..., op. cit., pp. 201-202, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835 [date of access: 25.03.2025].

[54] J. Dutkiewicz, J. Smolenski, *Epistemic Superimposition: The War in Ukraine and the Poverty of Expertise in International Relations Theory*, "Journal of International Relations and Development" 2023, 26 (4), p. 620.

[55] Kulyk V., *The Politics of Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Beyond Brubaker*, "Journal of Ukrainian Studies" 2001, 26 (1–2), pp. 197–221.

[56] R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996.

[57] R. S. Clem, *Dynamics of the Ukrainian State-Territory Nexus*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics" 2014, 55 (3), pp. 219–235; E. Harris, *What Is the Role of Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Russia–Ukraine Crisis?*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2020, 72 (4), pp. 593–613.

[58] H. Shinoda, *How Do We Approach the Russo-Ukrainian War as an 'International Intra-State Armed Conflict'?* [In:] *The Impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Theoretical and Practical Explorations of Policy Agendas for Peace in Ukraine*, eds. H. Shinoda, P. Fedorchenko-Kutuyev, Singapore 2025.

[59] U. Schneckener, *Hybrid War in Times of Geopolitics? On the Interpretation and Characterization of the Donbas Conflict* [In] *Civil War?*..., op. cit., p. 27, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835 [date of access: 25.03.2025].

emerged from social formations as a result of mutual escalation of violence among antagonizing domestic actors. However, this view contradicts a substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrating Russia's creation of and control over these "domestic actors"[60]. Although Schneckener does acknowledge the intervention of Russian armed forces at a later stage, he overlooks earlier episodes of Russian incitement in what he characterizes as a "civil war."

Some scholars have suggested that Ukraine's ethnonational polarization was fostered by external interventions from the EU and Russia, plunging the country into a civil war[61]. Yet, in asymmetric conflicts, in which military, political and informational capabilities are unequally distributed among participants, the primary instigator is often better positioned to predict and manage escalation than other parties[62]. This advantage enables the initiator to obfuscate the actual causes of the conflict through manipulation.

Ultimately, the portrayal of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine as a civil war has been shaped not only by Russian propaganda and disinformation but also by the flawed application of theoretical frameworks, along with the underestimation of the empirical evidence base generated by high quality and transparent OSINT analysis. Notably, there is a clear tendency for scholarly works that disregard OSINT reports – including leaked email analysis – to support the "civil war" classification of the conflict in eastern Ukraine[63]. To avoid such misclassification, scholars must put aside ambiguous labels like "non-state actors" and critically examine the origins, affiliations, and political agency of the actors involved. Combining such analysis with OSINT-based empirical research offers a more promising path for understanding modern complex conflicts.

[60] Hosaka S., *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 47 (5) 2019.

[61] N. Sambanis, S. Skaperdas, W. Wohlforth, *External Intervention, Identity, and Civil War*, "Comparative Political Studies" 53 (14) 2020: 2169-73.

[62] S. Hosaka, *Putin the 'Peacemaker'? – Russian Reflexive Control During the 2014 August Invasion of Ukraine*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies" 32 (3) 2019, pp. 324–46.

[63] A. Schmidt, S. Hosaka, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Countering Simplistic Narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War with Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)* [In] *Studying Russia Anew*, edited by A. Makarychev, Y. Kurnyshova, Leiden, forthcoming

Bibliography

1. Balaban M., *Donbas in Flames: Guide to the Conflict Zone. Security environment research center*, "Prometheus" 2017, https://prometheus.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Donbas_v_Ogni_ENG_web_1-4.pdf.
2. Brik T., *The Donbas and Social Science: Terra Incognita?* [in:] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, ed. J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835.
3. Brubaker R., *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996.
4. *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*. *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, ed. J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021.
5. Clem R.S., *Dynamics of the Ukrainian State-Territory Nexus*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics" 2014, 55 (3), pp. 219–35.
6. Correlates of War "Intra-State War Data (v5.1)." April 6 2020, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-State-Wars-v5.1.zip.
7. Cunningham D. E., Gleditsch K., Salehyan I., *Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset*, "Conflict Management and Peace Science" 2013, 30 (5), pp. 516–31.
8. Dutkiewicz J., Smolenski J., *Epistemic Superimposition: The War in Ukraine and the Poverty of Expertise in International Relations Theory*, "Journal of International Relations and Development" 2023, 26 (4), pp. 619–31.
9. Gentile M., *West Oriented in the East-Oriented Donbas: A Political Stratigraphy of Geopolitical Identity in Luhansk, Ukraine*, "Post-Soviet Affairs" 2015, 31 (3), pp. 201–23.
10. Harff B., Gurr T. R., *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, Emeryville 1994.
11. Harris E., *What Is the Role of Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Russia–Ukraine Crisis?*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2020, 72 (4), pp. 593–613.
12. Hauter J., *Delegated Interstate War: Introducing an Addition to Armed Conflict Typologies*, "Journal of Strategic Security" 2019, 12 (4), pp. 90–103.
13. Hauter J., *Forensic Conflict Studies: Making Sense of War in the Social Media Age*, "Media, War & Conflict" 4 August 2021.
14. Hauter J., "How the War Began: Conceptualizing Conflict Escalation in Ukraine's Donbas." "The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review" 2021, 48 (2) , pp. 135–63.
15. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "Codebook for the Conflict Barometer 2014 Dataset", 20 May 2015, https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en#.
16. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "HIIK Dataset 2014" 20 May 2015, https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en#.
17. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, "Conflict Barometer Codebook 2022" Version 30. 12 May 2023, https://hiik.de/data-and-maps/datasets/?lang=en#.
18. Hosaka S., *Hybrid Historical Memories in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2019, 71 (4), pp. 551–578.
19. Hosaka S., *Putin the 'Peacemaker'? – Russian Reflexive Control During the 2014 August Invasion of Ukraine*, "The Journal of Slavic Military Studies" 2019, 32 (3), pp. 324–46.
20. Hosaka S., *Welcome to Surkov's Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War*, "Nationalities Papers" 2019, 47 (5), pp. 750–73.
21. Hosaka, S., *Enough with Donbas 'Civil War' Narratives? Identifying the Main Combatant Leading 'the Bulk of the Fighting.'* [In] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, ed. J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021, https://cup.columbia.edu/book/civil-war-interstate-war-hybrid-war/9783838213835.

22. Hosaka S., *Leaked Email Data: A New Source for the Study of Authoritarian Regimes*, "Digital War" 2025, 6 (1).
23. InformNapalm, Intelligence Data on 1st and 2nd Army Corps of Russian Federation in Occupied Donbas, 9 August 2020, https://informnapalm.org/en/intelligence-data-on-1st-and-2nd-army-corps-of-russian-federation-in-occupied-donbas/
24. Kulyk V., *The Politics of Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Beyond Brubaker*, "Journal of Ukrainian Studies" 2001, 26 (1–2), pp. 197–221.
25. Kulyk V., *Language Policy in the Ukrainian Media: Authorities, Producers and Consumers*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2013, 65 (7), pp. 1417–1443.
26. Kuzyk P., *Ukraine's National Integration before and after 2014. Shifting 'East–West' Polarization Line and Strengthening Political Community*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics" 2019, 60 (6), pp. 709–735.
27. Levy J. S., *The Causes of War and Conditions of Peace*, "Annual Review of Political Science" 1998, 1 (1), pp. 139–65.
28. Matsiyevsky Y., *Internal Conflict or Hidden Aggression?* [In:] *Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020*, ed. J. Hauter, Stuttgart 2021.
29. Matsuzato K., *The Donbass War: Outbreak and Deadlock*, "Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization" 2017, 25 (2), pp. 175–201.
30. Matveeva A., *Through Times of Trouble. Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within*, Lanham 2018.
31. Merezhko O., *International Legal Aspects of Russia's War Against Ukraine in Eastern Ukraine* [In:] *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*, eds. S. Sayapin, E. Tsybulenko, Hague 2018.
32. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine on 8 Years since the Beginning of Russia's Armed Aggression against Ukraine*, February 21 2022, https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/zayava-mzs-ukrayini-do-8-ih-rokovin-pochatku-zbrojnoyi-agresiyi-rosiyi-proti-ukrayini.
33. Mitrokhin N., *Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass*, "Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society" 2015, 1 (1), pp. 219–50.
34. Openbaar Ministerie and JIT MH17, *Report: Findings of the JIT MH17 Investigation into the Crew Members of the Buk TELAR and Those Responsible in the Chain of Command. Report: Findings of the JIT MH17*. Openbaar Ministerie / JIT MH17, 2023. https://www.politie.nl/binaries/content/assets/politie/onderwerpen/mh17/report_jit-mh17_8-februari-2023_eng.pdf.
35. Osipian Ar. L., Osipian A. L, *Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010*, "East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures" 2012, 26 (3).
36. Pearlman, W., Cunningham K., *Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution" 2012, 56 (1), p. 3–15.
37. Politie. Witness Appeal June 2019: Chain of Responsibility in the Russian Federation 4 (8), 18 June 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPGmFJH2ZO8.
38. Potočňák A., Mares M., *Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy*, "Problems of Post-Communism" 2023, 70 (4), pp. 341–51.
39. Regan, P. M., *Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution" 2002, 46 (1), pp. 55–73.

40. Sambanis N., Skaperdas S., Wohlforth W., *External Intervention, Identity, and Civil War*, "Comparative Political Studies" 2020, 53 (14) : 2155–82.
41. Sarkees M., *Codebook for the Intra-State Wars v.4.0. Definitions and Variables*, 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/Intra-StateWars_Codebook.pdf.
42. Sarkees M., The COW Typology of War: Defining and Categorizing Wars (Version 4 of the Data), 2010, https://correlatesofwar.org/wp-content/uploads/COW-Website-Typology-of-war.pdf.
43. Schindler, J. R., *Russia's 'Secret Army' in Ukraine*, 28 August 2015, https://www.interpret-ermag.com/russias-secret-army-in-ukraine/
44. Schmidt A., Hosaka S., *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Countering Simplistic Narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian War with Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)* [In] *Studying Russia Anew*, edited by Makarychev A., Kurnyshova Y., Leiden, forthcoming.
45. Schneckener U., *Hybrid War in Times of Geopolitics? On the Interpretation and Characterization of the Donbas Conflict* [In] Civil War? Interstate War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014-2020, edited by Jakob Hauter, 227, Stuttgart 2021.
46. Shandra A., *Leaked Kremlin Emails Show Minsk Protocol Designed as Path to Ukraine's Capitulation – Euromaidan Press Report*, "Euromaidan Press" 25 October 2019, https://euro-maidanpress.com/2019/10/25/leaked-kremlin-emails-show-minsk-protocol-designed-as-path-to-ukraines-capitulation-euromaidan-press-report/
47. Sherr, J., *A War of Narratives and Arms* [In] *The Russian Challenge*, edited by Giles K., Wood A., Hanson P., Chatham House Report, London 2015.
48. Shinoda H., *How Do We Approach the Russo-Ukrainian War as an 'International Intra-State Armed Conflict'?* [In] *The Impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Theoretical and Practical Explorations of Policy Agendas for Peace in Ukraine*, edited by H. Shinoda, P. Fedorchenko-Kutuyev, Singapore 2025.
49. Tsybulenko E., Francis J., *Separatists or Russian Troops and Local Collaborators? Russian Aggression in Ukraine: The Problem of Definitions*, [In:] *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law: Jus Ad Bellum, Jus In Bello, Jus Post Bellum*, eds. S. Sayapin, E. Tsybulenko, Hague 2018.
50. Tymchuk D., Karin Y., Mashovets K., Husarov V., *Vtorhnennya v Ukrainu: Khronika Rosiis'koi Ahresii,* Kyiv 2016.
51. UCDP. n.d. Government of Ukraine – DPR., UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data., https://ucdp.uu.se/statebased/14124.
52. UCDP. n.d. "Ukraine: Novorossiya." UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/13306.