MARIUPOL

2013–2022

Stories of Mobilization and Resistance

Hana Josticova

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The chapters in this book represent successive phases of one story—that of Mariupol, formerly Ukraine's tenth largest city, and the second-largest in the Donbas region. The author conducted her ethnographic fieldwork in this coastal town between November 2018 and August 2021. She was one of the last academics to do research in Mariupol before its invasion and eventual occupation by Russia.

"The book tells the story of the tumultuous months of the Maidan/Anti-Maidan, followed by the 'Russian Spring' and resistance in Mariupol. Josticova offers us a gateway into the dynamic realities of a diverse set of actors. In addition to story-telling reminiscent of Alexievich, the work show-cases the abundant potential of immersive ethnography to disaggregate, expose, and explain the complex, fluid, and highly contingent nature of social mobilization. It weaves together a polyphonic tapestry of narratives carefully embedded in the rich political, social, and historical context of the Donbas and the city of Mariupol itself. Readers will also be grateful that Josticova follows her characters into 2022, providing a testimony to this city and its inhabitants. It deserves to be widely read."

Sarah Whitmore, Oxford Brookes University

About the Author

Hana Josticova is a political ethnographer, currently working as a Research Associate at Central and Eastern European Studies (CEES), University of Glasgow. Her research is centred around the origins of social mobilisation in the context of protests, rebellion and war in the Donbas, Ukraine. She is particularly interested in researching individual mobilisation in high-risk environments, and its underlying social, cultural and political factors.

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хто—як не ми
коли—якщо не зараз

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кто—если не мы
когда—если не сейчас

~

who—if not us
when—if not now

To all those who lived and died for Mariupol

Contents

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

After February 24, 2022, everything changed.

I am writing this book as I watch all the places of eastern Ukraine I ever traveled to being shelled and destroyed by the Russian Army and its proxies so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. On February 27, 2022, Russia launched a total attack on Mariupol to achieve its occupation. Within two months, thousands of civilians lost their lives, and over 80 percent of civilian infrastructure was destroyed. Defenders of Mariupol were forced to retreat to the steel factory Azovstal, but by mid-May they were ordered to surrender. Their resolve to hold the last "outpost" of Ukrainian control in the city became the symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

In 2014, Mariupol experienced partial occupation by the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR); but eight years later, the occupation has been total.

My ethnographic journey began and ended in Mariupol. I studied social mobilization in this city between the onset of the Maidan in November 2013 and Russian incursion into Ukraine in August 2014. I sought to grasp the meaning behind people's decision to take to the streets and, ultimately, to the trenches. To this end, I sought out ordinary people, volunteers and activists, rebels, and combatants to hear their stories of mobilization and resistance. I saw the city and the region through the eyes of locals and experienced life as they lived it, in the shadow of war. While immersing myself among them, I began to understand what the "Donbas" is, and what it is not.

Mariupol, as my respondents knew it, does not exist anymore, but it lives on within those who stayed in the city, welcoming, sustaining, or resisting Russian occupation; those who have fled but

nurture its history and culture; those who are awaiting Ukrainian liberation; and those who are fighting to achieve it.

Mariupol resistance, however, did not start in 2022 with the heroic defense of the city and Azovstal that the world watched live. Those who are fighting for a Ukrainian Mariupol are the same people who experienced occupation and Russian shelling already in 2014. They knew then that, should Russia invade Ukraine, "Mariupol will be first in line." For them it was a question of when, rather than if, they were getting ready.

Mariupol protest mobilization originated at the end of 2013 when Ukraine rose in the largest, longest, and most regionally diffused social movement in the history of its independence—the Maidan revolution. The revolution inspired thousands to take to the streets for the freedom to decide their future. Initially, they imagined Ukraine as part of the European community and refused the then-president Yanukovych's policies that would tie Ukraine closer to Russia. When the riot police used violence to disperse protesters, the revolution acquired another objective: to topple the president who ordered it.

Ultimately, Yanukovych fled the office on February 22, 2014, and the Maidan protesters claimed victory. The supporters perceived this victory as a hope for a future without oligarchs and corruption that Yanukovych embodied.

But there are two sides to every story. As a reaction to the Maidan revolution rose another movement: the Antimaidan. The Antimaidan was ideologically opposed to the Maidan, and it was organized and supported by those whom the Maidan sought to topple: the then-president Yanukovych and his political party Party of Regions (PoR). The main support base of Antimaidan was in the electoral stronghold of the PoR—in eastern Ukraine. Therefore, when Yanukovych fled office, the Antimaidan considered Yanukovych's flight as an illegal coup d'état.

The Maidan ended with the end of Yanukovych, but the east of Ukraine was about to ignite in its own revolution—*Russkaya Vesna*—the "Russian Spring."

President Putin reacted to the ouster of Yanukovych by launching the annexation of Crimea. This added another crucial ingredient to

the mobilization: emotion. When Russia declared Crimea as a subject of the Russian Federation, the Donbas residents began to dream of following Crimea into the "Russian world."

Marci Shore described the Maidan revolution as a time when "the political became the existential." After Russia claimed Crimea, the fight for the future of Ukraine did indeed become existential. While the Russian Spring incited in many Donbas residents a wish for independence from the new government of Ukraine or even incorporation into the Russian Federation, others mobilized to prevent the loss of the Donbas and, potentially, the whole of the southeast of Ukraine to Russia. Suddenly, "Ukraine" and "Russia" acquired new meanings, and people who formerly cared little for politics had to choose a side.

The protest mobilization changed into defense mobilization: former Antimaidan supporters started to group into defense formations, from patrolling streets to "securing" public space and strategic buildings. They believed Maidan supporters were coming to "take over the Donbas like they did in Kyiv." Ukrainian national symbols were perceived as endorsing right-wing Ukrainian nationalists from the Second World War era.[1] The Russian Spring defense factions set out to protect themselves from "Ukrainian fascists" like their grandfathers protected the Donbas from German Nazis during the so-called "Great Patriotic War."[2]

As the Russian Spring grew across the Donetsk and Luhansk regions throughout March, the reality surfaced: under the guise of civil protests, Russian agents and Ukrainian collaborators pulled the strings to paralyze the police and security services, while the Ukrainian army was demobilized. Their task was to undermine local authorities and organize a rebellion to take control of administrative and strategic buildings, secure weapons, and create a power structure to replace the Kyiv rule. This is how the artificial Donets and Luhansk People's Republics were created.

In response, those who viewed the annexation and the Russian Spring as Kremlin's effort to agitate civil unrest to destabilize

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1 See Glossary: OUN; Bandera.
2 Soviet propaganda term for Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany in the Second World War between 1941 and 1945.

the southeast of Ukraine, organized themselves into self-defense groups, and sought out Ukrainian armed forces for protection.

By the second week of April, the rebels had occupied the Ukrainian Security Services building in Luhansk, securing weaponry to arm the rebellion. The Donetsk rebels self-proclaimed a DPR. Following these developments, the acting Ukrainian president Turchynov launched an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) and called for Ukrainian civilians to join territorial defense formations to protect their homes from rebels' occupation. This was the start of a volunteer movement to keep Ukrainian territory controlled by the Ukrainian government. Political contention thus turned into armed confrontation.

But the situation for the rebels was starting to get out of hand: the rebellion was not unanimous in its cause, or homogeneous in leadership, and too many individuals tried to claim power for themselves. They employed the right tactics and attracted mass support, but by mid-June, rebels were struggling militarily and losing ground to Ukrainian territorial defense forces. In order to prevent the loss of control over occupied territories, Russia utilized hybrid methods to increase the rebellion's capabilities. Instead of their defeat, the war over the Donbas thus started.

Mariupol witnessed all these dynamics.

The main reason why I am writing this book is to bring out stories of Mariupol residents who mobilized in 2013 and 2014, between the Maidan protests and the Donbas war. On the one hand, there are stories of Maidan supporters who mobilized against the majority who supported Yanukovych; those who aided Ukrainian soldiers when they found them unequipped for combat; and those who established self-defense groups to protect Mariupol, yet by doing so they were risking their own well-being. In the context of protest and war, Mariupol residents started a movement that laid the foundations for a new, pro-Ukrainian civil society. Mariupol's resistance in 2022 is its reflection.

On the other hand, I bring out stories of those who supported the Antimaidan and the Russian Spring movements publicly, and in principle. Honest accounts of this side of the contention are the hardest to gather but crucial. These movements reveal societal

characteristics of the region reflected in the mass popular support that they inspired. These movements also show the extent of Russian influence within the region: from influencing politics and law and security services to influencing the society, as observable in the social and political behavior of locals. Locals chose sides in the contention according to their frames: perceptions, beliefs, and values. According to these frames, they interpreted events, attributed blame, and formed their truths about events.

Mariupol resistance was thus twofold: divided into those who actively resisted Russian influence and those who resisted change to the status quo that the Maidan revolution, in their view, endangered. The case of Mariupol mobilization teaches us that to understand social movements we need to first understand the local social, political, and historical contexts that impact the individual frames of their perpetrators. The developments between the Maidan and war most readily reflect differences of interpretations of events that united some people and divided others. This book describes the local contexts and key events that reflect them.

I write about Mariupol mobilization between November 2013 and September 2014—between protest and war—utilizing the stories of the perpetrators and witnesses of the events I discuss. I follow the fate of this book's heroes into 2022 and their response to the Russian invasion. While most of the heroes survived the Russian siege and occupation, some of them are missing or lost their lives while defending Mariupol. This book is thus not only a collection of stories of Mariupol mobilization and resistance but also a collection of memories and testimonies that would otherwise be forgotten or lost. The aim is to bring out these stories that circumstance inspired on both sides of the contention and discuss why some locals came to demonstrate their political grievances in the streets and the trenches, while others never left the safety of their homes. I tell these stories anthropologically, as they were lived and experienced, to bring out their unique experiential quality.

All stories of activism reveal the same motivation *to do something,* "because if I don't, who will?." This motto is the main motif of this book that connects the book's heroes with events that most affected them.

I met my respondents as part of my ethnographic research in eastern Ukraine between 2018 and 2022. I sought to find the meaning behind, first, the unlikely pro-Ukrainian activism in a stronghold of the pro-Russian PoR, and, second, the movements against the Maidan, supportive of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Russian Spring.

Over the years, my respondents and I kept in touch. I revisited them over the years to learn how their perceptions, lives, and communities changed since the onset of the war. Specifically, whether, or if in any sense, the liberated Donbas became any more "Ukrainian." Accidentally, the search for understanding led me to become my respondents' ethnographer.

The reasons behind the search for understanding are that much literary focus is on the "war" and not enough on the mobilization that enabled it, and the lack of academic studies that deal with Donbas mobilization anthropologically, and with sensitivity to local contexts. Most studies focus on Russian influence in the Donbas, while omitting embedded social, political, historical, and cultural characteristics of the region. Yet, the war in the Donbas is in all these respects *specific to* the Donbas. I, therefore, bring into conversation the local contexts with the changing sociopolitical environment related to protests, insurgency, and, ultimately, war. The case of Mariupol mobilization and resistance reflects the deeper and heterogeneous roots of the contention.

Methods and Concepts

Another reason for writing this book is the lack of existing academic literature that would deal with social mobilization in southeastern Ukraine during the Maidan-Antimaidan and Russian Spring periods.[3] Yet, this period is crucial for understanding the development

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3 There is no study other than this book that deals with Maidan-Antimaidan interaction in eastern Ukraine. For the account of the Russian Spring rebels, see Anna Matveeva, *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within* (London: Lexington Books, 2017). For an analysis that links polarization of identity in Ukraine and Donbas with the onset rebellion, see Anna Matveeva, "No Moscow Stooges: Identity Polarization and Guerrilla Movements in Donbass," in *The Ukrainian Crisis*, ed. T. German and E. Karagiannis (London: Routledge, 2017), 25–50.

of the war in Ukraine as it was unfolding in time, with the heterogeneous actors, and the variety of claims and societal grievances.

I follow the efforts of scholars who highlight the need to decolonize Russian and Slavic studies and utilize immersive research methods in doing so.[4] The theoretical framework I utilize to make sense of mobilization is a mixture of concepts grounded in social movement studies. The analysis is inductive and utilizes original empirical data I gathered during ethnographic field research. This unique combination enabled me to write a more accurate account of mobilization in the specific environment of eastern Ukraine.

Setting out to describe empirically how and why contention emerged and developed oin the case of Mariupol, my book contributes to the fields of post-Soviet and Ukrainian area studies, social movements studies, international sociology, political ethnography, and international relations scholarship studying Russian hybrid warfare and Russian influence in Ukraine in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Methodologically unique, this book can serve as a guide to navigate ethnographic research on mobilization in violent and high-risk environments.[5] Applied to the Russo-Ukrainian war, following my conceptual framework, ethnographic methods, and research questions, and applying them to other cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, we would obtain another piece of the puzzle of the development of the war.

It all started with a story about Maria whom everyone calls Marichka.

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4 See the review by Jeremy Morris, "Political Ethnography and Russian Studies in a Time of Conflict," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39:1–2 (2023), 92–100; Vladimir Gel'man, "Exogenous Shock and Russian Studies," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39:1–2 (2023), 1–9.

5 Some political scientists and sociologists use ethnography to study mobilization in high-risk scenarios, namely political ethnographer Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) with her excellent guide to ethnographic research in a high-risk environments Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ethnographic Research in the Shadow of Civil War," in *Political Ethnography*: *What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power,* ed. E. Schatz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 119–142; or Anna Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 10:3 (2006), 411–427; this literature only covers mobilisation against the government in a civil war setting.

I heard about Marichka by chance during an interview with a Ukrainian activist. I asked them what it means to be a Ukrainian patriot. Instead of a definition, they told me a story about a Mariupol University professor who organized Mariupol Maidan protests as soon as the revolution started in Kyiv and mobilized the city to dig trenches to counter Russian invasion when the Russian army crossed the Ukrainian border in August 2014. I was surprised to find there was a pro-Ukrainian movement in a city that was largely pro-Russian, whether in terms of societal sentiments toward Russia, business and trade relations of elites, or political preferences of locals.

Thus, I set out to go to Mariupol to meet Marichka in person. We met at the Mariupol State University where she worked. I was waiting in the corridor for her to finish her lecture. I had not known what she looked like, but when I saw her, I instantly knew it was her. She had an air of authority about her and naturally caught one's eye. I also remember how passionately she spoke about protecting Mariupol and the similarly minded others. By the end of the interview I knew I would write about her and the social mobilization she inspired.

During the initial two weeks I had spent in Mariupol, I came to know many activists like Marichka—ordinary people with ordinary jobs whose lives changed profoundly in parallel with the profound sociopolitical changes that the Maidan revolution triggered. They said they mobilized "accidentally" and "spontaneously"; they never planned to organize protest actions but when the Kyiv Maidan started on November 21, 2013, they took to the streets in support of a better future for Ukraine envisaged by the revolution.

After the Maidan victory, protest mobilization changed: with the occupation of Crimea, Mariupol activists feared that their city—a strategic port city between Russia and Crimea—would become Russia's target next. As a response, they resisted in any way they could, whether by buying bulletproof vests for soldiers, by sewing old clothes into camouflage nets and suits for military vehicles or snipers, or by volunteering to territorial defense formations.

By doing so, people like Marichka unknowingly laid the foundations of the pro-Ukrainian volunteer and activist movement that changed the course of events after the revolution in Kyiv ended.

The knowledge I acquired about the "pro-Ukrainian"movement in Mariupol made me curious about the other side of contention: people who mobilized against the Maidan and in support of the Russian Spring.

Their stories made me realize that more often than not their support for the Russian Spring had less to do with Russia and more with the social, political, economic, or cultural characteristics of the Donetsk region. Striking was the finding that despite available evidence that proved Russian meddling in the region to destabilize it that led to violence and civilian casualties, most locals blamed the Ukrainian government and Maidan supporters for it.

Further, throughout my research in eastern Ukraine between 2018 and 2021, I kept noticing the absence of "Ukraine" in the industrial Donetsk and Luhansk regions observable in the language locals used or in demonstrating adherence to Ukrainian cultural tropes and national symbols like the Ukrainian flag, anthem, or coat of arms. There was even animosity toward these symbols observable in the behavior and conversations between locals when presented with them.

Participant observation was the only way to studying the behavior of locals. Embedding myself within local communities to live, see, and (to a very limited extent) feel what the subjects experience,[6] I aimed to capture some of the complexities of my respondents' experiences in the world that they lived in. Emphasizing the experiential dimension of mobilization, I aimed to provide "answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning."[7] This was reflected in people's motives, objectives, and the interrelationship between social and political factors that shaped their reality.

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6 Inspired by political ethnographer Edward Schatz, "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.

7 Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna Sessions Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials,* 3rd edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007), 10.

During the approximately sixty interviews and countless conversations on my trips as an observer, many of my respondents showed me around cities, towns, checkpoints, trenches, former battlefields, memorials, and other protest or war-related sites. In a sense, this enabled me to "re-live" their experiences with them. I also participated in various political events related to the Maidan protests, war commemorations, and social and cultural celebrations related to Soviet and Ukrainian traditions. I lived with one Mariupol family for two weeks while volunteering in the city. Spending extended periods of time with my respondents led to close personal bonds that, over time, enabled extensive, open, and honest conversations about events under study. Insights from locals are generally rare because of the politicized nature of the research topic, but they are all the more valuable precisely because of their authenticity and situatedness.[8]

My study of social mobilization was inspired by political ethnographers, particularly Elisabeth J. Wood and her immersive study of the foundations of the civil war in El Salvador, and social movements scholars, particularly Francesca Polletta who utilizes narratives and storytelling in exploring why people mobilize to achieve social or political change, and Kevin Gillan who brings individual frames into the study of collective action.

Narratives are understood as "stories, myths, and folk tales."[9] In the context of social movements, Polletta focuses on narratives as "ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists."[10] She thus analyzes the mobilising potential of narratives on protest participation used by the leaders that the audiences employ as their own.

But as Moore argues, "narratives are essentially embedded in culture; culture being the activities, meaningful practices and value systems within given society. And within culture, stories guide

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8 Sean O Riain, "Extending the Ethnographic Case Study," in *The SAGE Handbook of Case-Based Methods*, ed. D. Byrne and C. C. Ragin (London: SAGE, 2009), 289.

9 Robert N. Benford, "Frame Disputes within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement," *Social Forces* 71 (1993), 693.

10 David A. Snow and Robert N. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilisation," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988), 199.

action."[11] Narratives not only reflect assumptions, beliefs, or value systems that often guide political action and meanings that are assigned to personal experiences but also act as "a way to engage with social action and social agency that is at once temporal, relational, and cultural."[12] Combining narratives with ethnographic immersion to study collective action aids what Wood describes as "understanding of the history of local communities, residents' perceptions of that history, and the evolution of local political culture."[13]

I am therefore paying attention to narratives and stories and using them as a research method to study the foundations and course of mobilization. First, by analyzing narrative resonance: the effect of narratives on mobilization reflected in the receptivity of audiences toward some, while opposition toward other narratives.[14] Second, by observing the individual dimension of narratives: examining the language locals use to talk about events and the stories they tell to learn about the meanings they attribute to them. As Gillan asserts,[15] "the content of ideas is a route to characterizing the significance of the social movement that carries them. This is because what we are examining are political, as well as sociological, phenomena. Movements offer reflections on the organization of social, political and economic life."

Therefore, here comes to the fore the individual and their frames. Frames are understood as "structures of beliefs or values that guide critical action," understanding of and response to a given situation. Shifting the attention to individuals within movements, both leaders and audiences, frames "offer an alternative view of society, economy and polity that is grounded in protagonists' experience and struggle." They help us interrogate "why certain interpretative frames can lead to certain kinds of activity and outcome."[16] Individual frames give meaning to ideological or emotional bonds

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11 Cerwyn Moore, *Contemporary Violence: Post-Modern War in Kosovo and Chechnya* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 158.
12 Moore, *Contemporary Violence,* 158.
13 Wood, "Ethnographic Research in the Shadow of Civil War," 21.
14 Snow and Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilisation," 199.
15 Kevin Gillan, "Understanding Meaning in Movements: A Hermeneutic Approach to Frames and Ideologies," *Social Movement Studies* 7:3 (2008), 252.
16 Gillan, "Understanding Meaning in Movements," 250–252.

between participants which in turn informs the culture of movements, or the "sense-making, cognitively encoded [. . .] forms and recipes, values, and ideologies."[17]

The last crucial ingredient that impacted mobilization was violence and the threat thereof. As other ethnographers observed, violence amplifies emotions, perceptions, and beliefs that together drive individuals to take action.[18] This is because violence—whether lived or perceived—reinforces existing grievances according to these individuals' subjective frames. If framed correctly, violence can agitate mobilization and reinforce narratives so that they ring true.[19] Shesterinina observes that when framing resonates with threat perception, individuals mobilize against the "perceived threat to their collectivity . . . to defend families, localities, and the nation . . . threat to themselves, close family and friends and hid, fled, or defected."[20]

But how do people choose sides? How do they decide whom to believe and who the enemy is? Shesterinina argues that "[mobilizing factors] are situated in a complex social context, where threats are not given, but are rather constructed, or filtered through and consolidated by the social structures that individuals interact with in daily life, and the resultant perception of threat, rather than the fact of threat, drives individual mobilization decisions."[21] Further, mobilizing potential of threat framing and "social structures within which individuals are embedded provide access to essential information on threat that individuals draw on to make difficult decisions in the context of uncertainty. . . . [The narrative] is consolidated into collective notions of threat [that are] based on shared understandings of history and identity."[22]

To conclude the science behind ethnography, narratives inform motivational frames and the vocabularies and messages that

17 Anna Tan and David A. Snow, "Movements, Social," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, 16 (2015), 514.

18 Wood, "Ethnographic Research in the Shadow of Civil War"; Jeffrey S. Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined: Militant Action, the Black Bloc and the Mass Media in Genoa," *Critique of Anthropology* 25:4 (2005), 413–432.

19 Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined," 415.

20 Anastasia Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 110:3 (2016), 411–427.

21 Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing," 417.

22 Sherestenina, "Collective Threat Framing," 417.

movements employ,[23] and individual frames shed light on individual mobilization while also reflecting on how embedded factors such as culture and history impact on the values and belief systems that are demonstrated in the individual's social and political behavior. Ethnographic research allows one to study why these narratives have mobilizing potential in the first place. Answering these questions requires studying events through the viewpoints of the locals: observing them; interacting with them; and experiencing their realities of life whether it be social, political, or economic. These local contexts and characteristics of the region shaped people's lives and identities and formed their unique way of thinking. Participation in collective action, or a lack thereof, was a reflection of this.

In order to study and make sense of these complexities, I bridge ethnography and social movements concepts, bringing cognitive factors and local characteristics into the analysis of social mobilization. The combination of interpretive social movements literature and ethnographic research methods allows for assessing social mobilization at its various stages of activism or participation in movements and thus informs why individuals choose to, or choose not to, take action in the first place. However, despite the significance of mobilization, movements, and frames—and contention more generally—in international political sociology, few studies draw on this literature or apply it to a non-Western setting.[24] A secondary aim of the book is to encourage dialogue between researchers who do or have undertaken fieldwork in challenging, non-Western settings to supplement work on contentious politics and enrich broader attempts to decolonize Russian studies.

Activism was always intertwined with sociopolitical developments in the city and the country. Therefore, the structure of this book will follow a chronological order, following the events of Maidan and Antimaidan interaction through to Russian Spring and self-defense movements, to the end of my inquiry at the end

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23 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 6 (2000), 617.

24 See edited volume that analyzes social movements in non-Western countries, including Russia and Ukraine: Ekim Arbatli and Dina Rosenberg, *Non-Western Social Movements and Participatory Democracy: Protest in the Age of Transnationalism* (New York: Springer, 2017).

of August 2014 when a limited number of Russian army personnel entered Ukraine. From September 2014, the line of contact dividing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions into spheres of control between Ukraine and the self-proclaimed D/LNR was established, and security situation in Mariupol stabilized. At this point, Mariupol social mobilization in its popular demonstration ended. In February 2022, however, most of this book's heroes remobilized in resistance to the Russian invasion they had warned against, and prepared for, for the past eight years.

After finishing this section, I introduce the history, politics, and demographics of Mariupol, inspired by the varying accounts of my respondents: some considered the Ukrainian roots of the development of Mariupol and its geographical location by the Sea of Azov, while others highlighted Russian and Soviet legacies that shaped the character of the city and Mariupol's connection with the industrial Donbas. This dichotomy is symbolic of the 2013–2014 contention when interpretations of the past and belonging clashed.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the onset and course of the Maidan-Antimaidan contention in Mariupol, through the stories of the mobilization of the key organizers: Anatoly and Anna, Valery, and Marichka. They teach us about the origins and course of collective action through their actions and interactions with one another, their motives, and objectives but also about the different perception of "enemy" that turned political mobilization into self-defense and militant mobilization, identity and frames of their followers and fellow residents, or demobilization in the environment of violence and threat. They were selected to showcase the importance of the individual in studying collective action and social identity. Though spontaneously[25] at first, they established the foundations for mobilizing structures of the post-Maidan period.

Valery's account from the side of Antimaidan helps us understand the popular support for and mobilization on the side of the Antimaidan and Russian Spring movements discussed in Chapters

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25 I utilize the term "spontaneous mobilization" according to Shesterinina's definition as individual mobilization outside of established or official mobilizing structures, according to their perceptions and interactions with their social structures. See: Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing," 421.

2–4, while Anatoly and Anna talk us through their interactions with Yanukovych supporters and efforts to teach them of a better political alternative to his governance. Marichka's story continues into the post-Maidan period and reveals how the Maidan protest turns into a pro-Ukrainian support movement resisting the Russian Spring. Her support for Ukrainian forces attracted volunteers from the city who created the infrastructure for territorial defense formation in order to counter the growing anti-governmental rebellion. The nuances of the pro-Ukrainian resistance are detailed in Chapters 3, 6, 9, and 10.

I conclude Chapter 2 with the fall of Yanukovych's rule that, on the one hand, brought the Maidan revolution to an end, but, on the other, led to a counterrevolution in the southeast of Ukraine that considered the outcome of the Maidan illegal. In Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss how the combination of popular grievances about the Maidan and the subsequent annexation of Crimea orchestrated by Russia in response to toppling Yanukovych ignited a strong emotional response in the southeast: the so-called Russian Spring movement. This movement revealed the mobilizing power of violence and emotion, heterogeneity of actors and motivations in taking part in collective action, making claims, or stirring events to a certain end, and the post-Maidan vacuum of power and governance that enabled it. I discuss this in the section about the self-proclaimed "Mayor" of Mariupol Kuzmenko—a local businessman who used the combination of power vacuum and the popularity of the Russian Spring to claim political power.

While Kuzmenko ultimately failed to control Mariupol because he did not prove suitable for Russian special services and local proxies who decided events on the ground—the reasons I discuss in detail in Chapter 7 on the influence of Russian state and non-state actors and Ukrainian collaborators in using the popularity of the Russian Spring to destabilize Ukraine. The case of Kuzmenko's mobilization provides insight into the works and structure of the rebellion, on the one hand, and mobilizing potential of certain narratives, on the other. I describe the former on two of the main events that shaped mobilization in Chapters 4 and 5—the April 16 armed attack on the Ukrainian National Guard based at the Military Unit 3057 and

the May 9 terrorist attack on the Directorate of the Internal Affairs (*Upravlenie Vnutrennykh Del*—UVD)—the police building.

These two violent attacks are discussed in detail because the popular reaction to them steered mobilization in Mariupol in two directions: activism for preserving the territorial integrity of Ukraine or rebellion aspiring to topple local governance and install in its place independent rule of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

The May 9 attack helps us explore two of the key puzzles of Mariupol mobilization: Why were locals so moved by the myth of Ukrainian fascism to take to the streets and even pick up a weapon in resistance? Why did the interpretations of this event divide Mariupol into those who interpreted this event as a terrorist attack by rebels aimed to capture weapons stored within and those who accused the Ukrainian government of staging the attack that ended in the death of policemen and civilians in order to neutralize resistance and take control over the Donetsk and Luhansk regions?

The main ingredients that inspired this divide were violence and the emotions that they stirred. May 9 divided Mariupol into those with whom I discuss these opposing interpretations and attributions of blame reflected in narratives that elites and leaders used to mobilize people. I discuss this in detail in Chapter 8 on the history of narratives. I argue that these particular narratives resonated because they were embedded in the collective memory of locals fostered by the political elites, thus bearing the necessary emotional load and believability that elites and claimants could amplify and exploit. The narratives locals believed demonstrated in their frames and behavior were shaped by, and reflected in, their identity. I unwrap this in Chapter 9 where I discuss the key tenets of Donbas regionalism and Mariupol nationalism and sociopolitical changes that occurred in Mariupol throughout my ethnographic visits over the past six years until 2022. These changes reflect the resistance of Mariupol activists to Russian influence and active efforts to educate the society, build a strong territorial defense, and foster Ukrainian culture. However, these were minority efforts: most of the locals resisted pro-Ukrainian activism and a change to the established social, political, economic, or cultural trends of the region.

In Chapter 10, I follow the fate of Mariupol from February 24 until August 2022, and my respondents as they resisted and experienced Russian invasion, occupation, and, ultimately, Mariupol's fall.

Lastly, for clarification and orientation I also add in Appendices a timetable or key dates in Mariupol, a glossary of key terms, two maps of Mariupol and the region. The bibliography is organized into sections of primary and secondary sources to help with navigation.

The names of most respondents-civilians have been changed for security reasons, unless they are public figures with their real identity disclosed with consent elsewhere.

Mariupol Is "Pryazovia"

The first thing I learned about Mariupol was that it is not Donbas, but Pryazovia. Pryazovia is the region that stretches along the Azov Sea shore. The first thing I saw when my train neared Mariupol was the Azov Sea and thick smoke above it. The first thing I realized about Mariupol was that it changed character according to the different parts of the city: the Central district left of the river Kalchyk had a unique architecture and cosmopolitan character; Primorskyi district south of the center had the port and beaches; across the bridge over Kalmius River to the Left Bank in the east was the huge Azovstal metallurgic combine, and along the Kalmius River to the north was Kalmiuskyi district with the large Ilyich Iron and Steel Works. This is where sea breeze was replaced by suffocating factory smoke.

The most populous were the Central and Primorskyi districts, but the industrial districts had the highest working-class population. As of the end of 2014, the population of Mariupol neared 478,000, being the second largest city in the region after Donetsk and the tenth most populous within Ukraine.

The proportion of ethnic Ukrainians to Russians was similar to the industrial Donbas with 48–44 percent, and the everyday language was also Russian. Unlike the Donbas, Mariupol had a unique

composition of ethnic minorities (mainly Greeks, Jews, or Crimean Tatars) that influenced Mariupol's history, culture, and architecture.

Mariupol gained its city status in 1778 and its name in 1779, but its history as a settlement dates to the sixteenth century when, named Domakha, it served as a fortress of Zaporozhian Cossacks along the Kalmius River. In 1768, the Crimean Tatars won the fortress over and held it for the next seven years. After this the Russian empire integrated the territory into its Azov gubernia and Crimean Greeks were moved there to settle in the region. The name Mariupol honors Russian Emperor Paul's wife Maria Fyodorovna.

While the importance of Mariupol in the eighteenth century lay mainly in fishing and trade, the nineteenth century brought to the region the development of industry. Due to its coastal location, Mariupol turned from a strategic defense point for Ukrainian Cossacks into a strategic point for coal and grain transportation and metallurgical and chemical production and distribution. But while the industry shaped Mariupol and between 25 and 30 percent of the population worked in factories, it was also home to universities and churches that endorsed local culture, ethnic uniqueness, and language versatility.

Mariupol Is "Donbas"

The discovery of the rich Donbas natural resources led to a rapid growth of the industry. This period correlates with a doubling of Mariupol's population as well as its Russification that continued throughout the twentieth century: with the establishment of the Azovstal Metallurgical plant in 1933 and an inflow of workers, Mariupol became the third largest industrial center in Ukraine. By the end of the 1980s, the population of Mariupol surpassed 500,000, and Mariupol seaport became the second largest after Odesa.

While Mariupol retained its diverse ethnic composition, it gained the proletarian character of the Donbas and over time became Russified and almost completely Russophone. This trend continued and was solidified during the Soviet era.

The growing industry also shaped regional politics, closely linking business and trade relations. Owners of factories and businesses

employed the majority working population, which translated into political power. Mariupol became a "company town"[26] where the state provided municipal and public facilities which in turn produced social dependencies on the owners of industries. Consequently, the more workers relied on businessmen for their wages, the bigger became their influence over local politics.

This did not change when the central government of the Soviet Union disintegrated; instead, local sociopolitical structures of the past and business links with Russia prevailed. Owners of big enterprises continued to play the paternal role of "job-givers" (*rabotadateli*),[27] providers of pensions, and constructors of infra-structure. Community services and social dependencies on business turned companies and factories into "powerful electoral machines" that de facto determined the political structure of local and regional governance.[28]

Supported by the working class and combined with privatiza-tion of big businesses that ensued in the 1990s, a small number of individuals gradually gained control over big businesses and thus gained influence over the social and political life of the industrial Donbas. Simply put, such was the origin of how the political party of businessmen and business affiliates Party of Region with Viktor Yanukovych at its top, gained its wealth and from the mid-2000s, also majority popular support. This is also how the Donbas oligar-chic class emerged, with the key financer and unofficial leader of the PoR Rinat Akhmetov.

Akhmetov owns a complex of Mariupol iron and steelwork fac-tories and he is the single biggest employer in the city. The Soviet period produced the Donbas working class and a society in which life is intertwined with business, and with this the prevailing politi-cal culture: the working class equates their quality of life with what they can afford to buy and support leaders who can maintain or improve their economic situation. The PoR and (a Donbas native)

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26 Kimitaka Matsuzato, "The Donbas War and Politics in Cities on the Front: Mariupol and Kramatorsk," *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 46:6 (2017), 1008–1009.

27 Matsuzato, "The Donbas War," 1008–1009.

28 Matsuzato, "The Donbas War," 1008–1009.

President Yanukovych were associated with this stability and improvement of living conditions.

Though for the past decade *Mariupoltsy* (Mariupol residents) of varying political views have been protesting against the detrimental effect of Akhmetov's factories on the environment, the protest movement for a better air quality had not translated into a comparable political mobilization. There was one key pragmatic reason for it: too many people relied on oligarchs for their income.

This changed at the end of 2013 when the Maidan revolution began in Kyiv. Donbas and *Pryazovia* became political and civilizational metaphors: the former tied with Russia and the latter with Ukraine. The rest of the book will discuss how they clashed.

Chapter 2

MARIUPOL MAIDAN AND ANTIMAIDAN

This chapter deals with the onset and course of Mariupol Maidan-Antimaidan mobilization. The "Maidan movement" is an umbrella term for social mobilization supportive of the Maidan revolution. Pro-Maidan participation of Mariupol residents was both ideologically unlikely and statistically insignificant when compared to protest sites in central and western Ukraine. This is because the majority of the population including political and law enforcement structures supported Yanukovych and the Party of Regions (PoR). As a result, tens of Maidan goers stood against hundreds of Maidan opponents. Yet, this minority mobilization created the basis for the future defense of the city against insurgency and later Russian war.

For Maidan participants in central and western Ukraine, the decisions to take to the streets was primarily political, against the corrupt and violent practices of the Yanukovych government and toward a closer integration with the European Union instead of Russia. While Mariupol Maidan supporters mirrored these objectives, they saw the end of Yanukovych as a chance to incite societal change. They wished to break away from the established paternalist system that created societal dependencies on businessmen and political elites and to demonstrate to their voters that a better alternative existed for the city and the country. Mariupol Maidan started not as a mass effort but an effort of individuals who mobilized independently of one another: on the one hand, political representatives from UDAR[1] opposition political party Anatoly and his deputy Anna and, on the other, Mariupol intelligentsia summoned around Mariupol professor of politics and history Marichka.

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1 See Glossary.

Anatoly and Anna

The first pro-Maidan protests in Mariupol grew out of political meetings opposed to the PoR. These public meetings were the initiative of two individuals: Anatoly and Anna. Anatoly was the leader of the Mariupol faction of the UDAR opposition political party, and Anna was his deputy. The first meeting took place in October 2013, and its purpose was to converse with Mariupol residents about their grievances. They were mostly related to economic considerations, namely increasing living costs that rose quicker than salaries and pensions and expressing socialist wishes for equality between the elites and the ordinary people.

Anatoly and Anna tried to explain that many of these grievances were a consequence of the corrupt crony politics of the PoR, while those whom they elected lived in the expensive flats, ate in the best restaurants, and holidayed in the West that locals were taught to perceive as "rotten" and "culturally decayed." The locals reacted in a manner that showed conformism and defeatism. Anatoly and Anna argued that a different political governance could improve their living conditions, but locals did not believe it was in their power to change the political structure. Instead, they blamed someone else for their problems. This kind of thinking was fostered and used by the elites long before the Maidan, but when the revolution started political elites gave that "someone" a face and a collective name: "Maidan fascists," "Nazis," or "Western agents." Anatoly and Anna became any one of these as the opponents of the revolution branded them the enemy.

Political opposition to the PoR in Mariupol had marginal popular support and public presence which was reflected in attendance and oppositional representation at Maidan. Nevertheless, Anatoly and Anna continued this initiative when the revolution broke out of principle, without any budget and equipment or popular backing.

When I first met Anatoly, he was very polite and very reserved. He asked me if I was recording the interview, and I answered that I would not unless he gave his consent. "Of course not . . .," he smirked. I experienced similar initial reactions from most of my respondents. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, they were cautious about my motivations, especially as a foreigner, to study protests and war in

eastern Ukraine. The second factor was linked with their past experiences with political violence: pro-Ukrainian activists were often followed and had their safety threatened because of their views. As a result, they were careful about what they revealed.

Anna, on the other hand, was the opposite. When she entered Anatoly's office to join us, she greeted me warmly and openly. She was confident and same as Anatoly stood strongly behind her opinions and actions. I could understand why other activists, including political opponents, spoke of them with respect.

When I asked what motivated them to publicly support the Maidan, Anatoly confessed he was skeptical about what the revolution could achieve. For him, the act of overthrowing a regime does not bring about societal change necessary to instill political culture in the people. He meant that the sociopolitical specifics reflected in the majority support for the PoR would not simply disappear with Yanukovych gone. But once the Maidan broke out, Anatoly chose its side as an opponent of the regime.

Between October and November, Anatoly and Anna gathered every weekend on the Freedom Square (formerly Lenin Square)—a large square located in the very center of Mariupol where political and social activities traditionally took place.[2] Whether it rained or snowed, the pair flew Ukrainian and Mariupol flags and conversed with locals over a hot cup of tea. Since the start of the revolution on November 21, 2013, their effort gradually attracted political representatives equally opposed to Yanukovych, namely from the main opposition political parties *Batkyvshchyna* (Fatherland), *Svoboda* (Freedom), *Radikalna Partiya Olega Lyashko* (Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko), and *Front Zmin* (Front of Changes). These politicians took to the streets as an opportunity to express their political agenda and appeal to the electorate, namely the need for the forming of a civil society that will "elect its leaders" and decide the future of their country for themselves.

This cluster formed the basic format of the initial "political" Maidan protests in Mariupol. But when the *Berkut* riot police attempted to disperse Kyiv protesters by force on November 30, Maidan support was not just about politics anymore. At first

2 See Map A.1.

Anatoly and Anna wanted "the Maidan participants [in Kyiv] to feel our support" but they took the police "beatings of the children at the square as if they beat our own."

The cluster began to meet daily, setting up a schedule to perform their "Maidan duty": gathering, bringing hot tea and coffee, and providing Ukrainian flags and banners. They produced posters that urged Mariupol residents to "Wake Up!" and join the protests for "Ukraine Against Bribes." Maidan goers—or *Maidanovtsy*—demonstrated their affiliations by singing the national anthem wrapped in Ukrainian flags.[3]

Marichka

I met Marichka at the Mariupol State University. She worked there as a professor of politics and history. Prior to the Maidan, she never was or aspired to become a public figure. Since Spring 2014, the whole Mariupol knew her. Before we met, I had already spent a week in Mariupol, interviewing several pro-Ukrainian activists who self-mobilized in 2013–2014. Everyone said that in order to understand social mobilization in Mariupol I had to meet *Her*. Marichka believed that the relationship between a lecturer and their student outside the lecture theater should be informal. While she taught her students, she also encouraged discussions that would challenge their views. The students liked and respected her and when the revolution started, they came specifically to Marichka to help them organize Maidan support gathering at the University. She agreed.

> Ilya Ponomarenko, now a well-known journalist, came to me. "We want to go out in support!," he exclaimed. It was, well, dangerous, and I considered it my duty to warn [the students] of potential repercussions and provocations, whether from the university Rector or the PoR. There were virtually all pro-Yanukovych figures at the local level, but I couldn't say no. None of this discouraged them.

3 0629comua, "'Maidan v Mariupole 07,12,2013 TCH 1+1" [Maidan in Mariupol 7 12 2013 TCH 1+1], *0629comua*, December 7, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app =desktop&v=pDLB4sDGRKc&fbclid=IwAR3BJDybrCcsIYV-6tByEkRO7behrf6 tg7n1H4fFwH2TP_m2HIU-fsLmSpc.

Surprisingly to Marichka, despite being pressured by the local administration the Rector did not threaten to penalize the students or fire her; he just warned her to be careful. "You have three children, you know . . . ." The Rector told the mayor that if he tried to subdue the students and the staff, instead of pro-Maidan demonstrations at the University, they would have to face a revolution. This excuse, or a form of protest as Marichka interpreted it, worked. After this day she taught her classes in the morning and took to the streets with her students in the afternoon.

During the first weeks of public demonstrations, Mariupol Maidan supporters became acquainted with one another, and the pro-Maidan public presence extended from meetings over tea to marches across the city. The movement gradually grew into a cluster of supporters and autonomous groups ranging from political representatives, students and teachers, businessmen, and artists to members of various civil organizations.

Most of the attendees who were not affiliated with a political party mobilized to publicly demonstrate their political views for the first time in their lives. Previously, when locals' opinions on domestic and international politics differed, they discussed issues tolerating their differences or simply chose not to speak about politics. It was similar to the Maidan: at first, most Mariupol residents regarded the Maidan as something remote and probably short-lived. The first significant change that motivated people to mobilize came with the introduction of violence by Berkut. One protester was killed and protesting against a policy thus changed into a revolution of dignity and human rights, mobilizing thousands.

In Mariupol, this violence polarized the society. According to whether it was right or wrong for the police to use violent measures—and for the protesters to fight back—people chose sides either supporting or opposing the revolution. Local newspapers reported about the Kyiv Maidan daily, emphasizing narratives of unrest caused by protesters and interpreting police actions as self-defense. The majority believed the media and supported the riot police.

Marichka recalls how the Kyiv violence radicalized locals' behavior toward any demonstrations of Maidan support. This included animosity toward Ukrainian national symbols associated with this

support and harassment during meetings. There were no safety measures that could prevent physical attacks because the Mariupol police and politicians simply "turned a blind eye." My respondents described Mariupol Mayor Yuri Hotlubei as a "chameleon" "sitting on two chairs" ready to change alliances with whomever the winning side turned out to be. Local police were inactive because they largely sided with the riot police. This left the public space uncontrolled.

Marichka adds that agitators first came from outside of Mariupol. As soon as Maidan started, the PoR organized its own protest movement: the Antimaidan. The primary goal was to agitate popular support for Yanukovych while suppressing regional supporters of the revolution. For this purpose, the PoR hired locals and Russians, usually sportsmen, loaded them into minibuses, and transported them to pro-Maidan demonstrations across eastern Ukraine. They were collectively called *titushki*.[4]

Mariupol Antimaidan meetings were also held at the Freedom Square, except that they were attended by hundreds. Maidanovtsy never attempted to disrupt or actively engage in confronting the masses of Yanukovych supporters, but they watched them closely. Maidanovtsy distinguished Russian nationals from locals by a number of shared characteristics: their strong athletic physique, dark tracksuits, watches set to Moscow time, identical boots, identical Russian and Soviet flags that they distributed at protests, the same lack of knowledge of Mariupol geography, and the same interest in "finding out how much cigarettes and alcohol were in Ukrainian currency." They usually frequented once a week according to a schedule to disrupt Maidan meetings in other regional cities.

Maidanovtsy often found themselves followed or receiving threatening messages to their phones or letterboxes. With no protection from the police, they resorted to protecting themselves: young football fans *Ultras* that included some of Marichka's students and an affiliated small group of paramilitary nationalists *Soyuz Slavyan Rusi* (Union of Slavs of the Rus) formed a defense faction that served as a deterrent against any harassment or confrontations from titushki and Antimaidan opponents.

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4 See Glossary.

The Mariupol Maidan never outgrew thirty to sixty protesters on a daily basis or a hundred participants of marches in a city of half a million. However, though small in size, it represented the first popular demonstration demanding a change in the local and state level according to values of freedom and democracy associated with the European community. Aspiring to rid Ukraine of the corrupt practices of oligarchs and breaking free from Russian influence, Maidanovtsy called themselves "pro-Ukrainian." They created a loose network of like-minded individuals who shared a common goal. The longer the revolution lasted, the more violent confrontations in Kyiv became, and increased confrontations with the police led to stronger opposition to Maidan protesters. In Mariupol, this was reflected in an increased sense of insecurity, which led to the development of the first autonomous defense groups within the Maidan network. As the following chapter will discuss, defense mobilization will become crucial after the revolution ends and the Russian Spring begins.

Mariupol Antimaidan

> No one was going to cancel the long-accepted and ongoing course towards European integration. If unrest in the country provokes the resignation of the current leadership, then this will irreversibly lead to a deterioration in the socio-economic situation. We will be left without salaries, without pensions, all segments of the population, especially the socially vulnerable, will suffer. We must demand that the government preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine, prevent its split, and maintain the constitutional order in the country. Forces that deprive citizens of basic constitutional rights undermine faith in the law.[5]

This statement given by the Chairman of the Donetsk Regional Council at the time sums up the wave of reactions and concerns of

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5 Andrei Fedoruk, Chairman of the Donetsk Regional Council Quoted in "Ne dopustit raskola Ukrainy," *Priazovskii Rabochii*, December 4, 2013, http://pr.ua/news.php?new =29576.

both political elites and citizens across the Donetsk and Luhansk regions sparked by the start of the revolution. From the first day, Mariupol saw an increase in political meetings, organized predominantly by representatives and affiliates of the regionally dominant PoR and the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU). The purpose of the meetings was to show support for the regime and address grievances of the locals.

Accordingly, the two core narratives the elites utilized were restoring order and stability that the Maidan was disrupting, and emphasizing a detrimental economic impact a trade deal with the EU would have on ordinary people. They resonated because the industrial east was dependent on business and trade relations with Russian companies, Maidan goals were perceived as threatening the status quo that could see people out of jobs. Elites called for "protecting our families, our jobs" and played on the regional note of "oppression and pressure on the Donbas." A proposed alternative to "running headlong into Europe" was that "all Ukrainian people should decide" the destiny of Ukraine, "not the Maidan."[6]

These narratives resonated in principle with the majority of Mariupol residents, but not everyone was a fan of Yanukovych. As with the Maidan, protests against the revolution were heterogeneous and encouraged the mobilization of autonomous groups unrelated to the PoR. The largest such group was led by a director of an orphanage, a Communist Party member, and an opponent of Yanukovych in one person, Valery.

Valery

When I visited Valery for the first time, I felt intimidated. He told me to meet him at his organization. I arrived at a wide, tall gate with a camera above it and a buzzer to ring to be let in. I was grateful that my "gatekeeper" Ivan[7] was there with me. I had heard stories about Valery from Maidan supporters. He was a controversial

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6 Note of the governor of regional industry Andrey Shishatsky in "Ne dopustit raskola Ukrainy," *Priazovskii Rabochii*, December 4, 2013, http://pr.ua/news.php?new=29576.

7 Gatekeeper in the sense that Ivan helped provide me access to a number of key respondents which depended on Ivan's authority and mutual trust between him and the respondents.

figure whom some locals respected and others considered a collaborator and an enemy. So I sought to clarify from Ivan what kind of person Valery was. Instead of answering, Ivan picked up his phone, rang Valery, and arranged a meeting for me to find out for myself.

Once we were let into the property, we were greeted by young men: some working out in an outdoor gym and some repairing cars in the garage. They were watching our every step as we were directed to Valery's office. There we were offered a seat, a cup of coffee, and pralines. Even this hospitality did not put me at ease. Valery, a Crimean Tatar with a strong accent and broad shoulders of a boxer, was just as intimidating as I had suspected. Ivan kept smirking while introducing me and I proceeded to ask Valery if it was okay to go on record. "Of course, I have nothing to hide" was the first thing he told me.

The second thing he said was answering my question whether he mobilized against the Maidan because he was pro-Russian:

> We always voiced our opinions and the opinions of our nation. We are no paid titushki, our organisation does not have any relations with any Russian political parties. We were against the radicalisation [at Kyiv Maidan] that we saw on television every day and we took upon us the duty to tell what ordinary citizens were saying. These people were coming here or joining us at rallies. We listened to everyone, anyone could speak up without exemption, whatever their ideological stance.

Valery studied history at the Mariupol State University and later worked as an aide to Ukrainian Member of Parliament Vladimir Boyko—a local metallurgist and a member of the Socialist Party of Ukraine who owned Mariupol iron and steel factories before selling to Akhmetov. Valery also taught Mariupol youth boxing. He established and directed a civil organization *Iskrennost* (Sincerity) as a haven for children and teenage orphans, mostly alcoholics or drug addicts. Valery described his aspiration as transforming troubled youth into morally principled and physically strong adults through education, physical training, and discipline. In this he was successful.

The reason why he was controversial was related to his and his youth's behavior at protests. Anatoly described Valery as the "main enemy" of Maidan protesters, Anna described Iskrennost youth as Valery's "own army who did whatever he wanted them to." There were frequent clashes between the Maidan protectors Ultras and Valery's sportsmen.

During the Maidan period Valery organized city marches and speeches at the Freedom Square attended by up to three hundred people. He spoke out against the revolution because he saw it as "dangerous to the unity of Ukraine" and criticized closer ties with the European Union as economically damaging and culturally alien. These views were consistent with the political attitudes of the KPU and PoR, and their electorate gathered at Antimaidan events. But there was something else behind Valery's popularity: the personality and behavior I found intimidating were perceived by his followers as a sign of strength. The following chapters will reveal just how important this personality trait was for gaining popular following.

To conclude, the Maidan period triggered an unexpected popular mobilization on both sides of the contention. Neither of this book's heroes had expected the revolution to happen and to find themselves taking lead roles within it; but as blood of protesters and policemen was spilled in Kyiv, both sides felt obliged to stand up for what they believed in. While there were clashes between Ultras and Iskrennost, the Maidan period in Mariupol cannot be defined as violent. The first violent event occurred the day after Yanukovych was toppled by the victorious revolution, on February 23. During a protest march that Valery organized, he lost control over his men and they physically attacked and injured a Maidan protester. Everyone, including Valery, was shocked. Anatoly and Valery both realized they had to do something to prevent further escalation of violence and took it upon themselves to act.

Anatoly and Valery Sign a Pact

Toppling the Yanukovych regime was pivotal for the future of Ukraine. It marked the end of a violent protest cycle that started in Kyiv after January 16, 2014 following Yanukovych's decision to

ban public demonstrations by law. On January 19 Maidan protesters responded by confronting Berkut, starting a month-long violent standoff. During this time protesters attempted to take over Ukrainian governmental buildings for the purpose of establishing an "alternative People's government." Berkut was specifically trained for disrupting anti-government riots, but when Maidan protesters burned vehicles, attacked buildings, and used Molotov cocktails against the police, many considered the protests a massacre, not a riot. This was the majority narrative in Mariupol. "What if these radicals try to do the same in Mariupol?!" locals began to ask.

Locals most feared the growing influence of the Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector). Pravyi Sektor was the most radical section of the Kyiv Maidan self-defense movement as well as a collective name for the Maidan "enemy" used by political elites. They intentionally used narratives that linked Pravyi Sektor with the Second World War Ukrainian independence movement (OUN) and its paramilitary wing behind the leader Stepan Bandera. But rather than an independence movement leader, elites and residents across eastern Ukraine associated Bandera with radical nationalism and collaboration with Nazi Germany against the Soviets. Pravyi Sektor and its leader Dmytro Yarosh (who regarded himself as a "Bandera follower"[8]) were in the east perceived as aspiring to incite a revolution, topple the government, and take over Ukraine. PoR fueled the fears by employing these "Great Patriotic War"-themed myths, resulting in eastern Ukrainians fearing "Nazis" and "fascists" without physically meeting any.

And then, Maidan violent clashes peaked. In Mariupol, the January–February violent cycle inspired thousands of Mariupol residents to take to the streets in support of Berkut and demand from Yanukovych to "rescue Ukraine" from a "Yugoslav scenario": a split of Ukraine and an outbreak of a civil war.[9] This fear escalated on February 18 when the Maidan self-defense blocked the Kyiv

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8 "Profile: Ukraine's Ultra-nationalist Right Sector," *BBC,* April 28, 2014, https://www .bbc.com/news/world-europe-27173857.

9 "Kievsii Maidan pereros v maccovyi bunt protiv vlasti: V Ukraine razigrivaetsya Yugoslavskii scenaryi?" [Kyiv Maidan Escalated into a Mass Revolt Against the Authorities: The Yugoslav Scenario Is Playing Out in Ukraine?], *Priazovskii Rabochii,* January 21, 2014, http://pr.ua/arhiv/date/2014-01-21, 2.

Parliament building and reached its peak on February 20 when a hundred Maidan protesters and eleven Berkut policemen were shot by snipers in the single most violent and final confrontation of the Maidan revolution.

Unable to stop the revolution, Yanukovych fled and the government crumbled. Maidan "won" and in the eyes of locals, the so-called "Banderovtsy" and "Pravoseki" (Bandera and Pravyi Sektor affiliates) turned into an enemy that could not only endanger the political and economic stability of the region, but bring Ukrainian nationalism into the Russian-speaking east. The east, as a response to the "radicals" "taking over central and western Ukraine,"[10] put on the symbol of Soviet victory over fascism—stripy orange-black St George's ribbons.

On February 23, 2014, Valery organized a protest march across Mariupol against the result of the revolution and the violence that preceded it. While he was a political opponent of Yanukovych, he was more opposed to the new government formed by political parties of the "victorious" Maidan. Valery had no respect for a regime founded on violence and he wanted me to consider the violence from the view of the affected policemen, not just the protesters:

> Imagine your job is protecting the government. This government is toppled. You see how a new government is established on blood. On your blood. No government is worth a drop of spilled blood, no government is worth a loss of life. They saw their colleagues being attacked and killed. They were hostages of the situation. They are not guilty because in a sound governance the deputies would go out and govern the people, govern the police. Who was governing? No-one. Who took responsibility? No-one.

Thus, some holding flags of Ukraine and the Iskrennost organization, some wearing St George ribbons, and others carrying baseball bats and truncheons, Valery's protest movement—a hundred-men-strong—marched through the city toward the City Council in the center. There they entered the Council building and demanded

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10 "Kievskii Maidan pereros v maccovyi bunt," January 21, 2014.

from the Council to issue a statement identifying concrete measures that would be put into place to ensure that Mariupol would remain governed and protected from internal and external violence. This included the protection of Soviet-era monuments and memorials that were being demolished across Ukraine as a "symbol" of Maidan victory.

Hotlubei came out and spoke to the crowd:

> We are a city of working class. People go to work every day. Teachers, doctors and everyone else hold on because Mariupoltsy work on them. It is us who are the keepers of the region, who constantly pay to western parts of Ukraine. Mariupol—a great industrial city. One third of all that is manufactured in the region is produced here beside the one eighth of what is produced in the whole of Ukraine. On cities like Mariupol depends the stability of the whole of Ukraine.[11]

Hotlubei assured Valery that the law enforcement would prevent any disruptions to peace. Valery and his group then proceeded to march to the Freedom Square to join the six hundred Yanukovych supporters who had gathered to denounce the Maidan victory and express their opposition to the "illegitimate coup" of Yanukovych. In the meantime, someone spread a rumor that Maidan radicals from Pravyi Sektor were arriving in Mariupol. At this point, Evgeny Korablev was heading toward the Freedom Square to join Maidanovtsy in their celebration of the Maidan victory. He wore a yellow-blue scarf that resembled the Ukrainian flag. Suddenly, a group of around thirty sportsmen in black charged at him: "Pravosek!"— they shouted—"We captured one!" They beat and dragged Evgeny onto the stage built at the square where they demanded his confession to being a Kyiv fascist from Pravyi Sektor.[12]

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11 Anna Romanenko, ed., *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost* (Lviv: Poligraf, 2015), 20.
12 Bitva za Ukrainu, "Agressivnye Storonniki Rossii Izbili Maidanovtsa I Zhurnalistku v Mariupole, 23 Fevralya 2014" [Aggressive Supporters of Russia Beat Maidan Activist and Journalist in Mariupol, February 23, 2014], YouTube, March 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNCX0eEbz_g.

Opposite to Hotlubei's promise, the police did nothing but stand on the stage, waiting to see what happens next. Valery saw that the masses were out of control and approached to interfere. He asked Evgeny to explain who he was and what had happened.[13] When Evgeny explained he was a local journalist, Valery pushed the attackers away and helped escort Evgeny to safety from the angered crowd.

On the following day, Valery admitted personal responsibility for agitating protesters and apologized for the attack on Korablev. This misunderstanding did not extinguish locals' fears that "buses full of radical nationalists" were coming from Kyiv to "kill opponents of the Maidan." Over three hundred of them gathered at the gates of Valery's organization and asked to join Iskrennost to form a Mariupol defense movement against "fascism" under Valery's command.

When Anatoly heard about this, he and Anna rushed to meet Valery. The reason was security concerns:

> Self-defense groups started to mobilize around 21 February. Most of those who joined were just crazy fanatics who believed they were saving mothers and granddads from fascists. They did not understand what they were starting. Already by this time groups of foreigners who didn't even know the city had been coming in vehicles registered in Rostov-on-Don [in Russia]. In my understanding they were most likely recruited by Russian special services because they were organised and there were buses full of them. Drivers would simply drive those who paid them. We thought, this process ought to be stopped, something ought to be done; today they carry bats but tomorrow they can attack the administration. But not by attending their meeting because we would have been outnumbered by hundreds. So, we resorted to pay Valery a visit to mediate the situation by dialogue.

13　Guru ua, "Izbinenie aktivista Evromaidana v Mariupole, 23.02.2014" [The Beating of Maidan Activist in Mariupol, 23.02.2014], YouTube, February 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-l1EjRysec.

For Valery this incident was a warning: an illustration of the strength of emotions but also a sign that the situation could get out of hand if left unchecked. Anatoly felt obliged to protect the city and understood that despite their rivalry, Valery was the only person who had the authority among locals and the capacity to achieve it. As Anatoly recalled:

> We arrived at his big gate, rang the door. I asked, Where is Onatsky!? We've come to talk to him! The gate opened and in the yard inside we see lots of men with bats, protective gear. They're training. This was intimidating even for a brave person like myself, but we entered Onatsky's office. We talked for a long time about the necessity to address the situation in the city and deny rumours about Pravyi Sektor so that people remain calm, continue to go to work and so on. I still remember now how my hands were shaking long after we'd left.

Anatoly was not the only one who recognized the severity of the situation. By the time of their arrival, mayor's representatives and politicians had gathered at Valery's to discuss security. As a result, Anatoly and Valery agreed to use both movements' main defense factions—Iskrennost and Ultras—that had previously stood in opposition, to patrol protests and prevent violence on the streets. As a measure to educate and calm locals, Maidanovtsy also began to actively counter PoR propaganda about Pravyi Sektor, namely distributing leaflets that debunked fabrications about Bandera, Ukrainian nationalism, and the myth that "radicals" from western Ukraine were preparing to take over the Donbas.

To visualize this story, Anatoly paused and showed me a video from that night. It was Valery's public statement to the locals gathered at his gates. Valery stated this:

> All main parties with representation in the Ukrainian parliament were present here: Svoboda, UDAR, Front Zmin, Communists and Party of Regions. We set up the get-together here [to obtain] a guarantee from each political side that no Pravyi Sektor will arrive here. . . . Blood and

death have no other colour than red and stink other than of rotting. The colour will remain the same for a Communist, *Svobodovets*,[14] *Regional*,[15] or Pravyi Sektor. We demanded a warrant that the city will remain calm, and today we practically achieved that. Together.

As a proof of the warrant, Valery pointed at a sheet of paper in his hand. "We signed that document, all of us, symbolically, with each other's pens. I exchanged pens with the deputy, giving him my cheap plastic one." Laughing, Anatoly paused again and reached into a drawer, pulling out an expensive-looking golden pen: "I still have it."

This was not the first time Anatoly and Valery demanded security guarantees from the mayor, but the Korablev incident proves Hotlubei's promises lacked substance. It was up to them—two accidental leaders—to take matters into their own hands. The actions of Anatoly and Valery show the importance of individuals in collective action, while the behavior of the Antimaidan supporters highlights the power of emotion and frames. The latter led to rendering Anatoly and Valery's aspirations to control protesters futile. The following stories will demonstrate this.

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14 A member of the Svoboda Party.
15 A member of the PoR.

Chapter 3

MARIUPOL AND THE "RUSSIAN WORLD"

"I felt it my duty to protect the city," said Anatoly when he was telling me the story. At the start, he believed that the pact he signed with Valery could last and that managing the crowds was possible. "A day, two, it actually worked, and situation was calm. Our role was to manage our guys [Ultras and Iskrennost] and we did. But the others, they wanted the opposite and they outnumbered us. Things got scary very quickly." The "others" were Antimaidan protesters and new-coming agitators. They appeared in the context of the Russian takeover of Crimea.

On February 23, 2014, just before the Evgeny Korablev violent incident, Hotlubei stated the following:

> We are a city of working class. People go to work every day. Teachers, doctors and everyone else can hold on because Mariupoltsy work on them. It is us who are the keepers of the region, who constantly pay to western parts of Ukraine. Mariupol is a great industrial city. One third of all that is manufactured in the region is produced here, beside the eighth of what is produced in the whole of Ukraine. On cities like Mariupol depends the stability of the whole of Ukraine.[1]

On February 24, Hotlubei held an extraordinary Council meeting with representatives of political parties and civil organizations to address the attack on Korablev. He started the meeting with a warning:

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1 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost*, 20.

> Here live factory people. These people kept silent for the
> longest time but if they get startled, they will swipe us all.
> There will be no-one left. Do not play with fire.[2]

Retrospectively, these words were almost prophetic. Hotlubei knew
the grievances of people and realized that they could be agitated.
The spark that ignited the fire did not come from Mariupol, how-
ever; it came from Crimea in the form of the Russian takeover and
occupation of the Supreme Council in Simferopol. On February 26,
these councillors made a demand to become a subject of the Russian
Federation. The Russian Spring thus began.

The term "Russian Spring" represents a movement for Russian
awakening founded upon a civilizational myth of a "Great Russia"
within which ethnic Russians would unite. The territories of south-
eastern Ukraine, according to this myth, belong within this "Great
Russia." The movement would aspire to claim these regions and
establish them into an autonomous formation called *Novorossiya*—
"New Russia."

The diffusion of the Russian Spring was fast and it did spread
like wildfire. Russia formally annexed Crimea on March 18, 2014,
but the first Russian Spring support protests started straight after
the Council takeover. The first time the Russian Spring narrative
was used in Mariupol was on March 1. "Crimea-Donbas-Russia," a
crowd of hundreds gathered at the Freedom Square chanted.

Ivan recalled this event vividly. He was my gatekeeper and a
writer of Mariupol contention in 2014. He observed protests from
their onset and knew all key protagonists. He helped me get access
to many of my respondents in my aspiration to view this period
through the eyes of locals. To Ivan, March 1 was different to dem-
onstrations that took place before the Crimea. He watched how a
group of a hundred men on one side of the Freedom Square marched
toward a handful of Maidanovtsy on the other. "Fascism will not
pass!," "Berkut is with us!," they shouted, approaching. Ivan never
saw Antimaidan protesters this agitated and for the first time, he
feared violent escalation.

2 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost*, 21.

Maidanovtsy remained calm, however, and outnumbered by Antimaidan one to five, they retreated to their homes. But the aggressive group celebrating their "victory" over Maidanovtsy did not. Instead, they continued to march toward the City Council where they demanded to speak with the mayor. When Hotlubei refused to come out, they broke the windows on the first floor and some of them broke inside. Among them was a local lecturer of history. He removed the Ukrainian flag from the flagpole above the entrance to the building and replaced it with the flag of the Russian Federation.

Ivan feared an escalation for a reason. The March 1 marks the start of a new cycle of Antimaidan mobilization with new goals: Crimea-inspired aspirations of independence and autonomy from the Kyiv rule it considered illegitimate and hopes that the east of Ukraine would follow Crimea into the "Russian world."

Ivan highlighted two demonstrations of this. On March 2, Oleg Butskoi from the national civic organization *Obyedinenie Veteranov Razvedky Ukrainy* (Association of Veterans of Ukrainian Intelligence Services) and three hundred supporters called on the City Council to demand that the Ukrainian Parliament decentralize Ukraine and disarm "illegal" armed formations: the security services, army, and police loyal to the new government.

A week later protesters from this group, joined by thousands of Mariupol citizens, called for a referendum on Ukraine joining the Russian Federation and wrote a letter to Vladimir Putin to become the patron and guarantor of "the rights and freedoms of people of the Donetsk oblast." Two Mariupol residents then volunteered to travel to Rostov on Don to deliver this letter through the Russian intelligence services.

Within the context of fighting fascism in Ukraine and "winning" in Crimea were established the grounds for a collective Russian Spring "counterrevolution." But this was not organized solely by political elites. After Yanukovych's flight, many locals perceived politicians as traitors for quitting or impotent in their inability to counter the Maidan. They were looking for a leader prepared to act to address their grievances. And in Mariupol, they did not have to wait long for candidates to appear.

Mayor Kuzmenko

In the context of Russian actions in Crimea, mobilization in Mariupol and the region became much more heterogeneous. Increased popular support and participation in the Russian Spring created opportunities for new actors to appear. The annexation of Crimea created an ideological boost for the masses, while the post-Yanukovych weak governance and subsequent power vacuum enabled new actors to claim power for themselves. One of them was Dmitry Kuzmenko.

Dmitry was the younger of two brothers who were widely known in Mariupol as businessmen owning boxing clubs Tor and Fortius and organizers of sports events. Initially, he and his group of boxers had observed the protests without making any public statements. But during a Russian Spring demonstration on the second of March, Dmitry walked up the stairs leading to the entrance of the Council building, grabbed the megaphone, and for the very first time addressed the crowd:[3]

> Hotlubei betrayed us all. He is completely subordinated to the illegitimate Kiev authorities that seized power by force. He doesn't give a damn about any of us. Has only one [interest]—to hold onto his chair. . . . on 21 of February these invaders of Kiev selected the date when Ukraine joins the European Union. We will not let this happen. Russia! Crimea! Sevastopol! We are with you. Crimea! Sevastopol! Donbas!

Protesters applauded after each sentence. Ivan considered the public appearance of Kuzmenko well timed and well received. Protesters welcomed a young and energetic orator who echoed their disapproval of the new government and support for the Russian Spring. "Old demagogues or workers-metallurgists could never compare,"[4] Ivan added. With his group of sportsmen around him, Kuzmenko quickly developed an air of a leader. Throughout March, he aspired

3 Vasily Vlashchenko, "Mariupol, Dmitry Kuzmenko," YouTube, March 1, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kKC6bOmjc0.

4 Ivan Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014* (Mariupol: KIT, 2016), 35.

to become a leader, too, playing on established narratives and popu-
lar grievances.

One of Kuzmenko's tactics to increase his popularity was starting
rumors about the presence of Pravyi Sektor in Mariupol and stag-
ing a confrontation with them. The first such action was organized
on March 18—the day Crimea was formally annexed by the Russian
Federation. Kuzmenko and his adherents knocked down the door
to the City Council, disrupted a Council session, and demanded
that the issue of federalization of the region is put on the agenda.
Two days later his group tried to block the entrance to the military
base of the National Guard, demanding an inspection for the pres-
ence of Pravyi Sektor. On the following week, his group blocked
a cordon of Ukrainian soldiers headed to the Novoazovsk region
near Mariupol, refusing them to pass. The reason was the same: the
alleged presence of "Kyiv fascists."

A combination of such provocations and growing popularity of
the Russian Spring in the region, by the end of March, most weap-
ons stored in Mariupol had, for security reasons, been removed.
This meant that the police, Mariupol Security Services (SBU), and
Ukrainian Border Guard servicemen were largely disarmed. With
the police inactive, Kuzmenko used this security vacuum as an
opportunity to challenge Hotlubei's governance.

Kuzmenko utilized the most popular Russian Spring narratives
and endorsed the idea of regional referenda of independence. He
claimed close ties with the new leader of annexed Crimea Aksyonov
and proudly demonstrated his support of Kuzmenko's efforts:

> The National Guards of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea
> will make a maximum effort to coordinate its actions in
> establishing national guard groups in your region, under the
> command of Kuzmenko Dmitry Vladislavovych.[5]

On March 22—three weeks after his first public appearance—
Kuzmenko addressed the crowd again to express his readiness to
replace Hotlubei as Mariupol mayor:

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5 To view the document see Vasily Vlashchenko, "Mariupol Dmitry Kuzmenko,"
　YouTube, February 28, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kKC6bOmjc0.

I am ready to become mayor. We will all make decisions together. This is for a while and then there will be elections. . . . Our goal is federalisation of the Donetsk region. After federalisation, we will be able to hold elections of governors, mayors, and law enforcement agencies.[6]

I asked Valery what he thought of Kuzmenko. He explained the societal context to Kuzmenko's support as symptomatic of popular grievances and mentality of locals that had little to do with Kuzmenko's actual ability to lead and govern:

[After the fall of Yanukovych] the government was put aside, leaving the people to their own devices. People did not know what to do. Some "adventurers" [like Kuzmenko] saw in this their moment, opportunity to appear on the scene where there previously wasn't space for them. People need stability, people need peace, people need to believe in a better tomorrow. People would support anyone who represented power to do it.

In the meantime, the Russian Spring was gaining its momentum across the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, replicating the same pattern: radical factions of the Russian Spring attacked and captured administrative buildings and "People's Leaders" claimed power.

Apart from the small and closed-off Kuzmenko group, the revolution inspired other autonomous groups to mobilize. They shared core "antifascist," anti-establishment, or pro-Russian sentiments. The main organizers of the Mariupol Russian Spring were the KPU, *Russkii Soyuz Donbassa* (Russian Union of Donbass), *Russkii Rubezh* (Russian Frontier), *Antifashistskii Komitet Mariupola* (Antifascist Committee of Mariupol), and factory workers' unions. To demonstrate their active public presence, these groups set up tents on the Freedom Square and met daily.

Collectively they demanded that:

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6 Dmitry Kuzmenko in "Narodnoe veche vybralo narodnym merom Mariupola Kuzmenko" [The People's Assembly Elected Kuzmenko as the People's Mayor of Mariupol], *0629*, March 25, 2014, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/501931/narodnoe -vece-vybralo-narodnym-merom-mariupola-kuzmenko-fotodopolneno.

1. the Ukrainian army leave the Donetsk oblast by March 27;
2. the current city security and law enforcement servicemen will not be replaced by appointees of Kyiv;
3. international documents and treaties issued by the new Kyiv government are considered illegitimate, namely the EU Association Agreement signed on March 21, 2014; and
4. Yanukovych resumes his duties as acting president and, first, assigns popularly elected regional governors of southeastern oblasti of Ukraine; second, he, no later than March 28, writes a resolution announcing the organization of a regional referendum of these southeastern oblasti.[7]

The rationale behind this was a defense against fascism and the collective "West" (US, EU, and NATO), who allegedly armed the new government of Ukraine to launch a "genocide" on the Donbas people. And as the people had "no army that could protect us," the tent city Committee called for self-mobilization of locals as "the only option to save our lives." They proclaimed Dmitry Kuzmenko as the "People's Leader" to defend Mariupol.

But while there was consensus on the Committee's political and security demands, not everyone agreed that Kuzmenko should be the leader. During a regular protest meeting on March 29, two local residents and observers of protests, Andrei Papush and Oleg Nedavny, addressed the crowd for the first time. They called for the necessity to unite into an inclusive civic movement *Narod* (A People). Part of this was setting up a volunteer national guard that they named *Koordinachnyi Centr Antikriminal—Mangust* (Anti-crime Coordination Center—Mangust). The aim of this guard was to help the police patrol the city. As soon as Nedavny announced it on the stage, locals began to join its ranks. By the end of the first day, Mangust had sixty guards: policemen, local factory workers, pensioners, unemployed, first Afghan war veterans, and former criminals. The guards were divided into groups of fifteen to twenty

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7 Report in 0629, "Narodnoe veche vybralo narodnym merom Mariupola Kuzmenko" [The People's Assembly Elected Kuzmenko as the People's Mayor of Mariupol], *0629*, March 25, 2014, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/501931/narodnoe-vece-vybralo -narodnym-merom-mariupola-kuzmenko-fotodopolneno.

in each formation and according to the city parts they were living in.[8]

As to the purpose and actions of the Mangust groups, the tasks involved not only collecting intelligence on Russian Spring opponents and criminal activity in the city but also exercising control over the movement of firearms and military equipment in case Pravyi Sektor "invade." This, at the start, was coordinated with the Colonel of Police Oleg Saprikin. Intelligence gathering included surveying the Kuzmenko brothers and Dmitry's group. While Kuzmenko was a protest leader, on the one hand, the two brothers were also known for their involvement in shady business deals involving narcotics, robberies, and allegedly even issuing killing orders.[9]

At this time, the Russian Spring grew in the public space, but supporters also increased their online presence. The "antifascist" forces of Mariupol utilized the most popular Russian social network *VKontakte*, namely the online group "AntiMaidan Mariupol," as the main platform for networking, sharing information, and coordinating their activities within Mariupol and across the Donetsk oblast. Another communication and coordination tool was the radio channel *Zello*—a network of taxi drivers and their coordinators. Its range stretched the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and Crimea and territories along the border with Russia. Taxi drivers did not just drive, but they exchanged information. Most of them sided with the Antimaidan and acted as an effective surveillance tool.[10] "When you got into a taxi as a Maidan protester, you had a one in five chance that they would not report where you live," said Anna.

Further, as March turned into April, the growing Russian Spring had developed an insurgent faction in the shadow of popular protests, and its *siloviki* (power) structure started to crystalize. The aim was to destabilize Ukrainian control over the region. Among the first signs was the establishment of sabotage groups: mobile groups of up to fifteen men whose task was to conduct surveillance and harass the army and security servicemen of Ukraine.

 8 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*, 67.
 9 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*, 64.
10 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 68.

In Mariupol, the first such operation was launched on April 4 by a group of local and Donetsk citizens. This group drove east of Mariupol to the Novoazovsk army checkpoint, built stations around this point, and closed it off to disable Ukrainian operations. As a response, the SBU issued the first arrests on the grounds of "encroachment on territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine," i.e., terrorist acts. Among the arrested and sentenced was the "People's Leader" Dmitry Kuzmenko.

Valery said that Kuzmenko was a "symptom," not the cause of the popularity of the Russian Spring, and even with Kuzmenko gone, the Russian Spring grew. Locals perceived the arrest of Kuzmenko as an act against the people. Following his arrest, hundreds of Mariupoltsy took to the streets and demanded his release. Unsuccessful, the "tent-city" leaders organized a protest titled "Against political repression," and twenty-five protesters from Mariupol formed a car column and drove to Donetsk.

To understand the links between Mariupol groups and the regional Russian Spring network, it is necessary to zoom out and provide a chronology of the developments of the growing rebellion in the wider Donetsk oblast. The reason those twenty-five men drove from Mariupol to Donetsk was to assist in the first takeover of administrative buildings in the oblast. Donetsk was the first to fall into the hands of the rebels. The next was the building of the Security Services of Ukraine in Luhansk. This point marks a milestone in the development of the Russian Spring because the building contained a large arsenal of weapons, enough to equip a small army of three hundred men. Equipped with firearms, the rebels increased their capacity to cripple Ukrainian rule and claim Ukrainian territories. They called themselves *opolchenie* (militia) and regarded themselves as a liberation movement. According to Ukrainian law, however, they were terrorists. And as a response, the Anti-Terrorist Operation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was launched to contain them.

To conclude, mobilization did not end with the Maidan. On the contrary, the annexation of Crimea inspired an unprecedented movement across the southeast of Ukraine. The weak and chaotic local governance led to apolitical and security vacuum that enabled

heterogeneous grassroots mobilization to rise and grow, including new actors who used the momentum to claim power. As the next chapter will discuss, Maidanovtsy did not demobilize, either. With the annexation of Crimea and the growing Russian Spring, they began to network to resist the rebellion to keep Mariupol under the control of Ukraine.

Chapter 4

MARIUPOL AND THE RUSSIAN SPRING

After the Maidan victory in Kyiv, Mariupol Maidan mobilization changed. First, because when Yanukovych fled his post, Russia began the occupation of Crimea and President Putin announced that a popular referendum would be held to decide on formally incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation. The second reason was the attack on the City Council and subsequent plea to Putin to send the army to rescue the Russian-speaking Donetsk region. Third, from the March 1 protest, groups of suspicious "foreigners with a Russian accent and watches set forward an hour" increased their presence in the city. For Maidanovtsy, these were red flags that pointed to Russian influence in Mariupol, and they feared that with Crimea occupied, Russia might attempt to create a sea-shore land corridor to connect it with Russia. Mariupol was in the way. As Marichka recalls,

> There was no public organisation and security structure after the fall of Yanukovych, no leader behind whom we could stand, who would mobilize and unite us to protect ourselves. The new government was disorganised in who should lead the post-Party of Regions local administrations. The army was demobilised, and the police demoralised. I asked myself—what could become of Mariupol?

This means that the governing, law and security structures remained as ineffective to provide security as during the Maidan revolution. At this point, Maidanovtsy realized they had to rely on themselves. For this reason, Marichka set up a volunteer organization *Novyi Mariupol* (New Mariupol):

> During the Maidan, we never really engaged in cooperation
> with one another; after the Maidan, I set up my organiza-
> tion with a few others with whom we got acquainted at the
> square, sharing the same positions and values. Then, we
> began to consciously seek out one another.

As the Russian Spring grew through to April, Anatoly set up a
Facebook group *Edinyi Mariupol* (United Mariupol) as a network-
ing and information-sharing platform for residents, activists, and
volunteers. People could aid one another and coordinate their
activities in real time. What united them was the preservation of a
"Ukrainian" Mariupol.

There were two core ways of resisting the Russian Spring: the first
was aiding the Ukrainian armed forces. But the problem with mobi-
lizing the army was the actual lack of an army. During the Soviet
times, the army was concentrated in western parts of Ukraine in
order to counter an invasion by the Western powers. Soviet Russia
was never considered a threat; neither before, nor after the disinte-
gration of the Soviet Union. The lack of army bases led to an insuf-
ficient number of personnel and equipment. This led to operational
unreadiness for combat.

The first divisions of the Ukrainian armed forces began to appear
in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti in mid-March. And as soon as the
activists heard of the army coming, they began to seek them out:

> There was one detachment of the Ukrainian army that had
> recently set up camps in Yalta, near Mariupol. At first, we
> had no knowledge of their exact locations. This is where we
> mirrored the tactics of the Russian "green men" in Crimea:
> establishing intelligence, gathering groups of volunteers
> who would locate the military and present themselves as
> locals. We were demanding provision of security and mili-
> tary assistance. We provided them with assistance and sup-
> port in return to assure them that others, too, stand by the
> principles of a territorially united Ukraine.

When I asked Marichka why the soldiers needed civilian support,
she said that because they found them wearing slippers and Soviet
uniforms.

Denys added that the soldiers had one rifle each and an armored transporter per company. He was one of the co-organizers of the political Maidan for UDAR party and Anatoly's friend. After the Maidan, both of them sought security guarantees, first from the policemen and then from the soldiers. They saw these efforts as a necessary continuation of their activities during the Maidan:

> We understood that after Yanukovych provocations would start. And in the middle of March, we witnessed that Russians from Rostov were being sent here, weapons were being sent here. Then towns were getting occupied. . . . We went to pay the soldiers a visit. They were not on the perimeter of the city but further away. There we saw the absolutely terrible condition of the soldiers were in. We understood that should any urgent situation develop here they would not be able to act. An armoured transport vehicle stood there, uncharged, for a whole company only two rounds of ammunition deposits. They were building roadblocks. At first, we went there to get to know them, not as an organisation yet, but we saw the horrific conditions of, well, overall— from clothes to food to equipment. Something had to be done when the government could not manage to provide for them properly, to secure the guys. This was when we realised that we needed to establish a group that will allow us to act in an organised way.

At this point, Denys decided to establish a volunteer defense group, *Oborona Mariupolya* (Mariupol Defense):

> At first, we acted chaotically. We knew some pro-Ukrainian people, we raised our own money to buy the utmost necessities. Someone gave socks, others underwear, bags, food, warm things, sleeping mats and so on.

Social media groups like Anatoly's United Mariupol linked leaders and members of newly formed defense organizations, most importantly *Novyi Mariupol* (New Mariupol), *Oborona Mariupolya* (Mariupol Defense), or *Maibutne Pryazovya* (Future of Pryazovya).

While these groups were autonomous, they also aided one another in establishing a supply chain, providing logistical support, raising money, or collecting goods. This post-Maidan "pro-Ukrainian" mobilization can be best explained as an informal and loosely organized resistance network against the growing Russian Spring: there was not a single organization or a single leader, just a shared objective.

As March turned into April, all these efforts were substantiated. Within the first two weeks of April, Russia increased the presence of the Russian navy in the Black Sea, which could enable it to cut out the Azov Sea from Ukrainian control. This would mean that Russia could send its army into Mariupol via land as well as the sea if the Kremlin decided to connect Crimea with Russia along the shore. The overall security situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti also worsened: the Russian Spring protesters in Donetsk self-proclaimed their own "People's Republic" and a former Russian military intelligence officer Igor Girkin with his squad seized Sloviansk. As part of the ATO, the government urged civilians to form and join groups of territorial defense.

Fears that Mariupol could fall started to turn into reality the day after the capture of Sloviansk—on April 13—as the Russian Spring protesters stormed the Mariupol City Council. As the takeover was underway, Anatoly and a group of activists realized that the rebels might aspire to seize firearms like they did in Luhansk the week before. They rushed to the Police Headquarters where weapons were stored and formed a human chain to prevent a takeover. Soon they were met by Russian Spring adherents who also rushed to protect the building but from "fascist" Maidan supporters. They clashed and some pro-Ukrainians got beaten.[1]

If this was the first glimpse of what the Russian Spring could bring to Mariupol, the attack on the Mariupol Military Unit by a group of masked and armed men on April 16 was its confirmation: on this day, first shots were fired and first people lost their lives. This

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1 Val Gordienko, "Mariupol, 13 aprelya 2014. Cbor grazhdan u zdaniya UVD. Stychka s PravoSekami" [Mariupol, 13 April 2014. Gathering of Citizens at the Police HQ. Skirmish with Pravyi Sektor], YouTube, April 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwQg1Cj6hRY.

event was a signal that the opolchenie was attempting to incorporate in Mariupol into the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). Mariupol, too, could soon become occupied. Serhii Savinsky, the commander of the National Guard of the Ministry of Interior based at the Unit at the time, told me the story of the attack.

Serhii Fights Off DNR

> After our combat wing took the Mariupol City Council, they began to collect information about the Ukrainian military units. I was given the contacts of a Ukrainian lieutenant general, who served as something like the chief of staff of the troops in the Donetsk region. I wanted to solve the problem of military units with him, but he only laughed into the phone. As a result, we decided to occupy the military unit of the Internal Troops located in Mariupol. My group and I went there from Donetsk.

These were the words of Igor Khakimzyanov. Khakimzyanov mobilized in January 2014 in Donetsk to support the Antimaidan. Back then he organized the "National Patriotic Movement" and participated in the takeovers of strategic buildings in Donetsk. From April 7, he was the first Minister of Defense of the newly self-declared DNR, and from April 10 he became the chief commander of the newly formed "People's Army." The goal in Mariupol was to occupy strategic buildings, capture weapons, and declare Mariupol part of the DNR.

The phone call took place on April 12. When Serhii Savinsky refused to cooperate, Khakimzyanov called again two days later; but this time personally and accompanied with two armed men. Since its takeover the day earlier, these men were based at the Mariupol City Council building. Khakimzyanov demanded that Savinsky gives up the base along with all weapons and equipment and joins the DNR in its fight against Ukrainian "fascists." Savinsky refused again, but he suspected that Khakimzyanov would try to take it by force:

To my regret, no police or state structure could stop them, to put an end to their activities. This was enabled by the fact—and this is the first factor—that the central power structure was ineffective. They were afraid to take initiative to their own hands, they found themselves in doubt, did not know how, and whether, to respond.

Another reason Savinsky expected an attack was that two days after the visit around one hundred men self-identified as DNR representatives drove to the Ukrainian military base near Mangush set up for the Mariupol sector of the ATO and demanded that the soldiers surrender their weapons and military equipment. Savinsky could see the pattern of tactical attacks repeated throughout both Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Khakimzyanov and his men arrived in Mariupol from Donetsk.[2] They became known as the Donetsk group: approximately ten armed men who operated in the Mariupol sector. They coordinated their actions with DNR representatives in Donetsk, namely the "mayor" Kuklin. Kuklin's role was to monitor Mariupol developments, pass instructions between Donetsk and Mariupol, and coordinate DNR and local rebels. The Donetsk group provided weapons and trained the rebels to form a power block of Mariupol rebels. Kuklin's role was also to create the necessary "popular mass" effect by mobilizing local residents. For this purpose, he utilized orators with megaphones, who would amplify popular grievances to instill fear and a sense of insecurity.

About 90 percent of the city would have been influenced by propaganda. I had ordinary Mariupol residents come here in support of the [Russian Spring] movement, demanding weapons to protect themselves.

On the day of the attack, Vladimir Khabarov, the same person who delivered the aforementioned "plea to Putin" to Rostov on Don near

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2 Infovek.org, "Narodnoe opolchenie Mariupolya vydvigaetsya na pomoshch Slavyansku 04 05 2014" [The People's Militia of Mariupol Is Moving Forward to Help Sloviansk 04 05 2014], YouTube, May 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJlRbtImhs0.

the Ukrainian border on March 8,[3] was ordered to stand up on the stairs in front of the City Council and shout that Pravyi Sektor had arrived in the military unit, and as a matter of security, the unit had to be secured. By the evening, three hundred people mobilized to march together from the City Council to the nearby unit. As one of them recalls:

> They told us that the military base was full of weapons and that they could be used against peaceful protesters. We came to the military unit not to let this happen. We came to the unit and demanded from the commander to let us in and open the storage with the arsenal. But the commander refused to fulfil our demands. We were armed with Molotov cocktails and a tyre.[4]

To Savinsky, this looked like the takeover of Crimea:

> A group of forty-fifty armed men dressed in black came to the base, bringing with them Russian journalists. Ordinary people joined them, telling us that the army and the people should unite against fascism. They came here because they genuinely believed that among our ranks were Pravyi Sektor fascists. Myself and my officers came out of the building and engaged in a dialogue with these people. The peaceful citizens then came to an understanding that in fact there were no fascists among the guards, and that we were ready to defend the city. Then most of them left.

In the meantime, however, a second part of the operation had begun. Minibuses drove in the armed, camouflaged Donetsk group and the local rebels. Their role was to agitate the mass, force the soldiers to leave, and take control of the building. First, they addressed Savinsky's men through a megaphone:[5]

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3 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*, 75–78.
4 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost,* 75.
5 Hromadske, "Mariupol, 21:30, lyudi v maskakh shturmuyut viinskuyu chastynu vni-trinshykh viisk (No3057)" [Mariupol, 9:30 p.m., Masked Men Storm the Military Unit

> You have numerical superiority [over your commander]. If one asshole gives you an order that is illegal, you can take power into your own hands and detain them. . . . We do not want you, our guys, friends, comrades, to suffer because of some moron, a corrupt guy. Guys, come out! We support you, we are with you! You swore your oath to the people! You swore to the people. And the people are here!

Savinsky's men did not respond. After half an hour of such narratives and a refusal of the soldiers to surrender, the attack began.

> The [rebels] saw that taking over the military base will not be as simple as in Crimea. This is why they started setting various objects around this building, including these surrounding panel houses, on fire using Molotov cocktails, and started shooting in order to provoke us to return fire; but we refused to shoot at civilians. During one hour of this stir, the armed people—DNR people—tried to push to enter the base to seize it, along with its arms. They attacked the entrance. At this time, we were still standing by the entrance gate.

The drive that led to the base was set on fire and, as it was dark, the flames and sparks were the only source of light. At this point, the Donetsk group opened fire.

> We were still standing by the entrance gate. After this, we fired in the air as a warning sign that we will protect the base. But as the separatists refused to cease fire, we ultimately had to shoot at them.

When the shootouts commenced, the rest of the unarmed civilians began to run off—some to get away from bullets, others to help transport the injured into hospitals—and the attackers started to realize that Savinsky will not give up the building. It was dark and

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of the Internal Troops (No. 3057)], YouTube, April 17, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQz3RaQIWaM.

difficult to distinguish the direction of shots, so the Donetsk group and rebels resorted to plan B:

> One part whose position was at the back of the crowd began to shoot at the people who were running away. In the morning, at the scene, the police and SBU investigators found more than seventy cartridge cases from 5,45mm [machine gun], 7,62mm [machine gun or carbine], 9mm [pistol]. All this evidence was found in front of the unit and could not have belonged to the soldiers, since this territory was under the control of the protesters.[6]

The purpose of this provocation was to increase the number of injured civilians and blame the Pravyi Sektor for the operation. Two Mariupol citizens lost their lives, thirteen were injured, and twenty local rebels were prosecuted. The armed group cooperating with Khakimzyanov was the Kuzmenko group, led by Dmitry's brother Denys.

In the end, everyone fled the scene. Savinsky never gave in to the demands and threats of the rebels. When I complimented his resolve and courage, Serhii just shrugged his shoulders and said that he was fulfilling the oath he had given Ukraine and that he did what was his duty. This event could have been a pivotal moment for Mariupol, however: had Serhii behaved differently and the Unit fallen into the hands of Kuzmenko and Khakimzyanov, the rebels would have captured military equipment; and if the advances of the rebels across the region were any indication, Mariupol could have fallen, too.

By this point, the elites who had organized or supported the Antimaidan began to realize the increasing popular unrest and mobilization of self-defense groups across the Donetsk oblast; that the Russian Spring they fostered took on its own dynamics and was becoming unmanageable. In response, the PoR organized a congress in Donetsk where all regional deputies were present. Their plan to de-escalate and stabilize the situation was based on the promise of decentralization of power: direct elections of local

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6 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*, 90.

authorities, self-governing authority of the region, and its budget-spending autonomy and official status for the Russian language as the second official language in Ukraine.

Interesting is the fact that this echoed the official position of both the international community and the Ukrainian parliament and acting president Turchynov. On the day after this event, a multilateral delegation of Ukrainian, Russian, EU, and US representatives met in Geneva in order to de-escalate the situation in the east represented in the continued takeover of governmental buildings by the rebellion and their demands for a referendum; but they also feared that the ATO launched by Ukraine would incite a spiral of violence. The attack on the Mariupol military base was used as an example of this.

The West called for disbanding of all illegal armed formations which, the Russians demanded, ought to include the Pravyi Sektor. An agreement was reached about necessary constitutional amendments that would bolster regional autonomy, self-governance of local districts, and minority (Russians') rights protection.

Turchynov published the following statement:

> The leadership of the state, with the support of the majority in the *Verkhovna Rada* [parliament] of Ukraine, will make every effort to urgently consider the relevant amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine, and to reform local self-government and the organisation of power in the regions in Ukraine.

Apart from a greater autonomy by replacing the then-local and regional administrations with directly elected councils and executive committees —thus giving a direct voice to the locals—Turchynov promised fairer distribution of state budget and taxes and official status for the Russian language on par with the Ukrainian. All this in return for the rebels laying down their arms and walking out of the buildings they had seized, free of criminal prosecution.

In other words, the elites could not control the situation on the ground and therefore tried to solve it politically, before the D/LNR would achieve territorial separation or federalization of Ukraine. But this policy of appeasement toward Russia and the opolchenie both the West and Ukraine did not address the development and

dynamics of the situation in the east. While calling for a cease-fire and laying down weapons, the ATO continued, and the rebellion continued to regard the Ukrainian authorities as illegitimate. Despite the efforts, demands for a referendum for autonomy and independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti grew stronger.

Thus, while political statements were circulated among the citizens to assure them of undertaking active efforts to stabilize the situation in the city, the events in Mariupol and the Donetsk oblasti show the opposite. Due to this security vacuum, self-defense and paramilitary groups were able to grow, and the opolchenie entered the second phase crucial for its advancement: connecting cities by controlling the infrastructure around captured territories for performing tactical tasks, defensive and offensive operations, and coordination of supply chains of people and weapons. In order to prevent logistical disruptions, rebels built and manned *blokposty* (control checkpoints) on roads leading to captured territories and on each crossroads.

By the end of April, the DNR was extended to Shakhtarsk, Torets, Snizhne towns, and Hirne and Krasnyi Luch villages. This provided control over the access between Donetsk and Luhansk—the centers of gravity and command of opolchenie. By May, the goal of the rebels was to consolidate control over captured territories and prepare for the referendum for autonomy from Kyiv, thus "legitimizing" the existence of the Republics. The date was set for May 11.

In Mariupol, the DNR flags were hanging from administration buildings in all four districts of the city, and barricades were erected to close off the city center. Full control over Mariupol beyond the Council building and the surrounding area had not yet been established, however. After the military unit attack, military equipment was removed from Mariupol for security reasons, but there was another strategic building containing firearms, and it was still under Ukrainian control. This was the Headquarters of the Interior Troops—the police building. If the rebels wanted to take the city, this would be their next target. The date of the attack was set for May 9. The following sections describe, first, the security situation in the city prior to May 9, and then the event itself, as witnessed by the locals.

Andrushchuk Liberates and Loses the City Council

By the beginning of May, the ATO had already been launched, and the Ukrainian army assumed positions in the east. In order to check and counter the opolchenie, however, Ukraine needed a popular, armed resistance movement. In the first week of May, the acting president Turchynov ordered local regional administrations to form territorial defense formations. This led to the establishment of the first volunteer battalions. But the core of the problem remained the same: the inability to clear towns and cities off the rebels or to prevent their takeovers by those agencies that were meant to ensure law and order in the first place:

> The events in the east of our country have shown inaction, helplessness, and sometimes criminal treason of law enforcement officers in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The situation in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions has shown that we have no choice but to carry out a complete renewal of the police and the SBU.

This was the assessment of Valery Andrushchuk, and the reason behind his appointment as the new Mariupol police chief Andrushchuk was an experienced policeman from Kyiv who was selected to restore order in Mariupol. My gatekeeper Ivan described him as a professional, brave enough to uncover crime and bring criminals to justice. But as Andrushchuk would soon realize, even with his credentials, ridding Mariupol police of these elements would be more difficult than he would have imagined.

Andrushchuk arrived in Mariupol on May 1. There was a public meeting organized by the Communists to celebrate Labor Day, attended by a large group of locals. Here, locals learned about Andrushchuk's appointment.

> When the news of my appointment reached the protesters near the city council, it was clear that I was disliked, though not by the [crowd], but by those who organised the crowd. I received information that protesters were moving towards the police station and that our policemen would not protect

it. Instead, they would part ways and make a corridor for them. They approached. They behaved aggressively. . . . They demanded [my resignation]. They demanded [the appointment of] Gorustovych. They considered him one of their own, in their DNR. Such a person speaks on TV and talks about a defense of Mariupol. What to expect if the city has such a defense, I didn't know.[7]

Andrushchuk started to act to mobilize officers who seemed reliable. On May 6, he summoned the Mariupol law enforcement and special forces commanders operating in the Mariupol sector of ATO. He had a plan thought out to liberate the City Council captured by the rebels. As this was the only administrative building the DNR controlled in Mariupol, the plan was simple: to coordinate forces, surround, and close off the building and detain the occupants. Andrushchuk's deputy Gorustovych objected.

I told him: my friend, . . . you, the former police chief, and Hotlubei are to blame for allowing all this to happen.[8]

Gorustovych left in a fury. The head of the public security department Sklyarov was to forward the plan to his staff commander Zinoviev. Zinoviev also refused to comply, arguing that policemen will never open fire at their own neighbors.

I'm like, who is telling you to shoot?! There was no order to shoot. I said detain those who illegally occupy a state institution and do not comply with the orders of the police. They looked at me but did not answer. But I realised that they won't follow my orders.

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7 Anna Romanenko, "Valery Andrushchuk: Yesli by my ne otstoyali UVD u nas byl by vtoroi Slavyansk" [Valery Andrushchuk: If We Had Not Defended the Internal Affairs Directorate, We Would Have Had a Second Slavyansk], May 9, 2019, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/645029/valerij-andrusuk-esli-by-my-ne-otstoali-uvd-u-nas-byl-by-vtoroj-slavjansk.

8 Romanenko, "Valery Andrushchuk," May 9, 2019.

The worry of having to exert violence against fellow residents was felt very strongly among most local policemen. This also derived from their Maidan experience, gatekeeper Ivan explained:

> All personnel of the patrol service of Mariupol had spent almost two and a half months at the Kyiv "Euromaidan." What they went through there, I don't know. But I know one thing—they never received any psychological support; they didn't get even a short vacation.[9]

The operation Andrushchuk had planned did go ahead. Initially, it went according to the plan: the sixteen rebels who illegally occupied the council were detained, without a single shot fired, Russian and DNR flags above the entrance to the building were changed back to Ukrainian, and then a sweep-up ensued inside and outside the building. Inside were found dozens of bottles of Molotov cocktail and even more bottles of vodka. Outside, there were tires, furniture, sandbags, and other material used as barricades. Mariupol defense group Ultras who heard of the planned operation and came to help the police started to dismantle the reinforcements and clear the area from the rubbish, while the police created a cordon for security. But the operation did not end as planned.

While the clear-out was under way, angered locals started to gather at the site. As Oleh from Ultras recalls:

> Babushki standing nearby name-call us "Pravoseki" and "visiting Banderovtsi" . . . the group of our opponents is getting bigger. The law enforcement officers are telling us off for provoking the supporters of the "Republic" by having our faces covered. So, we remove balaclavas and face masks. . . . Looking at the barricades, I realised that . . . there are 300–350 pro-Russians. They are chanting something vulgar. We realise that if they attack, we don't stand a chance. The police urge us to leave: "Stop provocations, we don't want blood spilled." . . . You invited us here to help hold up, I say

9 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 122.

to the policeman. "Who? No, not us. Leave, we'll sort it ourselves," he replies.[10]

At this point, the Ultras decided to leave. Starting a fight with an agitated group ten times larger without help of the police was pointless. Oleh went home and turned on the news to watch how the situation developed:

> After we left, the police surrendered the building to the separatists, literally 15 minutes later. And I watch through the computer screen how the Ukrainian flag is thwarted and the crowd applauds the law enforcement as they are leaving. Separatists freely re-enter the City Council. I have no words. Why and who ordered the police to abandon the building? Why?![11]

Oleh blamed the police. But Andrushchuk saw it differently:

> We kept telling Hotlubei all day that we needed to start dismantling the barricades, and he kept [making excuses], not giving the command. Then it started to rain. [Reinforcements] were tired, hungry. . . . That's why the cordon was called out.

With the police gone, rebels resumed their positions at the Council building. Without the cooperation of the governor, there were limits to what Andrushchuk could achieve. On the same night, he learned of another obstacle he would face in restoring control in the city: sabotage. The aforementioned police commander Zinoviev detained a Ukrainian intelligence group that was on a mission by blocking their car. With Zinoviev were journalists from a Russian TV channel that were to document the detention and confiscate the officers' documents. On the next morning, Andrushchuk called Zinoviev to his office to find out who ordered the operation:

10 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost*, 123.
11 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost*, 123.

> When I asked what kind of journalists they were when they
> behave like GRU [Russian military intelligence] agents,
> Zinoviev suddenly stood up, span his back to the balcony
> and jumped out. I had already witnessed all sorts of things,
> including a criminal jumping out of a window, but a police
> officer and from the third floor. . . . I'd never seen anything
> like it.

Zinoviev broke his limbs and but instead of calling an ambulance,
Zinoviev shouted at other policemen to escort him into a taxi. They
immediately fled Mariupol and, according to Andrushchuk's infor-
mation, they fled to Crimea. Zinoviev allegedly worked there as
a police officer. Zinoviev's flight revealed that police officers were
actively undermining Ukrainian control, but it was difficult to estab-
lish how many saboteurs and collaborators there were and the scope
of their corruption. This factor will be discussed over the following
two chapters, starting with the May 9 terrorist attack on the police
station. This operation was meant to achieve the rebels' control over
the stored weapons, but it triggered violence and Ukrainian coun-
terattack that divided locals according to their frames and attribu-
tion of blame. It did, however, provide a boost for the opolchenie
reflected in popular attendance at the May 11 referendum.

Chapter 5

MARIUPOL

A DIVIDED CITY

May 9, 2014

This day is by locals referred to as a "bloody Friday" that marks one of the greatest tragedies of contemporary Mariupol. On this day, Mariupoltsy went to the streets to celebrate the "Victory Day" and to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the Red Army during the so-called "Great Patriotic War" (GPW). As any other year, it was organized by the local branch of the Communists. The event started at 10 o'clock with a march of approximately four thousand people following a previously agreed route from the Freedom Square to the memorial of the Soviet liberators not too far away. Normally, people would lay flowers by the memorial and gradually disperse to their homes. Instead, shooting was reported by the police station, and a rumor reached the commemorators that members of the Pravyi Sektor had arrived in the city in order to disrupt the event.

> For a long time, the city government hesitated, whether or not to celebrate [May 9]. Everyone knew that provocations were possible. . . . No one knew what to expect exactly, but everyone was getting ready for something.[1]

According to Anna, the "bloody Friday" could have been prevented, and with it the injuries and deaths of civilians. Because of the increasing insecurity in the city, Mariupol activists disseminated posters and letters through letterboxes to urge people not to attend the "Victory Day." Andrushchuk warned mayor Hotlubei of the likelihood of provocations during the traditional outdoor

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1 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost,* 131.

commemorations, and even some members of the organizing Communists suggested to cancel. All their efforts were overruled.

As a result, instead of being remembered for commemorations, May 9 is remembered for civilian and police casualties, and the city is divided over whom to blame for them. The truth is that the police building came under attack, the interpretations held responsible either Kyiv or the rebels. But studying this event with its conflicting accounts brings us closer to the core of understanding Mariupol mobilization: that people's perceptions were influenced by existing sociopolitical contexts and their interpretations reinforced by the effect of violence. Individual frames shaped how people interpreted the reality and how they acted, thereby shaping the course of the future.

Part One—The Takeover

I will first describe the operation of the takeover, and how it happened in reality. It was a well-planned tactical operation organized from Donetsk and undertaken by the aforementioned Antimaidan self-defense group *Mangust* and an associated group of Mariupol citizens. The objective was to take control of the city in a similar manner as was successfully executed a month earlier in Donetsk and Luhansk: through capturing firearms and strategic buildings.

The May 9 celebrations were used by Mangust as an opportunity to launch an attack on the police building because most policemen would be out patrolling the streets. The group itself was not established for this purpose; the reader will recall Koordinachnyi Centr Antikriminal—Mangust (Coordination Center against Crime—Mangust) and its leader Oleg Nedavny from Mariupol Antimaidan. Back in February, he called on "men with military and sport training to serve in special forces of our Soviet army." In April, Nedavny established a "shock group" from his men, seeking to arm, equip, and train them for armed operations. This group consisted of ten Mariupol residents, including Nedavny.[2] The selection criteria were simple: military experience was preferred, but opposition to the post-Maidan government and Pravyi Sektor was essential.

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2 Romanenko, *Mariupol. Poslednii Forpost*, 163.

However, according to the SBU, Mangust also worked for the Russian intelligence services (FSB). From the start of the Russian Spring, he traveled repeatedly to the nearby Russian city Taganrog where he received instructions from Russian agents. His duties ranged from intelligence gathering and establishing a contact network within the Donetsk region to coordinating the supply of money and weapons for organizing operations.[3]

On May 2, the instruction came to start training. The trigger was protest violence in Odesa—a standoff between Russian Spring supporters and pro-Ukrainian (pro-unity) opponents that resulted in the death of forty-eight Russian Spring protesters.[4] Nedavny traveled to Donetsk to train with the *Vostok* (East) battalion established and led by Aleksandr Khodakovsky. Khodakovsky was a former Chief of Donetsk Regional Special Forces unit of the Ukrainian Intelligence Services who defected to the rebels. On May 7, the Mangust group returned to Mariupol, but this time in a minibus full of firearms and hand-written instructions to take over the Mariupol police building. These instructions were provided by Igor Girkin himself at his headquarters in Sloviansk:

> [Mangust] received a piece of paper with the new task. . . . The group ought to seize the police building. [Mangust] added that the policemen inside the building will be ready to open the front door and let the opolchentsy in. After the takeover . . . the task of the group itself would end.[5]

This means that once under control, the DNR would decide on further operations to extend control over other administration and security buildings.

On the morning of May 9, Andrushchuk held a meeting for which he summoned his deputies, the already introduced National

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3 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*, 210.

4 See Halya Coynash, "Odesa 'Massacre' Propaganda vs. the Facts," Kharkiv Human Rights Group, August 11, 2014, http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1407453894; Howard Amos and Harriet Salem, "Ukraine Clashes: Dozens Dead after Odessa Building Fire," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/02/ukraine-dead-odessa-building-fire.

5 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 116–117.

Guard commander Serhii Savinsky, and commanders and repre-
sentatives of local and regional divisions of the police. The purpose
of this meeting was to address the deteriorating situation in the city
related to DNR advances and the need to solve internal problems of
the Mariupol police. Sklyarov—the head of public security depart-
ment—never came.

Next, there is gunfire and someone shouting: "First floor. Ours!
Second floor. Ours!"

Andrushchuk knew what this meant. He had had an argument
with Hotlubei about the irrationality of going ahead with mass
commemorations. Andrushchuk rushed to gather weapons from
his office, and then went to Sklyarov's for his machine gun. Sklyarov
never came "probably because he knew about the impending cap-
ture," he thought.

> So we break into the office, take the machine gun, go first
> to my office, then to the reception, shoot back. At this
> time—and all the commanders of special battalions and
> the National Guard were conferring in my office—the com-
> manders began to call their units and call for help. Armoured
> vehicles were called in. . . . All while we're on the defensive
> and while we're waiting.

The takeover itself was undertaken by thirty armed rebels: the
first group of fifteen infiltrated the inside, and the second guarded
the outside from the ground, including the roofs. It started with
Nedavny pretending to be a suspect who was being brought in for
interrogations.

As gatekeeper Ivan explains,[6] at this point, the policemen were
meant to contact the commander for directives on the protocol, but,
instead, the two guards let the group in, stepped out of their way, and
passed their weapons to Nedavny. Everything was going according
to plan and the rest of the armed group entered the building. But
then, the plan started to crumble. The operation was meant to go
smoothly and quietly, but, instead, an officer who had witnessed the
scene realized what was happening, pressed the alarm button, and

6 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 118.

assumed defense of the corridor. He soon ran out of ammunition, however, and was forced to surrender.

> The attackers began to cover themselves with the [surrendered officer] and move through the building. According to Mangust's order, [the surrendered officer] was captured, but before then, he managed to throw the weapons storage key into a dedicated trap, so there was nothing to open the storage room with. . . . They shot their way through, gaining access to the weapons. . . . 100 pistols, up to 10 automatic rifles, a few shotguns and a huge amount of ammunition calibre 5,45mm.[7]

While the Mangust group made advances within the building, as part of the cover operation, the second group of attackers split up and dispersed in the city, while the rest assumed positions outside the building to stop any Ukrainian advances toward it. They placed waste bins and sacks of sand on the road and forced a truck driver out of the vehicle to use it as a roadblock. So when Ukrainian forces arrived, they immediately fell under attack from the street, the police building, and from the roofs of surrounding buildings. Outnumbered and sustaining injuries, the first wave of officers retreated.

The next reinforcements to arrive were *Azov* volunteers. Coincidentally, this battalion had only formed four days prior to this attack. Not expecting the call, they wore civilian clothes and put on face coverings and Ukrainian flag-style bandages on their sleeves as insignia.

Back inside, Andrushchuk and the other officers still held their third floor. Mangust was shooting from the staircase. One of the officers was injured in the leg. He retreated but was then shot in the head through the window by a sniper. This forced Andrushchuk to retreat into the office. "Hold on! We're moving in!" read a telephone message from approaching Ukrainian units.

On the Ukrainian side, the National Guard, Azov, and the 72nd battalion of the Ukrainian army from the nearby checkpoint

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7 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 119.

position "Mangush" joined forces. Their armored vehicles provided cover, while the infantry readied their firearms for attack. Upon the order "Fire!" the offensive began.

> Up to the moment when the armoured vehicles arrived, bandits had lost two men, thirteen remaining, out of which four were injured. . . . They began to call in their own reinforcements.

The Mangust group found themselves under heavy fire and they were returning it with all the ammunition they had gathered from the weapons storage. "Guys, we need reinforcements! We have no ammo left," Mangust shouted into the radio. At this point, Azov combatants entered the police building. Due to heavy bombing, however, the building burst into flames, forcing Azov to retreat. This allowed the attackers to flee. While Andrushchuk and Savinsky managed to escape the flames through an outside staircase, six other officers had not.

The officers were not the only casualties. Policemen tried to stop civilians from entering the area but did not manage to secure the streets around the contested building, and an estimated eight hundred civilians who either had not heard the policemen, or did not listen, managed to get to the vicinity of the shootouts. They began to physically attack Ukrainian vehicles and troops. They threw stones, tires, and stepped in front of the armored transporters to prevent their advances, while calling the troops fascists.[8] When the commanders realized the popular reaction to the presence of the Ukrainian armed forces, vehicles and soldiers were ordered to retreat immediately from the vicinity of the city center to prevent any clashes with civilians.

It was too late, however: the second group of insurgents who had dispersed in the crowd, followed the retreating soldiers and opened fire at them from within the civilians.[9] In the next instance, panic ensued. Rebels fired the first shot, but the soldiers returned fire

8 MegaPRONICK, "Mariupol, razstrel mirnykh zhitelei! Ubiistvo! 9 maya 2014 goda" [Mariupol, Shooting of Civilians! Murder! 9 May 2014], YouTube, May 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXrcxCP9mA.

9 MegaPRONICK, May 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXrcxCP9mA.

in defense. But instead of shooting the attackers who had hidden behind civilians, three innocent people were shot dead.

While I wrote that the plan of the Mangust group would cease with the takeover of the police building, the plan of the attack's organizers ran deeper. After he escaped the burning building, Andrushchuk was taken hostage and was meant to be kept in the DNR, while the rebels establish control of the building. This would be made to look like a staged abduction by the Pravyi Sektor and Ukrainian "fascists" to create a cover story for the attack. Andrushchuk did survive in the end—after hours of torture and negotiations, he was freed.

While the rebels failed to take control of the building, the event instilled fear, hatred, and agitated locals to mobilize through corresponding demonstrations of violence. Rumors about Pravyi Sektor were perceived as having come true. This was reflected, on the one hand, in popular interpretations of May 9 that produced very different versions of history. On the other hand, the violent event had implications for the future course of events, the first sign of which was popular attendance for the May 11 referendum for the autonomy of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from Ukrainian control.

Part Two: The Interpretations

May 9 was always attended by thousands of locals. People dressed up, put on military clothes or memorabilia, flew the Soviet flag, or carried flowers and pictures of their family who had fought in the war. Mariupoltsy traditionally gathered by the war memorial and honored war veterans with a march through the city. From the start of the commemoration, locals chanted the old Soviet war chant: "Fascism shall not pass!" Public demonstrations of anti-fascism were a sign of honor and appreciation of the Red Army and those who had lost their lives.

It was the same on the morning of May 9, 2014. But this year, standing up to fascism felt substantiated again. People were still in shock about the Russian Spring protesters who died in Odesa in the Trade Union building a week earlier. Mariupol residents largely

blamed the football fans Ultras and Pravyi Sektor from setting the building on fire. When the police building came under attack, Mariupoltsy feared the same was happening in Mariupol. This is how Ivan remembered it:

> Just before 10am, people started gathering near the Drama Theatre. . . . Exactly at ten, a column of people (up to four thousand) began to move according to a decided route towards the Lenin Komsomol square, where the monument dedicated to Soviet soldiers-liberators was located. The event started at 10:20. At this time, singular shots were heard from the direction of the police main directorate. After a while, they developed into clearly recognisable bursts from automatic weapons. The organizers of the commemoration proceeded and called for the mass to remain calm. At around 10:50 the event officially ended. Members of Iskrennost (up to a hundred men) moved towards a nearby memorial of the victims of fascism. Close to 11 o'clock, the shootout was irregular in character and rumours started that members of Pravyi Sektor are currently storming the policemen who are refusing to fulfil their "inhumane" order to open fire at the civilians. "Patriots" of the "Russian World" decided to go and liberate the defenders of the police building, while [the rebels] relayed to the approaching commemorators that people were being "crushed" by [Ukrainian] tanks and "shot down" by heavy machine guns.[10]

Gatekeeper Ivan, having heard this, could not believe that the Ukrainian army would send tanks into the city center during the most populously celebrated national holiday. At this point, everyone, including himself, rushed to the police station.

Meanwhile, Katya, an ordinary Mariupol teacher, was driving her car. Katya stopped at the red light, waiting to cross toward the Freedom Square ahead, past barricades on the right. Rebels had placed them a week back to block off and guard the main avenue leading to the occupied City Council and the police building.

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10 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 112.

When Katya looked left to check the road, instead of cars, she saw an armored transporter with a Ukrainian flag approaching at high speed, crashing into the barricades and "flying" over them.

By now, social media was full of videos from around the police building. The first story Katya found claimed that dozens of Mariupol policemen were being burnt alive by fire started by the Ukrainian army, as a result of a special operation perpetrated by the Ukrainian government. Next, she saw a video of the very armored transporter she had watched crush through the roadblock, having thrown stones and tires at civilians who tried to prevent its advance.

This is a short excerpt from near the police building, of one of the witness' commentary:[11]

> People are creating living shields to block army equipment. A tank with a Ukrainian flag just drove up. Fascists! The police had been on the side of the people; now they are fired at by soldiers. . . . They're running out [of the building], now [soldiers] will open fire at them along the way. . . . There we go. . . . Targeting civilians! Scum! With automatic guns! Did you see how many bodies there are? It's fucked up! Retreat dad, retreat. . . . There are people lying on the ground. . . . Bullets flying. They are targeting the [St George's] ribbon. Well, in short, they will not show you this on Ukrainian media.[12]

Odesa resonated in Mariupol not only because of the Russian Spring victims but also because the "fascists" who were believed to have started the fire included football fans Ultras and Pravyi Sektor—groups supporting the Mariupol Maidan movement.

> We saw it from the balcony. The police building is just there, up this road. They were from Pravyi Sektor. Definitely.

11 Sebrovar (1996), "Mariupol 2014 god. Nacisti rasstrelivayut vocctavshikh russkikh. Khronika sobytii. Mariupol na tot moment eshche Ukraina, mai 2014 goda," [Nazis Shooting Down Russian Rebels. A Chronical of Events in Mariupol, at this Moment Ukraine Stands], Pikabu, 2022, https://pikabu.ru/story/mariupol_2014_god_natsistyi_rasstrelivayut_vosstavshikh_russkikh_8945900.
12 Sebrovar (1996), "Mariupol 2014 God," 2022.

> Civilian clothes, armed, balaclavas on, without insignia.
> Why else would they have no insignia?

I spoke with Zhenya, quoted above, about these events in 2019. Regardless of the findings of investigations since 2014,[13] she believed her version of the event as she saw it with her own eyes. To many of my respondents, May 9 was a special operation of the Ukrainian government, the aim of which was to crush the rebels' resistance and establish control over the city by force.

The same emotion was expressed by those who recognized the event as a rebel terrorist attack. Ivan's account above matches the official investigation,[14] and independent sources that implicate Mangust's group and a subunit of the Vostok battalion under directives from Khodakovsky. After May 9, they returned to Mariupol to continue reconnaissance and sabotage operations that resulted in more casualties, both military and civilian.

In conclusion, on May 9, there were no Pravyi Sektor fascists in Mariupol. When the rebels attacked and Andrushchuk called in for reinforcements, the commander of the 72nd platoon of the Ukrainian armed forces rang Marichka to ask for coordinates for the police directorate. It was his decision to move troops in to counter the terrorist attack. He was also the person who drove the "flying" armored transporter. This event, however, illustrates that the "truth" matters less than its interpretations. Those who blamed Ukraine were also those who told me how they waited hours—and would have waited the whole day—to attend the illegal referendum to vote in favor of the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk

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13 See a documentary produced by Mariupol investigators: 0629comua, "Vsya pravda o sobytyakh v Mariupole 9 maya 2014 goda" [The Whole Truth about the Events of 9 May 2014], May 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55w7BH4JNw8&t=608s. Or investigators atBellingcat: Pieter Van Huis, "A Reconstruction of Clashes in Mariupol, Ukraine, 9 May 2014," *Bellingcat*, January 28, 2015, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/01/28/areconstruction-of-clashes-in-mariupol-ukraine-9-may-2014/, and Vice News analysis: "Violent Clashes in Mariupol on Victory Day," YouTube, May 11, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlSzewPMhD4.

14 Dmytro Putiata, Andrii Karbivnychyi and Vasyl Rudyka, Militarnyi, "What Happened in Mariupol on May 9, 2014," Militarnyi, May 9, 2020, https://mil.in.ua/en/articles/what-happened-in-mariupol-on-may-9th-2014/.

regions two days later. The May 9 violence and the emotion it incited were the most effective mobilizing tools for its attendance.

Mariupoltsy Vote for the Independence of the Donetsk Region

May 9 changed the course and future of mobilization for both sides of the contention. When I spoke with commander Savinsky who fell under fire both on April 16 and May 9, he said that, as a result of the treatment officers and soldiers received from civilians, all troops and weapons were immediately transported out of Mariupol. This was his reasoning:

> On 16 April the ordinary people, the peaceful people, went away after our dialogue; it was the bandits who stayed and opened fire. But on 9 May practically the entire population of Mariupol, under the false impression spread by propaganda, was against us [National Guards] and the army. [The rebels] could initiate fighting, but we understood that we should protect the Ukrainian people. Through our withdrawal, we succeeded in preventing civilian deaths, and by leaving Mariupol for a month, we saved the lives of many. The actions we undertook were for their security.

While Serhii's explanation was rational, the actions of ordinary people were driven by emotions. The withdrawal further deepened the power and security vacuum in Mariupol and combined with popular grievances created an opportunity for the rebels to proceed with the May 11 referendum. "Had the 9 May not occurred, Mariupoltsy would hardly have gone and vote in the illegal separatist referendum—or at least not in such masses," I heard many of activists repeat. Consequently, people went on to cast their vote against the "acts of terror by Ukraine against the Donbas and Russian speakers."

 The referendum was organized by the brother of the arrested Dmitry Kuzmenko—Denys, and directed and financed by the Donetsk People's Republic. The referendum committee was selected from local Antimaidan and Russian Spring supporters with previous

election committee experience. The venues were to be the same as normal polling venues, and refusals to allow their use led to threats of physical violence.

Four polling stations were opened in total in the end, one in each district. The police were not ordered to shut them to prevent the referendum; instead, the new Chief of Police Oleg Morgun who replaced the injured Andrushchuk assigned patrols to prevent any disruptions at the polls, even though the referendum was illegal in practically all respects: it was not organized or approved by the government of Ukraine, therefore unconstitutional; there were no international observers and non-aligned parties that would oversee the process and counting of votes; the ballots were printed on a plain paper (the ballot containers had D/LNR stickers covering the Ukrainian state symbol); there was no protective measure that would prevent manipulation, no individual cubicles for casting votes, and locals were bribed two hundred *hryvnia* to cast a vote.[15]

Further, the referendum question translated as "Supporting, or not, the declaration of *samostoyatel'nost'* (independence) of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics: Yes/ No." It contained no detail or clarification, it was ambiguous, and it was and based on individual interpretation. The results were published by the DNR, but they were fraudulent and not recognized by the international community or local governing bodies. The acting president of Ukraine Turchynov called the referendum a "propaganda farce" that would "have no legal consequences other than the criminal liability of its organizers."[16]

However, the importance here is not one of legality. While some people went to vote in the May 11 referendum because of the May 9 violence, in most cases, the violence accentuated and reinforced already existing frames: locals perceived the referendum as a chance to right the wrongs inflicted onto the Donbas by Kyiv, whether by

15 Gordon, "V Mariupole na referendume golosuyut na ulitse" [Mariupol Votes in the Referendum in the Streets], Gordon, May 11, 2014, https://gordonua.com/news/separatism/v-mariupole-na-referendume-golosuyut-na-ulice-22149.html/.

16 "V Donetske obnarodovany rezultaty 'referenduma'," BBC, May 11, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2014/05/140511_ru_s_donbass_referendum.

the toppling of Yanukovych, signing the EU Association Agreement, or launching an ATO:

> The Kiev authorities, it seems, did not understand what was really happening in the Donbas, and instead of a dialogue, they came with threats and arms.

Misha, a referendum attendee, only expressed a grievance that—in societal and political realms—had long brewed underneath the surface. History provides an example of the popular reaction expressed at the Congress of the Party of Regions (PoR) in Sievierodonetsk in 2004. Over three thousand PoR members from fifteen regions of Ukraine were summoned by Donetsk and Luhansk ruling elites as a reaction to the outcome of the Orange revolution. This revolution was a protest movement against the fraudulent presidential victory of Yanukovych. The outcome of the revolution saw a repetition of the vote, and the result reverted in favor of the candidate of the opposition—Viktor Yushchenko.

Yushchenko's presidential candidacy and political agenda were based on tackling corruption and oligarchic practices of the PoR. The PoR and its oligarchic clans, namely in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, perceived the victory of such candidates politically and economically threatening. Claiming legitimacy of Yanukovych's election results across the southeast where Yanukovych secured a majority of votes, deputies expressed readiness to hold a referendum on the independence from the rule of Kyiv. A failure to do so would "declare the results of voting in the east and south of the country illegitimate."[17] Instead, the southeast was to be ruled from the eastern city Kharkiv, by Yanukovych.

While the rest of Ukraine made jokes about the name of the proposed autonomous entity *Pivlenno-Skhidna Ukrainska Avtonomna Respublika* (South-East Ukrainian Autonomous Republic), which in its abbreviated form "PiSUAR" means "urinal," some PoR elites

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17 "Stenogramma sevedodonetskogo sezda 28 noyabrya 2004 goda," Vostochnyi Variant, November 28, 2004, https://v-variant.com.ua/articles/81128-stenogramma -severodoneckogo-sezda-28-noyabrya-2004-goda.html.

expected the south-east to rebel against Yushchenko, and called for the creation of territorial defense groups to support Yanukovych.

Yanukovych tried to mitigate such notions during his speech at the Congress, stating:

> Today we are on the verge of a catastrophe, on the verge of the abyss, [whereby] peace in the country is very fragile. . . . If we allow destabilization in the state, [the state] will be torn apart.

Yanukovych concluded his speech with a warning that "as soon as the first drop of blood is spilled, we will not be able to stop [the masses]."[18]

This was a warning that, ten years later, he would ignore.

Back in 2004, no blood was spilled because there was no political will to take action to push for the referendum and incite popular mobilization to legitimize it. In Mariupol, locals paid no attention, or desire, to take political action during the Orange revolution or in support of the autonomy of the region.[19] Consequently, both the referendum and the Congress were largely forgotten about.

The importance and validity of the 2014 referendum did not lie in legality or legitimacy defined by the law. In the Donetsk oblast, 1527 polling stations were opened, and by the time they opened at eight o'clock, people had already formed queues by the entrances. Due to the small number of polling stations in Mariupol, the queues were long. One Mariupol journalist described locals as queuing "like by the Mausoleum!"—a reference to queues at Lenin's memorial on the Red Square in Moscow.

As there were four stations and long queues of people, commissions were having trouble to record the personal details of voters.

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18 "Kak tolko proletsya pervaya kaplya krovi my eto nasilie ostanovit ne smozhem—Yanukovich" [As Soon as the First Drop of Blood Is Shed, We Will not Be Able to Stop It (the violence)—Yanukovych], Unian, November 28, 2004, https://press.unian.net/press/965050-kak-tolko-proletsya-pervaya-kaplya-krovi-myi-eto-nasilie-ostanovit-ne-smojem-Yanukovych.html.

19 The only protests in Mariupol during the Orange revolution were organized by the PoR. Local opposition parties were, according to my respondents, afraid of the authorities and did not mobilize to support the revolution.

To solve this, locals set up their own "mini commissions," bringing tables and chairs onto streets and collecting signatures on empty sheets of paper.[20] These "ballots" were counted on the spot, by hourly attendance. This system allowed enthusiasts (and paid opportunists) to cast their votes repeatedly. And even though the number of ballots produced by the DNR reportedly exceeded the total of 1.8 million needed for the Donetsk oblast, Mariupoltsy donated their own money for the production of paper copies, to ensure there were enough "leaflets of the future" for everyone.[21]

"Future" meant different things to different people, just as their motivations to vote were manifold. Some explicitly argued for the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics because "we would be better off self-governed," with "money made locally, distributed locally" rather than by Kyiv. The accent on the "local" was pronounced often, relating particularly to direct elections and more autonomy to the local government. The argument was that "people should decide for themselves whom they wanted to stay, and whom they wanted to topple, in a legitimate way—in a referendum" and that the referendum would "achieve unity of the Donbas within Ukraine through federalisation."

Locals were in a consensus about their opposition to the ousting of Yanukovych and appointment of the new Kyiv government. "Yanukovych was *our* president," I heard repeated. They voted as a protest against the "illegal overthrow of a democratically elected president" that they believed was organized by "fascists," "nationalists," or "the West." "No one was against Ukraine; we were all for Ukraine, but not the way it was politically represented after the Euromaidan victory." These people wanted the pre-Maidan status quo of social, political, and economic stability which Yanukovych—a Donetsk native—was associated with.

This need for stability was accentuated by the continued political violence that destroyed the status quo. The process started during the Maidan and escalated with increasing military presence

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20 See photo documentation "V Mariupole startoval referendum. Vystroilis ocheredi" [Referendum Began in Mariupol. Queues are Formed], 0629, May 11, 2014, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/532002/v-mariupole-startoval-referendum-vystroilis-oceredi-fotoobnovlaetsa/.

21 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014*.

of Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian forces from April. "Ukraine launched an anti-terrorist operation against its own citizens! I don't support the government, so I am a separatist now?!," one of my respondents and a referendum attendee exclaimed. "We are not separatists; we live in a democracy and we simply expressed our will!," said another.

After the ATO, a key catalyst was the May 2 and 9 violence. To the referendum voters, "Ukraine" was to blame, either by its perceived support and influence of "fascism," or by executing "a planned operation against the Donbas" that resisted the new government, or the Russian speakers generally. Equally common were motivations related to ideological and economic ties with the Russian Federation: "we hoped the Crimean scenario would be repeated in the Donetsk oblast," including its ultimate accession as the subject of the Russian Federation.

The point is that the referendum did not have to meet legal requirements to be valid for those who cast their vote on that day. For the people who went to vote, the referendum *was* legal, because "the fact that people went to vote in itself made the vote legal." "I waited two hours to vote and would have waited the whole day." And many, if they had a chance, would have voted again when I spoke with them in 2019.

To conclude, the referendum was preceded by events that, in the eyes of the voters, gave it credibility; it was viewed as a solution to their grievances, as well as a means to improve their lives. There was no governing structure and mechanisms for implementing the goals of the referendum, however. Not realizing the context of what the referendum was set to achieve, who organized it, and for what purpose, the voters could never expect that the result of the referendum would be chaos, disorder, and violence the Donetsk People's Republic exerted as they tried to achieve full occupation of Mariupol.

Mariupol's Donetsk People's Republic

Who were you before becoming a "People's commander"?
People knew me as a local businessman.

What did you want to achieve?

The agenda was us against the Euromaidan, against the new government, and for federalization of Ukraine. We wanted autonomy for the Donbas, like was in Crimea. Simply that the money that we make here stays in the region. It was not about separation from Ukraine to join Russia. Our anti-Maidan mobilization was on this basis.

How did the Maidan impact you?

For me it was an impulse. Antimaidan started as an anti-fascist movement. People started to gather against Kiev bandits who saw the revolution as an opportunity to pursue their criminal aspirations. There was no control of the security situation in the country and the city. The police did not mix in, they were not on anyone's side per se, but we tried to help them maintain order in the city. Our guys were patrolling streets to deter crime. This is why I, personally, and in collaboration with the police, took the initiative, to keep the city safe.

During the month of the occupation, did someone try to control you?

Yes.

Were they from the Russian Federation?

No. The people were from Donetsk. You know "Bes,"[22] the military commander? And also, Akhmetov, but we did not let him. His men came here in two cars, wanted to meet [our chief commander] personally, but he refused; for him they were competition in his city business. They wanted to have a share in the control over the city, business, everything. But we were not to give them any share of power. They came to me, told me to give up the building we had seized, I said no and slammed the doors behind them.

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22 Igor Nikolaevich Bezler, a Russian citizen and a Russian army veteran, DNR army commander.

Did you want the region to become integrated into the Russian Federation?

I don't believe this territory will ever become part of the Russian Federation. The oligarchs will not allow it—they have divided the region and have their own agreements with Moscow and between themselves. I do not support this. We wanted to achieve unity of the Donbas through federalization.

Who was responsible for violence in Mariupol?

The Kuzmenko brothers were responsible for April 16. They organized people, knowing that they would be shot at. As a result, innocent bypassers were shot dead. Kuzmenko brothers are personally responsible for many deaths. And May 9 was a planned military operation by Ukraine in conjunction with local authorities.

Elaborate on May 9. . .

All that happened on May 9 was planned. There were two groups of people, those who were marching in the memory of the fallen ones during the Great Patriotic War, and a second group of protesters—agitators. The army knew that the rally would take place and they organized an operation that would provoke an armed confrontation and cause chaos among locals. That is why I got involved with the rebels. I felt indebted to the police and wanted to help them. I had friends in the police at the time, some of whom died on May 9.

I consider the occupation a civic movement, a will of the people. *Samo-zakhvat* [self-capture]. We were Mariupol people, and the push came after May 9.

Was it locals who wanted to control Mariupol?

Yes, joined by Donetsk rebel groups Vostok and Oplot.

Who gave you weapons?

The supplies were coming from Donetsk. Everything came from Donetsk.

Who trained you?

We undertook military training to learn to handle various firearms. I was in Donetsk two or three times for this purpose. This was

organized by a former SBU agent Khodakovsky. There were some people among us, of course, who simply wanted to know how to fight and to fight.

Do you consider yourself a Ukrainian?
   I am proud to be a citizen of Mariupol.

~

This was an excerpt from my interview with Misha. Misha introduced himself as a Cossack and a security guard. He had spent three years in prison for his role in the rebellion. The roadblocks and barricades around the city center were his work.

   I met Misha unexpectedly. I sent Anatoly a message one day, asking who might be able to help me understand Mariupol rebellion. He replied: "You have an SBU Major in your Facebook friends list. Why don't you ask him?" In the next message he sent a link to the Facebook profile of my gatekeeper Ivan. Suddenly, everything made sense. Whenever I asked Ivan if he knew the person I wished to meet, he just sent me their phone number, or set up the meeting for me. This is how I got to meet Valery, Savinsky, or Misha. Ivan knew everything about the period I had studied, and everyone who was involved in the events because it was his job. He was helping me over the years because he wanted me to have the chance to study both sides of the contention and be as knowledgeable in my analysis as I could.

   So, when I asked Ivan to tell me about the Mariupol opolchenie, he just smirked and said: "Ask for yourself. Just make sure you order vodka." Then he rang someone and fifteen minutes later I was sitting opposite the former commander of Mariupol rebels. When he arrived, Ivan introduced me and said: "Tell Hanichka everything she wants to know" winked at me and left.

   The first time I met Misha, he was cautious and did not say much. The second time we met—a year later—I knew better what to ask, and he got closer to telling me the truth. I bought his favorite *Kozatska Rada* [Cossack Council] vodka and cigarettes, and he gave me a tour around where his barricades were located.

I asked Misha about the opolchenie power vertical. DNR in Mariupol was self-proclaimed by the rebels following the May 11 referendum. Its structure of command was imposed intending to achieve the last "step" of DNR control: to replace politicians, the police, and security structures with DNR personnel. This rule was meant to be a military rule organized and directed by DNR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko. Zakharchenko assigned as commander of Mariupol Andrey Borisov,[23] call sign Chechen. At this time, he was a commander of a DNR "special forces" unit with the same name. Before May, Chechen was one of the leaders of the tent city of Russian Spring supporters in Mariupol set up in late March. He also assisted in the takeover of the Donetsk regional administration building in April. The purpose of Chechen's arrival and his role were mainly twofold: to establish command and control over the city and organize national squads that would exert this. The group around Chechen was responsible for military tasks, including guarding roadblocks and patrolling the city.

Besides patrolling the city, the group recruited and trained recruits for service in the Republic. Those who had already possessed weapons and knew how to handle them would become the first coordinators of self-defense squads within Mariupol. The second part of the governing structure was administrative, designed to deal with humanitarian and communal tasks. This was provided by local Russian Spring supporters, and Misha was their commander.

> I would deal with people whom the police arrested, drug addicts, alcoholics, unemployed and so on. We collected money, distributed money, provided food for as many as we could. And people, mostly pensioners, were coming to us for help.

Gaining popular support for the rebellion was necessary for enabling Chechen to overthrow Hotlubei, close off the city, and take control of Mariupol. Chechen used the established tactic of spreading rumors and inciting fear among the population to increase their

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23 For Chechen's profile, see "Borisov, Andrei Aleksandrovich," Myrotvorets, April 1, 2015, https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/borisov-andrej-aleksandrovich/.

recruitment and decrease their resistance. One of such rumors was that the Ukrainian army had mined all roads and bridges leading to the city. To make this believable, Chechen's people conducted tactical shootouts and used the information to prompt and justify building roadblocks to control infrastructure around the city.

There were also other dynamics at play. When the referendum was passed, Denys Kuzmenko aspired to replace his arrested brother as a new leader of Mariupol, but the "Mariupol People's Council' was set to replace Mayor Hotlubei with a new, popularly elected mayor. However, there were no mechanisms or consensus on what the structure of governance should mean in reality.

Further, Misha said that Kuzmenko "wanted to become the leader, but he could not do it. Both brothers had to flee to Crimea because they would be prosecuted in Ukraine, and in the DNR they would be killed." This is because DNR did not tolerate competition and challengers to their own plans for ruling. The pattern was the same across both regions—local leaders were useful insofar as they mobilized and agitated masses and prepared the grounds for the creation of D/LNR and the referendum. After this, many were discarded and replaced by D/LNR appointees.

The locals did not support the DNR and referendum because of its power vertical: they supported an *idea*. At the start of the Russian Spring, popular support was ideological and founded on frames associated with "Russia," "DNR," "Putin," or "Ukraine." But for the DNR, it was the opposite: ideology was a tool that would enable control and power. While the plan was to extend the control to Mariupol, the rule of Chechen brought chaos and anarchy instead, demonstrated in robberies of banks and ATMs, raids at shops, and nationalizing properties. Chechen wanted power for himself.

As a result, banks froze assets, disabling peoples' pensions and salaries, and communal services were affected. This was not what the locals wished for when they queued to cast their "leaflet of the future," as Ivan sarcastically called the referendum ballots. Instead of the "Russian world," people began to wonder who will pay their pensions and empty their bins. The initial enthusiasm for the referendum quickly waned, no popular overthrow of

Mayor Hotlubei materialized and official Ukrainian governance in Mariupol thus prevailed.

This governance, however, enabled the occupation in the first place. Following the May 9 tragedy, on May 11 Mariupol oligarch Rinat Akhmetov demanded that the Ukrainian government "hear the voice of the Donbass [and] abandon the practice of conducting large-scale battles in the peaceful cities of Donbass with the use of the Armed Forces, heavy equipment and weapons."[24] He asked for the Ukrainian army to withdraw from the region like it did from Mariupol and abandon the checkpoints on the region's borders. He reasoned:

> Further military operations in the territory of Donbass will only lead to the fact that the majority of residents will lose trust and respect for the authorities. [To maintain order in Mariupol] together with the municipal police we'll create people's squads from among the employees of metallurgical plants. From tomorrow, these squads will begin patrolling the city and protecting civilians from looters and criminals operating in the city.[25]

The concept of "municipal" (local) police did not exist in 2014, but Akhmetov's idea was clarified four days later. On May 15, directors of Akhmetov's Ilyich and Azovstal factories, Mayor Hotlubei, the head of police Oleg Morgun, representatives of workers' unions, and Denys Kuzmenko signed a multilateral "Memorandum on Order and Security." This memorandum contained "joint initiatives to ensure public safety in Mariupol," since the May 9 tragedy "showed that armed confrontation is the path to the death of people." The proposed solution to "peacekeeping" was strengthening

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24 "Akhmetov trebuyet prekratit ATO i sozdavat sobstvennye 'Narodnye dryzhiny' [Akhmetov Demands an End to the ATO and Creates His Own "People's Squads], LB UA, May 11, 2014, https://rus.lb.ua/news/2014/05/11/266022_ahmetov_trebuet _prekratit_ato.html?fbclid=IwAR0A_JGCEtp95f89Xht0Cj5el6hE87fF2CeoN5pQ jFHvzO82-4skw3rel7o.

25 "Akhmetov trebuyet prekratit ATO," May 11, 2014.

the "People's Squad," which was to be overseen by Kuzmenko and DNR together with the police.[26] This was too little, too late.

Misha's response to the visit of Akhmetov's people is key to the problem that not only Akhmetov but also Ukrainian authorities would soon face: without active opposition and resistance from authorities, the leaders of the rebellion and their ideologically motivated supporters who believed their cause, would refuse to be controlled by any state or non-state authority. As such, when the two men who visited Misha—directors of Ilyich and Azovstal—tried to request a public debate with the leaders of the rebellion on the May 30, the rebels refused, claiming that all industry and business ought to be controlled by the Republic.

However, and to the luck of mediators, there were too few men and resources behind Chechen that would enable him to fulfill the plan of total occupation. All that his sixty-men-strong armed faction could achieve in Mariupol was to occupy three buildings for one month. There were two important consequences of the limited DNR grasp of the city: Mariupol organized and undertook Ukrainian presidential elections, and this sent a signal to Ukrainian authorities that Mariupol could be liberated.

Mariupol Elects the Ukrainian President

In Mariupol, increased violence correlated with increased active and passive support of civilians for the defense of the Russian Spring. Illustrating this on events discussed earlier in the book, the arrest of Kuzmenko on April 5 was perceived as harassment by "fascist Ukrainian elites," and brought to the street hundreds who demanded his freedom; May 9, with the additional factor of the Odesa tragedy context, steered popular opinion against the Ukrainian army and government even further, driving thousands to vote in the referendum. Ultimately, the reason behind this agitation was to make sure the presidential elections set for later in the month would not take place in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, in order to make the elections, as a whole, illegitimate. This was one of the key goals of the D/LNR in this period.

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26 "Akhmetov trebuyet prekratit ATO," May 11, 2014.

In the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the elections were described as "held in conditions of acute civil confrontation and hard opposition." This meant forced closure of polling stations and confiscation of voting ballots by armed opolchentsy and instances of violence and harassment toward the voting committee. By the end of the day, roughly only one in four stations in the regions worked, and only 10 percent of people cast their votes. The "closure" of a polling station looked as follows: a group of armed men marched in, threatened the committee, took all documentation, and left. There was one instance of a shootout during which one civilian was killed and another injured. Some of those people who were thus refused to vote, cast their votes symbolically, by posting a picture of the name of their candidate on social networks.

In Mariupol, 204 out of 216 polling stations were opened, which represented 37 percent of the whole Donetsk oblast. DNR groups circled all polling stations one after another, harassing voters, tearing down posters, collecting information about voters from stolen voters' list, and disrupting and dispersing election committees.[27] When lunches were delivered to Mariupol polling stations, some committee members refused to eat them because they feared they might get poisoned; some members did not show up at all, which resulted in a closure of the station. Some voters tried to persuade the staff to return to work, others traveled to a different station, but staff refused to admit voters from other districts. Depending on the district, voters had to queue for up to three hours, but they were determined to cast their vote: it was a symbol of resistance, for the unity of Ukraine.

The DNR grasp of Mariupol may have been limited but terrorist actions on this day were always a possibility. Yet, Ukrainian governmental elites "gathered all resources in order to make [the elections in Mariupol] happen."[28] What is interesting is the elections' organization. As Ivan explains, the aim was to keep it a secret: first, the ballots, as a practice, would have been distributed to committees

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27 Romanenko, *Poslednii Forpost*, 103–204.

28 Konstantin Batozsky, Donetsk regional administration adviser in i24 Comua, "SBU obnarodovala film o sobytyakh 9 maya v Mariupole" [SBU Published a Film about the 9 May Events in Mariupol], YouTube, May 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soKabj67pzs.

prior to the voting day. In Mariupol, ballots only arrived on the day of the election. On May 24, ballots were flown from Kyiv by a military plane to nearby Berdyansk airport. Here, they were stored at the airport until the night before the election when they were loaded onto a ship and sent to the Mariupol seaport. From there they were loaded onto a coal-transporting factory train that was sent to a safe place at Akhmetov's Azovstal factory. And finally, on May 25, they were distributed to the polling stations in the city.

According to the Ukrainian law, this distribution should have been undertaken by a special courier and the day before the elections, but the problem was that no local courier could be trusted, or was willing to take the risk. As a result, workers from Akhmetov's factories who had formed the "People's Squads" along with policemen protected and distributed the ballots. When we look back at the Antimaidan-Russian Spring period, many factory workers were paid, or ordered, to man protests against the Maidan and the new government. Now, Akhmetov's factory workers "distributed ballots across the Donetsk oblast. Ironically, ballots for electing a Ukrainian president."[29]

The fact that the elections took place meant that Akhmetov, who facilitated storing and the dissemination of the ballots, took a political position of keeping Mariupol under Ukrainian control. The fact that there were no major disruptions or armed response of the DNR, on the other hand, sent an important signal to the activists and the command of the Ukrainian joint armed forces—and so the operation to liberate Mariupol was launched.

For Ivan, taking part in the elections showed two societal realities: "true Ukrainian patriotism" that was reflected in voting despite the threat of ending up tortured in a *podval* (basement), and the proportion of these patriots—amounting to less than 15 percent—who were prepared to take an active pro-Ukrainian position. In the next chapter, I will return to the pro-Ukrainian activists, their response to May 9, and their resistance to the occupation of Mariupol reflected in its liberation.

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29 i24 Comua, "SBU obnarodovala film," May 6, 2015.

Chapter 6

THE PRO-UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE

May 9 was pivotal for Mariupol mobilization on both sides of the contention, creating an ideological push reflected in its increase. But there were also instances of demobilization. Valery had continued to patrol at protests after the Maidan ended, but did not take part in illegal takeovers or violent attacks by rebels, or join the opolchenie. When I asked him why, he laughed:

> Because I'm not stupid. Like Kuzmenko, other adventurers wanted to grab and seize, use people in order to reach their own personal goals. Power for power. And the more chaos there was, the easier this was to achieve. Take the 9 May: it was a provocation that everyone needed in order to create a certain picture. For those adventurers to show that no one governs here, to show inaction of the local government. That the "People's leaders" ought to be governing.
>
> The [rebels] came to me asking to give them my men to man *blokposty*. I told them to get lost. They got scared and fled. In order to be a separatist one ought to want something; think. These people in the City Council were just idiots. Honestly. I could have cleared the building. I had 300 men, healthy, sportsmen. They feared us, respected us. I used to work with some of these [rebels]. They were factory workers. But when we spoke with the mayor, we were explicitly told not to mix in. And those street patrols? Useless. I asked them—what are you patrolling streets for? They said, well, they pay us, so we go. Please, if anything actually happened, they would be the first to flee.

After May 9, Valery joined neither side—not the rebellion, nor Ukraine—with the occupation of Mariupol, he demobilized from public demonstrations. He was not the only one: Anatoly and Anna mobilized at Maidan "when the choice was being made between the West and the East." They "chose the future." But after May 9 they saw how locals—mostly factory or construction workers or unemployed—started patrolling streets, building and manning barricades in the name of DNR. They knew "something had to be done, it has to be stopped. We can't simply become controlled by Russia." "We just had to stay part of Ukraine!," Anna added. But she also understood that her previous effort to educate the masses through conversation and distribution of leaflets would not be enough to protect Mariupol:

> We were in a great minority. We felt it was impossible to achieve anything tangible in opposition to [the rebels] as long as the majority of ordinary people are actively on their side; as long as the Russian border, so to speak, is at our doorstep. Not only had the physical border with Russia vanished, but the border also disappeared in their heads, too. We came to understand that no societal or political change had occurred [after Maidan], or could have, without the support of people, the governance, without civic organisations, political organisations, military corps, all working together. Therefore, we decided to move out of Mariupol towards the centre of Ukraine.

Marichka, too, realized that political culture had to be fostered from below, but she believed that it was possible. She did not leave or demobilize. Hers was the first story I heard about Mariupol activism and hers was the name mentioned by every activist I ever spoke with. She was not the only activist who self-mobilized, but she is the one person in the center of it all, connecting volunteers, activists, fighters, and soldiers since 2014.

When I asked Serhii whether activists played an important role in the post-Maidan defense of Mariupol, he said that "supporters of the military were the main force that helped patrol and defend it, defend Ukraine." He named volunteer combatants generally,

and Marichka's organization *Novyi Mariupol* (New Mariupol) specifically.

For Marichka, activism "for a Ukrainian Mariupol" was a natural continuation of her Maidan efforts. She most feared the security vacuum in the region that enabled the Russian Spring to grow, that the occupation of Mariupol could become total, and as a result, that Mariupol could be "handed to Russia like Crimea was." No one knew how to wage war against Russia, and no one was ready because there was no infrastructure for defense. The region could easily be lost and "Ukrainian patriots simply eliminated."

Marichka's concern was not only related to security. Like Anna, she knew that pro-Ukrainian activists were in a minority and, like Anna, she had doubts whether keeping Mariupol a territorial part of Ukraine was what the majority wanted. For this reason, she conducted a survey:

> I have been conducting sociological research in the form of surveys in the region, including in Mariupol, since 2002. There had never been any significant positive response towards the integration of the region within Russia. But after I saw the popular support for the annexation of Crimea, my first thought was that it was only me who stands for Ukraine It scared me. My pro-Ukrainian position scared me because of the potential repercussions for my security and the security of my family.
>
> I had no idea how many people would have shared this position; how many people would have wanted Mariupol to remain part of Ukraine; how many would have been waiting for Putin. I had to understand what views the people shared and whether they were prepared to defend them.

In order to find out, Marichka conducted two surveys in April 2014, with just two questions to answer:

1. Should the Donetsk region be considered part of Ukraine, part of Russia, or part of a federative structure within Ukraine?
2. Can you see the Donetsk region as part of the Donetsk People's Republic, or do you consider it united with Ukraine?

The questions were designed to be specific to territorial preferences, not to be ideological, and they showed surprising results: 75 percent of Mariupol residents wanted the region to remain part of Ukraine against 25 percent who wanted separation from Ukraine and integration within Russia and DNR, respectively. In the second survey conducted a few weeks later, this number fell to 12 percent.

> These surveys showed us that Mariupol had not been lost and we had a foundation to build upon, to fight for. I was surprised. I showed these results to my fellow volunteers, knowing that we needed to mobilize people to save the Donetsk region. This is how we established the biggest volunteer organisation in Mariupol—Novyi Mariupol, a coordination centre of patriotic forces, also the only one of its kind in Mariupol.

Marichka argued that Mariupol needed a social organization that "people could unite under" and build a civil society of activists. Initially, activists acted individually, but once trust was established, they began to network. As Denys from Oborona Mariupolya explained,

> [In April] we started coordinating military assistance through our organisation in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior divisions, including the SBU and National Guard. We resumed our work until the attack on the police directorate. After 9 May people were scared but the "backbone" of our organisation remained active: we moved underground for a month. Then we started to act full-time. At first, as there were only two such organisations in the city—us and Novyi Mariupol. We cooperated; drove together to deliver supplies.

Gradually, from a center for humanitarian and material aid, Novyi Mariupol grew into a coordination center of patriotic forces in the Mariupol sector of ATO. This included the National Guard, the army, and territorial defense formations that started forming at the beginning of May.

From June, the Ukrainian armed forces and volunteers started advancing against the rebels in order to liberate occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The conflict turned into an armed confrontation.

> [Novyi Mariupol] provided any help from produce to military equipment, to aiding wounded soldiers with first aid, medicines and transport to safe zones. We also provided aid to refugees because during this period the inflow from both Donetsk and Luhansk regions seeking shelter had been great.

Valentina, a pensioner, "couldn't just stay at home and do nothing when Ukraine was in danger." When she heard of Novyi Mariupol, she walked into Marichka's organization and asked how she could be of use. Her story illustrates the spontaneity of mobilization, "accidental" collective action, and networking of ordinary people united by a cause:

> When the same events [as Crimea] affected the Donbas and Mariupol itself, the whole family—both the daughter and the grandson—joined in the defense of Mariupol. We participated in almost all events against the referendum and the formation of the DNR. As soon as I found out that our troops appeared near Mariupol, I began to feed them with fried pies, sometimes cutlets, eggs, borsht. First with my daughter, then with a friend and her husband, we started bringing them vegetables and potatoes weekly. But then another volunteer Svetlana, a teacher of the Russian language, found out about me and offered to work with Oksana and Galina. They were women who collected the necessary things and brought them to the fighters. I cooked, they drove. Then they began to send more volunteers to pick up what was prepared, to attract people to make dumplings and cook. In addition to food, we collected second-hand clothes, I washed everything, packed it, and the group delivered it. We sewed balaclavas. Elena and I. Oleg and Vasily brought material. All of us—pensioners. At first, I cooked at my own

expense, then Marichka from Novyi Mariupol donated flour, sometimes meat. But it seemed to me that this was not enough when there was so much work to do. So, I joined Novyi Mariupol. Girls made balaclavas and head bands, weaved camouflage nets and suits for snipers. This is why they jokingly nicknamed us "Kikimora[1] battalion." Natalia was our leader. She could turn anything into something useful to soldiers: Whatever was not suitable for refugees or schools, she turned into blankets or pillows so tank operators would not sit on cold metal. We came to work every day, but also worked at home, dying sheets for nets and bandanas, washing material.

Natalia, the leader of "Kikimora battalion" had attended Kyiv Maidan before volunteering in Mariupol. Her biggest regret was that she was too old to pick up a Kalashnikov in the defense of Ukraine. "I'll never be too old to fight for my principles," she explained her motivation to "fight in any way I could." As supplies were coming to the east, Kikimory realized that women like themselves weaved and sewn all around Ukraine. With the help of Marichka, they began to network, exchange material and effectively distribute their products to the armed forces in a coordinated manner. These women thus became part of a volunteer movement that shared the same collective identity of resistance, illustrating how collective identity glues movements together.

There were also those who fought in the literal sense of the word. Following the launch of the ATO and Turchynov's call for mobilization into territorial defense formations, Mariupoltsy joined. While Marichka united volunteers, another "accidental" leader, Viktoria, mobilized future volunteer fighters:

April 16 and the attempted capture of the military unit of the National Guard . . . showed that Mariupol could resist. [Savinsky] and our hero and patriot Andrushchuk took an active part and showed civic consciousness. . . . On 1 May our members helped Andrushchuk to equip checkpoints

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1 According to Slavic legends, Kikimora is a mythical female spirit utilizing witchcraft.

and organize patrols at them. On 9 May, the first fight for Mariupol, I realized what fear is; when bullets whistle next to you, and you realize that there are real enemies, and they are around you. I received a call that it was necessary to leave the city, because I was in danger. . . . I left for Kyiv and visited Anton Gerashchenko, who was at that time an adviser to the Minister of the Interior Arsen Avakov. I persuaded him to create a battalion of volunteers who will defend our city with a weapon in their hand. Then I returned to Mariupol and started recruiting the first volunteers to the Donbas battalion (2nd company) and sending them to Kyiv for education. These were the first volunteers from Mariupol and Berdyansk.

On 29 May our [organisation] "Mariupolska Druzhyna" (Mariupol Squad) was officially registered, and already on 3 June I was elected chairwoman under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. We began to collect intelligence data on the forces and deployment of DNR militants: we tracked their movement around the city, drew schemes and locations and passed on the placement of *raztiazhky* and land mines. We [also] provided information about how many stores and ATMs were robbed, how many hostages were taken and released and whom [DNR] aspired to take hostage next. Every single day, sometimes even wearing a wig, I went to the city and met with our members, collected the data and brought it to the [military base at the] airport. Twice we were ambushed and twice they tried to capture us.

It was due to activists like Marichka and Viktoria that mobilization developed a structure and the joint armed forces acquired local volunteers, fighters, or inside informants, and after the presidential elections pro-Ukrainian activism enabled active preparations to liberate Mariupol to begin. The operation was executed mainly by the Azov battalion under the command of its chief Andrii Biletsky in cooperation with the Dnipr-1 special unit and 72nd mechanized brigade of the Ukrainian armed forces.

The Liberation of Mariupol

Azov described the operation to liberate Mariupol as "a lightning strike" after which "half a million industrial city port was Ukrainian again."[2] Local activist Kirilo described it as "a clearing of three buildings formerly under the control of the rebels. Most of the separatists had fled Mariupol the night before." Viktoria, who took part in the liberation, provided the context:

> When it became known to us that Chechen was coming to the city, it was clear that Mariupol urgently needed to be liberated, because later it would be almost impossible. I remember with gratitude General Klimchuk, who trusted us patriots, and did not believe Morgun who was acting head of the directorate of the internal affairs of Mariupol at the time. He tried to convince us and argue that everything is under control in the city, and that they are patrolling together with the [Akhmetov] squad, Afghan [war veterans], Cossacks, and representatives of the DNR.
>
> On 11 June, when we learned from our intelligence that Chechen had left with his armed group of 30 people, I arrived at the airport. I realized that it would now be possible to clean up the city, and asked that our guys from the [Mariupolska Druzhyna] to participate in this event. The general, of course, did not say the exact date, but announced readiness. Wherein our guys came and conducted shooting training at the airport, along with Azov.
>
> Meanwhile, we passed on reconnaissance and drew schemes and locations of *raztiazhky*[3] on maps, locating snipers and sentries. I can't say that the general trusted me; he often asked for repetitions and re-checked. Before the clearing itself, I was told that if someone from the ranks of fighters dies because of our intelligence, then I will be "cleansed" like the separatists. I agreed to this because I understood

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2 Mykola Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya: Fotozyirka viiskovoy memuarystyky* [Liberation of Mariupol: Photo Collection of Military Memoirs] (Orientyr: Kyiv, 2018), 4.

3 Wires connecting land mines or other explosive ordnance.

that one cannot trust anyone. But no one did die, and the operation was successful.

The liberation was originally planned for May 23, 2014, to ensure that the presidential elections would take place. It did not go ahead because of the paralysis of local law enforcement agencies and the lack of human resources to undertake the operation. Back in May, Azov was (in its commander's words) "a very scarce group of poorly armed and ill-trained youngsters . . . students, managers, ordinary guys who had the courage to take on the role of the army, having no combat experience."[4] When they first arrived in Mariupol on May 5, 2014,

> we had no power or opportunity to knock [DNR] out of there so became stationed at the "Shmel" base near Mariupol. There we got weapons. We travelled here as the 'Black Men', as an illegal independent structure, subordinated to no-one, with 5 or 6 guns and [here] we became a battalion![5]

The initial role of Azov was to help Mariupol self-defense groups and the loyal section of the police in clearing the rebels from the held City Council building and repel the rebels' attempts to seize weapons from the police building. Commander Biletsky described the policemen as "completely unfit for action."[6]

Azov received thirty firearms from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Only two volunteers were professional soldiers and these men became the unit's instructors. The training took place mainly in the neighboring town Berdyansk:

> We were based at the "Breeze" Hotel sanatorium from where we accessed the training ground, provided to us by the border guards. . . . We learnt how to shoot [and operate] machine guns, grenade launchers, automatic rifles, everything that

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4 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya*, 5.
5 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya, 13.*
6 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya, 7.*

was available. We learnt to throw grenades through check-points and studied explosives.[7]

Azov training continued until June 12, and combat experience was gained through neutralizing sabotage groups in urban fighting and initially defending the Mariupol airport while Ukrainian National Guard forces mobilized. This was a strategic position they had to keep control of against advances of the DNR. But Azov also began to grow through self-mobilization of Mariupol residents.

> We established the connection with policemen, patriotic forces of Mariupol, held excursions, explorations.[8]

Oleh and other Ultras football fans joined Azov and acted as "our guides and eyes in Mariupol"[9]:

> We recruited locals who infiltrated the rebels' ranks to understand their central organisation and tactics. To blend in one of them wore a USSR and "Glory to Russia" t-shirts, and he was our *razvedchik* (scout) who informed us about what was happening around the Chechen's base and the types of fortifications [. . .] We also recruited a girl who had helped them build the barricades. [. . .] and based on this intelligence and a satellite map, we created their layout.[10]

The intelligence also revealed heterogeneity in the rebellion, and the prevalence of three autonomous groups: the group around commander Chechen, the "Russian Orthodox Army," and a group of pro-Russian Chechen[11] and Russian nationals from "Vostok" and "Oplot" brigades: according to the locals the groups ranged from thirty to sixty armed individuals. While Chechen was

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7 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya,* 15.
8 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya,* 13.
9 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya,* 7.
10 Andrei Biletsky in i24 Comua, "SBU obnarodovala film o sobytyakh 9 maya v Mariupole" [SBU Published a Film about the 9 May Events in Mariupol], YouTube, May 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soKabj67pzs.
11 Chechen nationals under the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov—a strongman whose authoritarian regime is supported and utilized by Putin.

assigned Mariupol "Chief commander" and had its military and administrative factions, the other two groups were building and protecting barricades. "[The barricades] couldn't be shot at by anything. And they mined all the routes with mines with triggers."[12] More reinforcements were built around the city center with each passing day.

However, there were factors favorable to the liberators. The violence that the rebels perpetrated led to waning popular support for the "Republic." Chechen criticized locals for "hiding in their flats" instead of manning barricades in support of the "Republic" and threatened Hotlubei that he either steps down or will be "taken down." Chechen was incapable of imposing power by neither political, nor military means: on June 6 Chechen attacked servicemen from the National Guard, preparing for the scenario of an armed provocation. The guards engaged in a shootout that lasted half an hour after which Chechen fled. On the next day, Chechen gave them an order to give up their weapons within the next twenty-four hours, "but the national guard found support from some of the SBU and border guards, and [replied] with a categorical no."[13]

The day for the liberation was set for June 13, 2014. On the 12th, Azov acquired intelligence that Chechen's armed faction—the most combat capable one—was fleeing Mariupol. Misha confirmed this: everyone apart from one rebel had fled to Donetsk the night before. "We, too, had our informants," he explained. Those who remained were the "Russian Orthodox Army" and local rebels.

The operation to liberate Mariupol went ahead:

> I remember that our plan of assault was written by a hand on a sheet of paper, pulled out of some trainee's notebook. . . . The National Guard and the police Dnipro-1 were to block the centre so that no enemy could escape. And we went on to storm.[14]

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12 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya*, 7.
13 Bohdan, *Mariupol: 2014,* 168.
14 "Dushman" quoted in Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya*, 21.

Despite the fact that rebel fighters had left, the operation still took over three hours. The joint armed forces consisted of an Azov assault squad, two Dnepr-1 special task force companies, two National Guard servicemen, one special Alfa unit of the Ministry of Interior, and Mariupol volunteers from the ranks of Pravyi Sektor. They were divided into two groups: Botsman and Dushman, under the command of Biletsky. Moving from one barricade to another, 30–40 meters at a time, the task was to break through the closed-off Hretska street (leading towards the Drama Theatre). The rebels were overpowered and forced to retreat.

> We fired RPGs into their building and it burnt down, along with those within it. . . . And then our task was to clear up all other buildings that were in the Grey Zone (contested area) along the perimeter of the territory that became the epicentre of the battle.[15]
>
> Everything went almost according to plan. The only surprise was that they had laid mines. There was a whole system of bombs with a control unit, some kind of engineering ambush. And had it worked, we would probably have suffered great losses. None of us knew that these landmines were connected to a single detonator. . . . I don't know if by accident or not, [one of us] destroyed the console, literally in one string of burst [from heavy machine gun], neutralising all the mines at once. God had mercy upon us.[16]

By 10:00 am barricades on this street were dismantled, and clearing of the occupied buildings began.

> The battle was over, in my opinion, rather fast, but the clearing operation took much longer because we hardly had any strength, we were exhausted. The assault itself passed in the morning, it was cool, adrenaline high but the clearing operation was monotonous work. When you storm—you see the enemy. And during clearing you are chained with inner safety locks . . . do not open fire on civilians, do not

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15 "Cherkas" quoted in Azov, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya,* 13.
16 "Dushman" quoted in Kravchenko, 21.

throw grenades where you don't need, not to injure civilians. . . . After the battle, we did not feel that it was our city, but after clearing the Grey Zone, we did. We were received well by the civilians, they told us where separatists were hiding. We detained thirty–forty. They were not killed in battle, not wounded, but decided to drop weapons and escape from the crime scene.[17]

This was the end of Mariupol occupation. In the last attempt of resistance, Communist Party members tried to mobilize Mariupoltsy to make a human chain in support of the DNR but only around fifty did.[18] By the end of the day, all buildings were cleared of DNR weapons, documents, and remaining personnel. Mariupol was free. Ironically, the same Pravyi Sektor that so many feared and mobilized against helped liberate them.

To conclude, the liberation of Mariupol reflects the importance of informal mobilization and volunteer support movements in the absence of regular armed forces and security structures. The general lack of manpower was reflected in the need for 150 Azov volunteers to undertake the operation, and its delay. The initial idea to liberate Mariupol was on May 24—the day before the presidential elections. The political context was to show that Mariupol belongs in Ukraine and not DNR, and to send a message to the opolchenie that the Ukrainian government would not give up Ukrainian territory. When I asked Misha why the occupation failed, he added that there was limited support from Donetsk in terms of resources and personnel because of an internal power struggle at that time.

After the liberation, Mariupoltsy rushed to the streets with Ukrainian flags and dressed in traditional Ukrainian vyshyvanka. While for some, Ukrainian symbols reflected their culture and political beliefs, others began to support Ukraine because under the DNR, the overall situation in the city worsened. However, even though thousands sided with the Russian Spring, none of the locals would have predicted that the revolutions could end in war between Ukraine and Russia. Yet, two months after the liberation,

17 Kravchenko, *Vyzvolennya Mariupolya*, 16.
18 Romanenko, *Mariupol: Poslednii Forpost*, 31.

Mariupoltsy would mobilize again, but this time they would be digging trenches to stop the advances of Russian tanks.

Russian Tanks Cross the Ukrainian Border

> Today at 7:00 from the territory of the Russian Federation (village Veselo-Voznesenovka), artillery shelling was carried out against the Novoazovsk checkpoint; and from 10:40, artillery and mortar shelling was carried out against village Novoazovsk.[19]

On August 23, 2014, three rockets were fired from a GRAD multiple-launch rocket system from Russia onto Ukrainian territory. They hit and destroyed a checkpoint of Ukrainian armed forces in Novoazovsk, less than 40 km east of Mariupol.[20] On the following day, the date that marks the independence of Ukraine, Mariupol activists received intelligence that Russians were preparing to invade Ukraine. They feared that if Novoazovsk fell, Mariupol would be next.

On August 24, the Ukrainian fifth special company Donetsk of the battalion Dnepr-1 working alongside the police positioned in the Markino area informed Marichka that Russian machinery was nearing the Ukrainian border. On the next day, Donetsk border guards and volunteer combatants based in the Novoazovsk region confirmed that a division of the Russian armed forces and military machinery crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border.

"An offensive on Novoazovsk and Mariupol was launched," reported Azov commander Ihor Mosyichuk.[21] He claimed that the

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19 Official statement of the Border guard service in "S territorii Rossii obstrelyali iz 'GRADov' blokpost ukrainskich voennykh pod Novoazovskom" [From the Territory of Russia, a Ukrainian Military Checkpoint Near Novoazovsk Was Fired from "Grad"], Podrobnosti, August 24, 2014, https://podrobnosti.ua/990305-s-territorii -rossii-obstreljali-iz-gradov-blokpost-ukrainskih-voennyh-pod-novoazovskom .html.

20 "S territorii Rossii obstrelyali," August 24, 2014.

21 "V Novoazovsk donetskoi oblasti prorvalis 30 rossiiskikh tankov" [30 Russian Tanks Broke into Novoazovsk, Donetsk Region], Podrobnosti, August 24, 2014, https://podrobnosti.ua/990382-v-novoazovsk-donetskoj-oblasti-prorvalis-30-rossijskih-tankov -foto.html.

joint armed forces near Novoazovsk were assaulted by thirty Russian tanks with a paint-over DNR insignia, howitzers, and GRAD systems. This was disproportionate to the military capabilities of the Ukrainians.[22] Faced with such enemy superiority, "there is nothing we could save Mariupol with," Mosyichuk concluded.

When I told this story to combatant Yura who was at one of the Ukrainian border positions, he started laughing. "They told you such fairy-tale? No, they were not chased away by thirty Russian tanks. Not even a half of that. And not chased away. They reported this tale to Mariupol sector HQs and fled their positions."

Nevertheless, the Russians did have superior arms. The enemy was reportedly from Semenovsky battalion, approximately five hundred men strong with twelve tanks, six armored transporters BMP-2, four mortars and Toyota Hilux with mounted 12.7 mm machine guns. These Toyotas were reportedly exclusive to the Russian Special Forces operations unit, and the Russian advance was supported by fire from four self-propelled guns 2S19 and a pair of GRAD systems near the border.[23]

Apart from enemy superiority, the Ukrainian forces lacked coordination and combat readiness. On 25th—the day of the incursion—a National Guard battalion was sent from Kyiv to the east of Mariupol to counter Russian advance. They were armed with brand-new howitzers and transporters. But they never arrived. While the official version is that this convoy made a diversion to assist Ukrainian forces with creating a safe corridor for the encircled soldiers at Ilovaisk, in reality, they got lost. Upon their entry into the city, the commander had to ask locals to provide them with maps.[24]

Further, even though Ukrainian territorial defense formations had mushroomed by August, they were too scarce, too scattered, and lacking in experience. There were also instances of defections

22 "Kolonka novostei," [News column], Priazovskii Rabochii, August 29, 2014, http://pr .ua/news.php?new=34721.

23 Mikhail Zhyrokhov, *Reid na Novoazovsk* [A Raid on Novoazovsk] (Kyiv: Vostochnyi Front, 2020), 4–5.

24 Zhyrokhov, *Reid na Novoazovsk*, 5.

of border guards and abandoning positions by territorial defense volunteers.[25]

Meanwhile, in Mariupol, the Mariupol sector was under the command of General Pavlovsky, who directed all available forces from the sector to engage in the defense of Mariupol. The battalion manning checkpoints in and out of Mariupol was Khortitsa. It was formed already in late April 2014 (a few days before Azov) and conducted operations in the Zaporizhzhya region before it was moved to Mariupol airport in June:

> For five months, the battalion performed the tasks of protecting public order, carrying out service at roadblocks, took up positions to protect the border between the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Ukraine, dug trenches, equipped dugouts and hot combat spots. The battalion served together with units of the National Guard, the Security Service of Ukraine, border guards, and other units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine at nine checkpoints along the perimeter of Mariupol.[26]

However, they were not combat-experienced and did not have heavy weapons:

> [We] had practically not the slightest knowledge about [conducting] defensive operations. Everything was done in a very amateur way: we dug a hole and covered it with slabs. Trench guards did not communicate with one another, and each was manned by three men only.[27]

Unprepared for territorial defense were also Mariupol policemen who lacked firearms,[28] and there was no coordinated line of defense, roadblocks, or enforcements against enemy advances.

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25 Zhyrokhov, *Reid na Novoazovsk, 4.*

26 Zhyrokhov, *Reid na Novoazovsk*, 7.

27 Romanenko, *Mariupol*: *Poslednii Forpost,* 250.

28 "Novoazovsk zakhvachen rossiiskimi voiskami—komandir spetsroty," [Novoazovsk Captured by Russian Troops—Special Company Commander], Pravda, August 28, 2014, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2014/08/28/7035992/.

The regular Ukrainian army also faced challenges. On the 25th, Dnepr-1 together with Donbass battalion engaged in combat with Russian proxies at Markino near Novoazovsk. Claiming to have destroyed six enemy tanks, they left their positions and retreated to the outskirts of Mariupol. Further, by August 27 military personnel of the First Operational Brigade of the National Guard relocated from Kyiv to Mariupol in order to reinforce ranks of territorial defense battalions and border guard service and soldiers in the city. They were equipped with automatic rifles and hand grenade launchers but lacked heavy artillery to repel enemy advances. Russians and the proxies could concentrate forces along the Ukrainian border and dig in while slowly pushing Ukrainian forces from their positions further to the west. Russian ships were reported to have begun moving toward the Sea of Azov from Crimea, enabling Russia to attack from the sea as well as the land.

My respondents believe that given these conditions, Mariupol could have fallen. And had Russia invaded in a decisive and concentrated way, Mariupol would likely have fallen. Mariupol activists expected this scenario and started to mobilize for the popular civic defense of Mariupol. What they did not expect was that hundreds of ordinary people would answer their call and bring shovels to the outskirts of Mariupol to dig trenches against invading Russian troops.

Mariupoltsy Mobilize against the "Russian World"

> We ask everyone who is ready to protect the city to enlist to the army. We need volunteers, we need help of the people. The situation is very serious.

This was a call to arms written by Marichka on her social media on August 24. In Mariupol, everyone agreed that the situation was grave but instead of a mass mobilization to protect the city, people mobilized to panic—buy food and water until supermarket shelves were empty; they bought out bus and train tickets for three days in advance and formed hours-long car queues as they were fleeing the city. Those who had not already left had their suitcases packed in case.[29]

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29 Romanenko, *Mariupol: Poslednii Forpost,* 233.

Mayor Hotlubei tried to contain the panic and chaos by maintaining his governance and all public services running, and he ordered to allocate over nine hundred shelters for people to hide in case of a shelling. The city was quickly covered with signs pointing to the nearest *ubezhishche* (shelter). Akhmetov put factories on high alert with a plan to urgently evacuate.

Within three days a Dnepr-1 commander announced that "the city of Novoazovsk was captured by Russian troops, blocked by tanks. Residents are not allowed to leave it."

Marichka understood the severity of the situation: the fall of Novoazovsk and strengthening DNR positions would mean that Mariupol is the only major city left between Russian proxies and Crimea.

> 27 August is the greatest holiday in Mariupol, dedicated to our patron Saint Mary. We were praying as we thought only a miracle would save us from occupation.

While wishing for a miracle, Marichka acted. Along with other Mariupol activists, she started disseminating information on social media about the necessity for mass mobilization. On August 28, Marichka and other Mariupol activists organized a meeting by the now-fallen Lenin statue on the Freedom Square that they called "Mariupol Against War."[30] The meeting was announced just hours before it took place, yet thousands came out in support. "Uncle Vova, you don't need to save us—we want to live!," was an address to Putin written on a banner held by girls dressed in Ukrainian vyshyvanka. "Putin-out!" and "This is our city, we know how we want to live!," chanted Mariupoltsy.

Those present described this meeting as extraordinary: flying the Ukrainian flag meant not only a protest against Putin but also a demonstration of resolve not to abandon Mariupol. Protesters shared the same wish: for Mariupol to remain free and Ukrainian.

On the one hand, this meeting was the most patriotic and most pro-Ukrainian event since the liberation of Mariupol two months

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30 Evgeny Sosnovsky, "Mariupol against war," YouTube, August 28, 2014, https://www .youtube.com/watch?v=NkXOrYkB4rQ.

before and, on the other, the first anti-Russian and anti-war one. It "awoke Mariupol," Marichka said. Taking turns at the stage to address the crowd, people, even children, expressed how they wished to live in Ukraine. "They can break us as individuals, but together, we are like a fist!," one of them exclaimed, accompanied by the melody of the Ukrainian anthem. One after another, people expressed their readiness to protect the city. The immediate actions involved donating appliances and money to the army and volunteering to cook and deliver food to the roadblocks and checkpoints. Women resorted to forming a human chain on the road leading to Novoazovsk as a symbol of resistance. "Even such an aggressor [as Russia] would not target defenceless people," they said.[31]

In her address, Marichka called for setting up a territorial defense group against "Russian tanks, not to allow [Mariupol] to be captured and destroyed." Her motto was that "a city that protects itself will never be conquered." At the end of the meeting, protesters united in a joint prayer for Mariupol to withstand whatever may come.

> Until August, we thought there was no popular, mass mobilization; it seemed that people only acted individually. Only in August when we organised the patriotic meeting to protect the city, did we come to see and come to know one another, face to face. Only in August we can speak of a true popular mobilization, whereby a great variety of different, and previously divided people, started to communicate with each other and act together. Before this, people were scared because the separatists were very active in the city.

Marichka spoke of the hundreds who answered her mobilization call at the meeting, and the rest who joined the initiative to protect Mariupol: in order to prevent the Russian army from entering the city, locals summoned their spades and gathered at the outskirts of the city to dig trenches together.

Within a week, Russian proxies advanced as close as Shyrokyno, only 5 km east of the eastern part of Mariupol. And then they stopped; despite the superior military capabilities of the Russian

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31 Romanenko, *Mariupol: Poslednii Forpost,* 244.

proxies and due to the fact that the Ukrainian armed forces had already retreated east of Mariupol. Marichka attributes this to the actions of the joint resistance movement, almost as if Saint Mary "sent help from the heavens," rewarding them for protecting Mariupol. Whether Saint Mary had protected Mariupoltsy on this day or not, the grassroots mobilization to save the city reflected the "Mariupol" and "Ukraine" that people mobilized to protect. Apart from shelling nearby villages and eastern parts of Mariupol by DNR in September 2014 and the battle over Shyrokyno in 2015 contained by volunteers and the army, there were no territorial advances of the opolchenie into Mariupol until February 2022.

Chapter 7

THE STOLEN RUSSIAN SPRING

The motivations of my respondents to mobilize on the side of the Maidan and against the Russian Spring had one thing in common: active resistance to Russian influence. To define the nature and extent thereof has been an empirical challenge, even when reduced to the single case of Mariupol. When I asked activists for examples, most of them gave me general descriptions: Russians at protests, Russian *kuratori* (instructors), Russian agents, or Russian propaganda. The most informed about this period in Mariupol out of my respondents was Ivan because it was his job. Apart from consulting Ivan about this topic, I consulted military historians, officers who liberated and cleared areas occupied by the rebels, Ukrainian border guards, and a former Russian FSB agent. Their account helped me create a mosaic and a basic chronology of Russian operations in Mariupol in the context of the Donetsk region.

Then there was another puzzle: How did this influence impact mobilization, and why? How to explain why *babushki* stepped in the way of Ukrainian soldiers with icons in their hands and hatred in their eyes, refusing "to let fascists pass"? How did people choose sides, whom to believe, and whom to blame? Was this all the work of Russian propaganda? I sought the answer in societal trends and stereotypes reflected in my respondents' accounts and actions. The following chapters discuss them.

The supporters of the Russian Spring "had not known they had been playing with fire until this fire spread across the Donbas, and it was too late to diffuse it," said one of my respondents. Local supporters of the movement did not wish for violence, and none of my respondents thought the rebellion could lead to war, but they, actively or passively, facilitated both. People followed those who

promised them a better future, thinking that they had the autonomy to express and address their grievances. It was not obvious to them that the "People's leaders" could be using the situation for personal gains, or that the Russian Spring could be a veil used purposely to destabilize Ukraine. May 9 provides the best example upon which to demonstrate in as much detail as possible the works of Ukrainian and Russian state and non-state actors that influenced the course of the protest period.

I had long conversations with a number of Ukrainian General Majors—commanders on the eastern front—to comprehend the scope of Russian influence within Ukraine. Just like Savinsky and Ivan, they were in consensus that Ukraine has always been riddled with Russian agents due to the lack of effort or low effectiveness of the Ukrainian security structures to reform their ranks. This was particularly the case in Crimea because of the Russian military presence and the south-eastern regions of Ukraine due to proximity to the Russian border. This influence, increased under the presidency of Yanukovych and the reform he passed to counter foreign influence within the SBU structures.[1] The problem was that high counterintelligence priority was given to the United States, not Russia.

In March 2010—with Yanukovych in power—the Ukrainian SBU and Russian FSB signed a deal of cooperation, as a result of which FSB employees resumed their posts as part of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea and Sevastopol. This had been denied in 2009 by the previous government because of subversive activities of the Russian agents. Notably, financing pro-Russian organizations and recruiting Ukrainian citizens into the ranks of their security agencies. As a result,

> Over the years 2010–2013 Russian special agencies FSB and GRU gained a chance to virtually unhindered act against Ukraine, establishing in the south and east powerful agents' networks that were then activated in February–March 2014.

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1 Dmytro Tymchuk, Yurii Karin, Konstantym Mshovets and Vyacheslav Gusarov, *Vtorzhenie v Ukrainu: Khronika rossiiskoi agressii* [Invasion of Ukraine: A Chronicle of Russian Aggression] (Kyiv: Brajt Star Pablishing, 2017), 10–13.

> The network management was carried out by a structural unit of the FSB at the headquarters [of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation] in Sevastopol, and the GRU network—the structural unit of this agency in Rostov-on-Don.[2]

The Maidan and Russian Spring period revealed that the tradition of infiltration of Russian intelligence agents in Ukraine is a legacy of the Soviet Union that had not been overcome. A common tactic after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was for Russian intelligence agents to relocate from Russia to Ukraine, gaining Ukrainian citizenship on the basis of Ukrainian predecessors or through work or marriage. The scope of infiltration ranged from ordinary agents to the top official ranks of Ukrainian politics, law enforcement, and security agencies.

Activities of individuals, groups, and organizations that were either then or later recognized as agents or collaborators with Russian intelligence agencies were coming to light from March 2014 in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the organization of the Russian Spring. According to the SBU, during this month alone as many spies were detained across Ukraine as over the whole period of Ukrainian independence.

Accordingly, during the 2013–2014 period, SBU agents who were either collaborators or former employees of Russian governmental agencies were actively involved not only in gathering intelligence on Maidan protesters and exchanging information with Russian agencies but also in informing, organizing, and equipping diversion-sabotage-reconnaissance groups around the southeast through instructors. From March 2014, FSB and GRU spies and collaborators were giving orders to individuals and groups on the ground—inconspicuously, in the shadow of popular protests supporting the Russian Spring.

This pattern can also be seen in Mariupol, as Ivan details in his writings.[3] To inform the reader about the nature and extent of Russian influence in Mariupol, I will present the actions of a few key individuals on the ground as an example.

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2 Tymchuk et al., *Vtorzhenie v Ukrainu*, 13.
3 Ivan Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni* [Patriots-Prisoners] (Mariupol: KIT, 2018).

According to the SBU, one such individual was Stanislav Shidlovsky—a former Mariupol City Council deputy, the leader of *Russkii Soyuz Donbassa*[4] (Russian Union of Donbas) and since 2006, a Russian agent. This organization was funded by the Russian government and is part of a Ukraine-wide network of civil organizations that organized Russian Spring protests. In Mariupol, this group had up to fifteen members. Its agenda was propaganda of Russian culture, nationalism, and ideas of the "Russian world" concept within the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti. It has been linked with the key Kremlin "*Novorossiya*"[5] (New Russia) ideologue Aleksandr Dugin and Putin's former aide Vladislav Surkov. Shidlovsky was an ideologically motivated FSB recruit since 2006, but his role as a kurator increased in Spring 2014; he was instructed to collect intelligence about the socio-political situation in Mariupol, the activities, positions, and regime of work at the Ukrainian checkpoints, but also the corruptability of Ukrainian officers. This intelligence was fed to two sabotage groups operating in the area. For the support of the Mariupol Russian Spring movement, he received $5000.[6]

Another such organization active from mid-February was Russian organization (and later a volunteer battalion) *Sut' Vremeni* (Essence of Time). Members of this organization advertised in the streets of Mariupol the memory of Soviet struggle and victory over Nazism and economic benefits of Ukrainian accession into the Russian Customs Union. While previously little known in Mariupol, Sut' Vremeni was an umbrella organization of groups in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti active since 2011. In March 2014, the mission was to provide military and informational resistance to the Ukrainian government. This meant humanitarian aid and recruitment of members and volunteers into tactical groups under the same name. Ultimately, the military wing was incorporated into Khodakovsky's Vostok battalion.

Moving from politicians and organizations to Ukrainian military and intelligence servicemen, on June 14, the day after the liberation of Mariupol, a tactical group attacked a minibus transporting

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4 Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni*, 237.
5 See Glossary.
6 Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni*, 230–231.

Donetsk border guards to Mariupol, resulting in six dead and eight injured soldiers. The organizer was a former Lieutenant Colonel of the Donetsk oblast border service Andrei Pankov, who was at the same time the operational instructor of the Russian FSB for the Donetsk oblast. He co-operated with Sergei Papush (call sign Prizrak), who undertook the May 9 attack on the police station together with Nedavny.[7]

Recruits like Nedavny either self-mobilized or were approached and recruited by Russian agents. An example of a recruit is Volodimir Khabarov—Mariupol Russian Spring protest organizer and a former Ilyich factory worker who was among the five men who traveled to Rostov on Don on March 8 to deliver to Putin the plea for help and protection of Mariupol citizens from fascism. Khabarov was recruited upon meeting FSB agents at the Russian border checkpoint.[8]

This was an important method of building a network of informants within the Donbas: experienced people like former officers and servicemen were appointed to senior leading or supervising positions over inexperienced recruits. Through this network, information was passed to commanders either from reconnaissance informants on the ground or from headquarters in Donetsk.

This also included the dissemination of protest propaganda material, such as Russian Federation flags, Soviet flags, or Russian imperial flags. "Did you ever wonder why the flags always look exactly the same? The same make, the same condition, the same size. Compare that with pictures from the Maidan where every flag or poster is different," Mariupol journalist Anna said. It was not unusual for border guards to find propaganda material concealed within other items, like children's toys.[9]

Viktoria recalls another story:

> Buses were called in from Krasnodar and Stavropol Territory. I personally recorded the Essentuki-Chisinau bus, which was completely unloaded in Mariupol during one of the

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7 Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni*, 210.
8 Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni*, 71–72.
9 Bohdan, *Patriotvyazni*, 69.

> pro-Russian rallies. It was these youngsters who profession-
> ally [agitated] the assembled crowd. They were also joined at
> the rallies by representatives from the Crimean Parliament,
> who talked about restoring justice, and campaigned to follow
> [the example of] Crimea to reunite with the fraternal peo-
> ple. For example, [they] brought into Mariupol an incredible
> number of Russian flags. Activists even saw one of them in
> the table of the deputy head of the Mariupol police depart-
> ment [Gorustovych].

Another form of propaganda was the dissemination of specific
information and content: the main outlet for networking and dis-
semination of information in and outside Mariupol was the Russian
social network *VKontakte* and the group *AntiMaidan Mariupol*. An
important role for regional networking played the aforementioned
online radio channel *Zello* used by taxi drivers to pass information
among themselves across the region. Many drivers used it to aid the
opolchenie by monitoring and reporting about the situation in their
respective locations, namely movements of pro-Ukrainian protest-
ers and movements and positions of the army and law-enforcement
agencies. "Knowingly, or unknowingly, taxi drivers were also aiding
eavesdropping Russian secret services," concludes Ivan.

  The basic scheme of the operation of the Russian special services
during the protest period can be described as follows:

  1. Mobilization of local agents already present in the city
  2. Recruitment of new local collaborators and informants (civil-
     ians and law and security enforcement officers)
  3. Organizing resistance and sabotage groups and establishing
     networks across the region
  4. Planning operations, giving orders and instructions, and pro-
     viding logistical, financial, and material aid

Between December 2013 and February 2014, the purpose of Russian
agencies was to determine the potential and readiness of people to
mobilize and availability of firearms held by the locals. An infor-
mation campaign was launched to spread narratives of uncon-
trolled Kyiv Maidan violence, lack of governance and security, and

opposition to the new Ukrainian government in order to increase popular support for the Antimaidan.

From March, the role shifted to assuring the public of the viability of the Russian Spring, emphasizing political will and material aid to support the self-defense groups forming to protect the Russian speakers. In the third stage, agents began to exert pressure: usually accompanied with local protest leaders, they visited local official administrative leaders and disrupted administrative sessions or demanded that law enforcement and security officials surrender or defect on the side of "the People." When the opolchenie acquired weapons and the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics were proclaimed in April, agents and leaders called by regional towns and city administrations, forcing the heads to sign a declaration of loyalty and the new D/LNR constitution.

Ivan documented how this process was implemented in Mariupol. What can be called the first stage of establishing mobilizing potential of locals represented a scoping visit organized by the future DNR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko. He set up a meeting with locals at one of Mariupol restaurants to establish popular grievances and the number of firearms at the disposal of locals. The meeting took place only a few days after the fall of Yanukovych.

The second stage started on March 1 when the leader of *Obedinenie Veteranov Razvedky Ukrainy* (Unification of Ukrainian Intelligence Veterans) Oleg Butskoi called on the City Council to demand that the Ukrainian Parliament decentralize Ukraine, disarm illegal armed formations, and recognize Yanukovych as the only legitimate president of Ukraine. Butskoi was a popular and frequent Mariupol Russian Spring protest speaker but allegedly also an agent of GRU, whose activities from April included coordinating recruits and support from Russia to aid Girkin's occupation of Sloviansk.

The third stage is already known to the reader: DNR representatives first called on the City Council to acquire formal control, and then Savinsky to neutralize armed opposition, and acquire weapons—if not peacefully, by force.

Using the example of agent Butskoi, integrating oneself among locals was crucial for having the capacity to mobilize them. Ivan described Butskoi as appearing "similarly minded": going to protests

and publicly sharing the grievances of ordinary protest-goers. Among Mariupoltsy he was regarded as "one of them." This was meant to give the impression that the contention in Ukraine was a purely Ukrainian civil affair. While some actors used separatist sentiments in the region only as a screen to cover their true intentions, the underlying, essential factor for the success of Russian special agents pursuing operations on the ground, particularly recruitment into self-defense ranks and DNR organizations, was the compliance of locals that were attracted to the narratives and actions of Russian Spring leaders.

When I asked Ivan to estimate how many of his colleagues were saboteurs or Russian spies, he said that up to 70 percent were either ideologically supportive of the rebellion, or actively collaborated with Russian intelligence agencies. This was a major obstacle from security point of view because SBU intelligence gathering operations were strained, and compromised through leaks. Another common practice was destroying evidence gathered during reconnaissance missions that would incriminate collaborators. It was very difficult to comprehend the scope of collaboration and organization in situ. As Ivan said, "a good agent, after all, is one who never gets found out."

Mariupolska Druzhyna also received information about the corruption within law and security agencies with the objective to undermine Kyiv's rule in the city:

> There is information that all chiefs of the Internal Affairs Directorate and the SBU received large fees for the demoralisation of their employees. . . . It is known for certain that at the end of February, the mayor of Mariupol was visited by the leader of the Party of Regions in Mariupol Pyotr Ivanov, accompanied by a small grey-haired man who introduced himself to the mayor as a General of the Russian FSB.
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> During this conversation, the mayor was asked to remain calm, and not take active steps to prevent riots and seizures of administrative buildings. "Everything will pass quietly and peacefully, like in Crimea, and the city of Mariupol will smoothly become part of the Russian Federation," said

the FSB representative. Perhaps, the head of the Mariupol SBU, just like the chief of police, accepted money from these structures: in March 2014 when they met with patriotic [pro-Ukrainian] activists, [the SBU chief] started to threaten them and demand they stop provoking the pro-Russian population by pro-Ukrainian rallies and flash mobs in the city. His reasoning was based on the assertion that everything will soon calm down and nothing threatens the statehood of Ukraine.

The remaining 30 percent of agents who remained loyal to Ukraine tried to infiltrate the opolchenie network, including Mangust's terrorist group responsible for the May 9 attack. There were obstacles to gathering intelligence: because of not only sabotage, inability to trust colleagues, and related lack of resources but also the wide-ranging network of collaborators from the ranks of locals that the rebels managed to establish between March and June 2014. Further, operations that were launched as part of ATO resulted in retaliatory tactical operations, more instances of urban warfare, attacks on civilians, and propaganda to attribute blame to Ukraine, to alienate the locals.

But why was the propaganda so powerful and effective? The following chapter will discuss how media was used to promote narratives that were commonly used to mobilize people to join protests in Mariupol and the wider Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti, focusing on ownership of media platforms. This is important because people were used to consuming narratives from the TV channels and newspapers they trusted, which enabled elites to present contextually sound and credible frames. They resonated with the locals because the key narratives had been established long before 2014, even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Chapter 8

NARRATIVES AND MOBILIZATION

The most powerful narratives utilized in this period were connected with promoting a referendum on federalization or decentralization of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti; associating Ukraine with fascism and "Banderovtsy" and marginalization of the Russian language; and promoting the cultural, political, and historical role of Russia.

The narratives of regional rule and federalization of Ukraine were employed by various civil and political groups from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti from 1989, by the KPU. The national deputies launched political campaigns to denounce "anti-socialist and nationalist forces" in the Donbas,[1] as a reaction to the establishment of the 1989 pro-Ukrainian national civil-political movement "People's *Rukh*" (Movement). The proponents of Rukh were mostly Ukrainian deputies who mobilized for a greater recognition of Ukrainian cultural distinctiveness, greater economic sovereignty, and national and minority freedoms under the Communist rule, according to Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost'* and *Perestroika*.[2] Though their popular support in eastern Ukraine was marginal, the KPU perceived the movement as Ukrainian separatism from the USSR. This led opponents of Rukh to establish their own "people's movements" for "Donbas autonomy" and "Donetsk federative land," and against "Ukrainian separatism-nationalism."

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1 Yurii R. Fedorovsky, "Donbass v Epokhu Perestroiky' in Kolektiv, Zhurnal Istoricheskikh, Politologicheskikh I Mezhdunarodnykh Issledovanii" [Donbass in the Era of Perestroika' in Collective, Journal of Historical, Political and International Studies], 68:1 (2019), Donetskii Natsionalnyi Universitet, Istoricheskii Fakultet, Donetsk, 149.

2 Vladimir Paniotto, "The Ukrainian Movement for Perestroika. 'Rukh': A Sociological Survey," *Soviet Studies* 43:1 (1991), 177.

They revived the idea of establishing in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti an autonomous entity modeled on the Donetsk-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic that existed briefly in 1918.[3] This republic was self-proclaimed in Kharkiv by the Soviet of Deputies as a resistance movement to the proclamation of independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) from the Central Soviet Government of the Russian Soviet Republic, following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. The Donetsk-Krivoi Rog encompassed not only the Donbas but also Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv oblasti of southeastern Ukraine.[4]

The most prominent in public dissemination of the narratives of Donbas regionalism in the Donetsk *oblast* was the *Interdvizhenie Donbassa* (International Movement of the Donbas) and *Narodnye Dvizhenie Luganshchiny* (National Movement of Luhansk oblast) in Luhansk. Upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union, members of the International Movement of Donbas published a plea in the Luhansk newspaper *Molodogvardeets* (Young Guard) to all deputies to form the "Republic of Little Russia" consisting of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasti, autonomous within Ukraine. Should Ukraine secede from the Soviet Union and fail to grant this status to the Donbas, "then we can only talk about the transition to jurisdiction of the [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Repulic]."[5] The logic was that within an independent Ukraine, the Donbas could check the "ambitions of officials in Kiev," prevent the "threat of a collapsing economy," and "discord among Ukrainian and Russian nations," thereby preventing a "civil war" if Ukrainian "nationalists revive Bandera."

However, more than the abstract threat of Ukrainian nationalism, the narratives of regional autonomy resonated for different reasons. Donbas workers feared deterioration of their everyday living conditions, should the Donbas with its industry and wealth fail to become self-sufficient or independent from the central authority of

3 Vladimir Kornilov, *Donetsko-Krivorozhskaya Respublika: Rasstrelyannaya Mechta* [Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic: A Shot Dream] (Sankt Petersburg: Piter, 2017), 7.

4 Denys Kazansky and Maryna Vorotyntseva, *Yak Ukraina Vtrachala Donbas* [How Ukraine Lost Donbas] (Kyiv: Chorna Gora, 2020), 152.

5 Valery Cheker in Fedorovsky, "Donbass v Epokhu Perestroiky," 145.

Moscow.[6] This resonated with the majority of the Donbas because with its richness in natural resources and industrial production, the region would be economically independent, and the riches would be spent locally.[7]

Donbas refused to feed Moscow, but it was not ready to feed Kyiv, either. As part of the post-independence restructuring (i.e., liberalization) of the coal industry, subsidies were cut, and mines had to fend for themselves.[8] However, unable to compete on the free market, mines were forced to close down. Consequently, wages fell, unemployment rose, and with it fears of wide-ranging poverty and feeling of exploitation by the state because "the most industrialised region of Ukraine is not getting its fair share of resources."[9] For the Donbas, the impact of reforms was not only physical but also psychological: people were forced "to adapt to new ideas, concepts, institutional structures while at the same time accepting total destruction of values established within the previous regime."[10] The combination of realities and grievances resulted in strikes of miners in 1993–1994, but resistance to the government in Kyiv spread across both intelligentsia and the working class: this was reflected in the decision of the International Movement to organize a referendum on popular preferences on federalization of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti, official status of the Russian language, and preferences toward joining the Commonwealth of Independent States. This referendum took place on March 17, 1994, was attended by 72 and 75 percent of the electorate in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti, respectively, and supported by over 80 percent of the voters.

The federalists argued that federalization would allow regional structures to reform the economy more effectively on the local level, and thus prevent the economic grievances and growing anti-Kyiv

6 Stanley Crowley, "Between Class and Nation: Worker Politics in the New Ukraine," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 28:1 (1995), 43–46.

7 Sergei Sakadynsky, *Luganskyi Razlom* [Luhansk Divide] (Moscow: LitRes, 2016), 21.

8 Vlad Mykhnenko, "Causes and Consequences of the War in Eastern Ukraine: An Economic Geography Perspective," *Europe-Asia Studies* 72:3 (2020), 528–560.

9 Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989–1992* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 71.

10 Victoria Yegorova, "The Influence of Local Authorities and the Public on Energy Policy in Ukraine," *Contributions in Political Science* 357 (1996), 1.

regionalism.[11] For the then president Kuchma, Ukraine was a unitary state, and despite the fact that both oblasti voted overwhelmingly in favor of the referendum, the results were not reflected in the 1996 Ukrainian constitution. However, the 1994 parliamentary and presidential elections that saw the victory of President Kuchma reflected already existing regional polarizations between the center-west and the east of Ukraine. The most visible divide was over Ukrainian language policy and attitudes toward "the [Commonwealth of Independent States], Russia, and the Russian language."[12] This divide was not based on an ethnic divide between Ukrainians and Russians but an economic one. Nevertheless, regional differences and disconnects between the industrial southeast and the center-west sparked warnings about "the potential for future internal unrest, and calls for federalisation of Ukraine entered the discourse . . . because if not now, then twenty years later we will face the issue of rejection of the inhabitants of one region by the inhabitants of another region. Sooner or later, Galicia and Donbass will clash."[13]

Before they "clashed" in 2014, the grievances and demands were most readily voiced in 2004 in the context of the Orange revolution. Political elites from the KPU and Party of Regions (PoR) called for federalization of Ukraine with Yanukovych in power and worked to discredit Yushchenko as the legitimate president of Ukraine. This was pronounced not only at the all-Ukrainian PoR Congress in Sievierodonetsk discussed previously but also in the public space. While the formation of the proposed South-Eastern Ukrainian Republic did not materialize because Yushchenko and the PoR resolved the issue politically, the response of politicians and businessmen to the Orange revolution bears all characteristics and tactics of the Maidan protest period both in the political and civil sense: political rallies were organized and sponsored by political parties; media propaganda used "visual crowding" to create

11 Marc Nordberg, "Domestic Factors Influencing Ukrainian Foreign Policy," *European Security* 7:3 (1998), 63–91.

12 Andrew Wilson and Valery Khmelko, "Regionalism and Ethnic and Linguistic Cleavages in Ukraine," in *Contemporary Ukraine*: *Dynamics of Post-soviet Transformation*, ed. Taras Kuzio (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 69.

13 Chernovil in Sakadynsky, *Luganskii Razlon,* 21.

mass effect; titushki-like paid protesters were driven in from within the region; campaign tent cities were being built. The same tactics were repeated in 2013 over the issue of the Association Agreement and free trade with the EU, as were the same narratives: before the call for independence of the region, the rebels demanded that the Council call for an all-Ukrainian referendum to enter the Customs Union.[14]

The narratives of federalism had both popular resonance founded on social and economic grievances and mobilizing potential for elites to exploit for electoral and business purposes. The same resonance and use applied to the second most prominent narrative of the 2013–2014 movements period: the myth of Ukrainian "fascists."

The Myth of *Banderovtsy* and the Great Victory

This narrative is a by-product of the "cult" of the so-called Great Patriotic War (GPW) created during the Stalin era: it established the "heroes," the "villains," and celebrated the might of the Soviet military machine.[15] Historically, the focus in the Donbas was on localized forms of resistance of individual towns and cities, reflected not only in their names with Soviet connotations but also in naming streets after Soviet heroes, buildings after Soviet movements, war memorials to victims of wars, and holidays. Traditionally, every year on April 11 and on a mass scale on May 9, citizens, veterans, anti-fascist organizations, and political elites in the Donbas gathered to commemorate victims of Nazism and Soviet victory.

However, the popularity and emotional resonance of the "heroes" and "villains" dichotomy has also made the narratives, historical myths, and collective memory susceptible to politicization.

Marichka assigned politicizing anti-fascist narratives in an effort to alienate Ukrainian nation-state to the PoR. Namely the 2004 Presidential campaign of Yanukovych against Yushchenko and the subsequent Orange revolution that rose in opposition to Yanukovych's fraudulent victory. During this political struggle, "the

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14 Kazansky and Vorotyntseva, *Yak Ukraina Vtrachala Donbas*, 159.
15 Misha Gabowitsch, "Victory Day: A Biography of a Soviet Holiday," *Eurozine*, May 8, 2020, https://www.eurozine.com/victory-day-the-biography-of-a-sovietholiday/.

markers of [Ukrainian] nationalism were first formed into a political technological scheme, a chain of associations linking a political opponent with a specific region, and at the same time images unacceptable for Donbas."[16] Yanukovych represented the Donbas while Yushchenko the western regions of Ukraine linked with the "unacceptable" Ukrainian nationalism. To discredit the Orange revolution, the PoR even produced a video that interpreted it and its supporters as a nationalist "disease."

What reinforced the narratives was that, once in power, Yushchenko embarked on nation-building from above, part of which was the rehabilitation of some leaders of wartime Ukrainian Independence movements OUN-UPA as liberators and, ultimately, recognizing Stepan Bandera as a "Hero of Ukraine." These were the same historical figures that locals had been taught were the enemies of the Donbas.

As a response, as Yushchenko opened the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance in 2005, Luhansk KPU erected a cross as a symbol of resistance against Ukrainian nationalists, aspiring to erect one at each entrance to the city; in 2007, the future Luhansk Antimaidan leader Klinchaev inspired by the Kyiv museum of Soviet occupation of Ukraine, organized a protest exhibition *Muzei zhertv oranzhevoi revolutsii* (Museum of the victims of the Orange revolution) of over 2500 exhibits depicting Yushchenko and Tymoshenko as nationalists and enemies. Their victims were "the Russian language [and] eastern Ukraine which they wanted to wire up and destroy." Part of the exhibition was also money collecting to build a memorial to commemorate Luhansk victims of OUN-UPA war crimes. While this attempt did not materialize at the time, it did in 2010. It was funded by the then-parliamentary deputy from PoR Aleksandr Yefremov and other local politicians, and its unveiling

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16 Sergei Pakhomenko and Mariya Podybailo, "Ukrainskii natsionalizm" vz "donbaskii patriotizm": Protivostoyanie media obrazov v sovremennom informatsionnom prostranstve Donetskoi oblasti," [Ukrainian Nationalism "v" Donbass patriotism: The Opposition of Media Images in the Modern Information Space of the Donetsk Region], *Historians,* April 30, 2013, http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/ istoriya-i-pamyat-vazhki-pitannya/681-serhii-pakhomenko-mariia-podybailo-iden-tychnisni-dyskursy-iak-suspilno-politychna-tekhnolohiia-ukrainskyi-natsionalizm -i-rehionalnyi-patriotyzm-v-donetskykh-media.

was attended by a Russian parliament deputy Konstantin Zatulin. The monument was named "Victims of Bandera" and depicted the names of twelve Luhansk citizens. No more local victims of Nazism were to be found. Additionally, Bandera had never set foot in the Donbas.

These narratives and sentiments were summed up in 2010 in a drafted university textbook, *Essays of the History of Ukraine*, a co-project of the Ukrainian National Academy for Education and Sciences and Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States and endorsed by the then-Minister of Education and Sciences Dmitry Tabachnik. The book was written as a response to the "Orange government's nationalising policies" to "mark the transition from a period of politicisation and constant rewriting of history for the sake of the authorities, to a period of objective comprehension of the past." Educating the youth and society would "transform our people from a whipping boy into a full-fledged subject of the socio-historical process, and form a sense of state identity in our citizens." The overarching theme is the history of unity among Ukrainian and Russian "fraternal people" that Ukrainians formed within the territory of a mythical *Novorossiya* (New Russia) or *Malorossiya* (Little Russia). We see this employed again in 2013–2014.

These examples are replicable to the wider region, as the ruling parties and their grasp of the society were the same. The same were also the narratives and Soviet traditions—both in their substance and their politicization.

People were taught certain interpretations of history and were subjected to political culture that, in essence, had not differed from the Soviet times, whether promoted by the Communist Party or the PoR. This is because they were founded on resistance to the influence of Kyiv over the established political and economic control of the Donbas and on maintaining close cooperation and business ties with Russia. If we compared the popular grievances and values of Donbas miners who resorted to calls for greater autonomy and federalism in the 1990s with the protesters in 2014, we would find similarities in narratives emphasizing the importance of enterprises oriented toward Russia and/or economic independence regionally,

autonomy from Kyiv governance, emphasis on economic considerations over ethnic or national issues, and the status for the Russian language.

The importance of the reaction of the PoR to the Orange revolution lies in the fact that the "cult of Bandera" was established, disseminated, and fostered as an embodiment of political enemy, ready to be used when needed. Politicians may have utilized narratives for political reasons, but their success was determined by factors that run deeper. There are a number of reasons for this: consistency in framing, dissemination in media, and, as the last section of the chapter will discuss, regionalism with its embedded stereotypes that have shaped the local milieu.

Monopolization of the Information Space

The consistency in the meaning and use of narratives has also been reflected in the information space: in framing narratives consistent with the preferences of the oligarchs or their associated political parties. The media sphere in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti was de facto monopolized by the PoR and KPU members or their associates.

The difference between the 1990s and 2000s was one of scope: regional political and business elites tightened their control over the political and social life in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions during the 2000s, which was reflected in media ownership and dissemination of information by the media controlled by elites. The result was an information vacuum and political favoritism that obstructed the pluralism of narratives and independent (critical) reporting.[17] The primary targets of the information were local residents. They were presented with the narratives in established media they regarded as "respectable," which gave the information perceived credibility.[18]

In Mariupol, the mass media space was from the 1990s controlled by the KPU oligarch Vladimir Boyko and since 2010 by PoR

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17 Natalya Ryabinska, "The Media Market and Media Ownership in Post-Communist Ukraine Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58:6 (2011), 3–20.

18 Pakhomenko and Podybaylo, "Ukrainskii natsionalizm."

de facto leader Rinat Akhmetov. Akhmetov owns the most widely read newspapers *Priazovskii Rabochii* (Pryazovie Worker) followed by *Ilyichevets* (Ilyich factory worker). Apart from newspapers, Akhmetov's Media Group Ukraine owns a cluster of TV channels including the Mariupol online news and information platform mariupolnews.com.ua.

These outlets were also the prime sources of narratives aimed to demonize the Maidan and agitate mobilization opposed to it. Perceived favorably was the formation of self-defense groups supportive of the Russian Spring prior to the proclamation of D/LNR in April 2014. This was consistent with the narratives presented by Russian TV channels.

> Our "independent" TV channels broadcast Russian TV during breaks. Not a word about our anti-Yanukovych actions, not a word about their terrorist attacks. And everyone's favourite newspaper Priazovskii Rabochii just insulted us.

Marichka also added that the Akhmetov-controlled media in Mariupol took a pro-Yanukovych stance and focused on emphasizing Maidan violence while encouraging "non-violent protesting," "preservation of order," and "cooperation with the law enforcement bodies." After Yanukovych fled on February 21, pacifying narratives appeared, focused on keeping Ukraine territorially united. This set a trend that continued with the rise of the rebellion. The difference between Mariupol and occupied territories was that the Mariupol occupation lasted only one month and after its liberation, media outlets tactically switched narratives to official governmental narratives in line with the newly elected President Poroshenko.

Studying Priazovskii Rabochii from November 2013 to September 2014, this shift in political narratives and focus from Kyiv violence to pacifism, to support for the unity of Ukraine was striking. Another novelty was the introduction of reports in the Ukrainian language and the front page depicting the heading in Ukrainian colors from summer 2014. The context was the development of the war. "Of course, Akhmetov and the rest had to switch their position, otherwise they would have politically discredited themselves," Anna explains.

Monopolization of the information space was key for influencing locals across the Donbas. For illustration, in occupied Luhansk,

> After the takeover of the administration buildings, the first thing separatists did was to damage the signal tower to block Ukrainian channels. And they started their own TV-campaign from the regional administration building.[19]

As a rule, all main media outlets in the region that supported and agitated mobilization against the Maidan by producing, promoting, and distributing opposition propaganda material continued their support with D/LNR in power. Also, all those who were perceived as pro-Ukrainian were raided or closed down under threat.[20] The situation did not get this serious in Mariupol, unlike in fully occupied cities.

Media representatives in D/LNR were given a choice either to comply with "what we will give you to publish," or the media would be closed down. Media had to comply with a weekly "media plan" designed and followed by a team of selected propagandists[21] (local historians and sociologists, journalists, writers, representatives of civic organizations, or military commanders), and released in the press and local TV channels to appeal to the target audience with selected topics that would resonate with them the most, such as prosperity of the Republic, prospect of inflow of investors, restoring wages, resuming education, protecting children, reporting a positive mood among the population, and a "gradual integration of the Donbas into the Russian Federation." Violence perpetrated by Ukrainian "terrorists" and decreasing living standards in Ukraine

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19 Respondent Ekaterina, former employee of the Luhansk regional administration.

20 An overview of LNR reporting and video footage of developments from March 2014, see: "LNR-TV: Chto pokazyvayut holubye ekrany 'respublyky'" [LNR-TV: What Do the Blue Screens of the "Republic" Show?], Informator, August 17, 2014, https://informator.media/archives/171483.

21 Andrei Dykhtyarenko, "Zavtrashnye novosti 'LNR'" [Tomorrow's News of LNR], Realnaya Gazeta, October 12, 2015, https://realgazeta.com.ua/temniki-lnr/?fbclid=IwAR2PARCY6ZjOfmrUBQ6Gb5clmH5rtupKWgp1fLlD68vE-9OonnBLRV92QpI.

were to be reported daily.[22] The Republics promoted traditional Soviet holidays such as celebrating the Miners' Day, the Stakhanov movement, Veterans Day, and the GPW, while the local channels started nationalistic content production. An example of attempted nation-building from above is producing a documentary series about local veterans of the GPW (allegedly narrated by their grandchildren) or mobilizing children into the "youth army."

This brings to light the link between ownership and use of mass media and their influence on developments of events on the ground: the same narratives and the main persons who disseminated them also organized, supported, propagated, or financed the Antimaidan, Russian Spring, and the rebellion. The leader of the aforementioned International Movement Vladimir Kornilov, who, in 1994, co-organized the referendum of independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti based on the principles of administrative and territorial autonomy of the Donetsk-Krivoi Rog basin, incorporated these narratives into the local education system of the LNR two decades later.[23] The 1994 referendum was regarded by D/LNR leaders as the birth of Donbas separatism legitimizing the May 11, 2014, referendum of independence.

Thus, while the basis of narratives remained the same, in the protest and post-Maidan period the use of information changed: not only were information and disinformation used for the purposes of asserting control over civilian population and mobilization, but also narratives, footage, and documents were used in a manner that would leave the population supportive of this control. The myths of federalization and anti-fascist narratives that have been framed as a "true history" have been used by the D/LNR as the basis of the struggle for independence and justification of existence of the

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22 Document accessible in Andrei Dykhtyarenko, "Zavtrashnye novosti 'LNR'" [Tomorrow's News of LNR], Realnaya Gazeta, October 12, 2015, https://realgazeta.com.ua/temniki-lnr/?fbclid=IwAR2PARCY6ZjOfmrUBQ6Gb5clmH5rtupKWgp1fLlD68vE-9OonnBLRV92QpI;and an example of practical use: "LNR prodolzhaet rabotat po temnikam" ["LNR" Continues to Work in the Dark], Realnaya Gazeta, October 13, 2015, http://realgazeta.com.ua/lnr-prodoljaet-rabotat-po-temnikam/.

23 Kornilov, *Donetsko-Krivorozhskaya Respublika: Rasstrelyannaya Mechta.*

republics and utilized as a basis for collective memory formation.[24] Kuzio calls such deliberate use of narratives "social engineering" of structuring beliefs and myths as forms of identity.[25]

This social engineering was not only conducted from within the Donetsk and Luhansk regions but also aided by Russia—covertly, through Russian TV channels that most of the population watched and by producing programs and financing media that promoted the Russian Spring and the rebellion.

In August 2014, the Ukrainian government blocked access to fourteen Russian TV channels and all Russian internet portals on the territory of Ukraine due to their production and dissemination of propaganda material and disinformation within Ukraine. However, up until this month, Russian government-owned channels were consulted daily as a source of information and entertainment in Ukrainian households.[26] The most popular Russian TV channels nationwide were the *Pervyi Kanal* (First Channel) along with *Rossiya-24*, Russian online newspaper platforms *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Regnum*, and *TV Zvezda* The most widely used media for dissemination of information and social networking in the Donbas were Russian platforms *VKontakte* and *Odnoklassniki*. According to my respondents, people were used to official Russian and pro-Russian narratives and trusted the information they were presented with. Also, all these platforms were used by Russian state and non-state actors for the purpose of popular mobilization and recruitment.

Russian narratives were used in the information sphere for the purpose of "image building."[27] The most frequent were "pro-Kremlin"

24 Kolektiv, *Aktualnye Problemy Informatsionnogo Protivoborstva v Sovremennom Mire: Vyzovy I Ugrozy dlya Rossii I Russkogo Mira [*Actual Problems of Information Warfare in the Modern World: Challenges and Threats for Russia and the Russian World] (Donetsk: Izdatelstvo Donetskogo Narodnogo Universiteta, 2019).

    Kolektiv, *Zhurnal Istoricheskikh, Politologicheskikh I Mezhdunarodnykh Issledovanii* [Journal of Historical, Political and International Studies], Donetskii Natsionalnyi Universitet, Istoricheskii Fakultet, Donetsk, 68:1 (2019).

25 Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: State and Nation Building* (London: Routledge, 2016), 204.

26 Joanna Szostek, "Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of Soft Power?," *East European Politics & Societies* 28:3 (2014), 463–486.

27 Goran Bolin, Paul Jordan and Per Stahlberg, *From Nation Branding to Information Warfare, Media and the Ukraine Crisis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

and "anti-Maidan" narratives aimed at inciting mobilization, discrediting Ukrainian narratives and using instances of violence against Ukrainian protesters and fighters.[28] Research suggests that "social media can also give ordinary citizens the power to generate false and inaccurate information. Such social media campaigns can be co-opted and redistributed via mass media channels to amplify their effect."[29] Given the popular use of narratives at protests, targeted Russian framing worked.

Investigative journalist Sasha sent me a Russian internet manual on how to disseminate specific narratives that Russian propagandists used on social networks, discussion forums, news-related internet portals, and video channels. This manual showed a simple but a well thought-out and coordinated system of frames through which a network of individuals was instructed on what information to share and what data (links to pages or references to documents) to disseminate to increase the credibility of the frame. Narratives were organized into categories according to particular topics, and hundreds of links to written material and video footage were provided to be readily available for the user. Users were specifically instructed to familiarize themselves with the layout and content of sections, add bookmarks to navigate for quick search and prompt use, and to incorporate other relevant links to expand the source database in response to real-time developments in the Donbas. In March/April 2014, this manual consisted of forty pages.

The emphasis in this document was on narratives about linking Ukrainian history and violence: the Ukrainian "fabrication" of casualties suffering during the *Holodomor* (Famine) imposed by Stalin; Maidan protest violence; ATO targeting Russian speakers and Ukrainian warfare leading to civilian casualties; and Ukrainian nationalism financed by foreign powers (USA, EU, the "West"). The general instruction was to highlight Ukrainian crimes and write in a charged language to spark emotional emotions, such as "Torture at the Maidan," "Ethnic cleansing in Kiev," or "NATO

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28 Jesse Driskoll and Zachary C. Steinert-Threlkeld, "Social Media and Russian Territorial Irredentism: Some Facts and a Conjecture," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36:2 (2020), 101–121.

29 Ulises A. Mejias and Nikolai E. Vokuev, "Disinformation and the Media: The Case of Russia and Ukraine," *Media, Culture & Society* 39:7 (2017), 1028.

equipping Ukraine with biological weapons." There was no direct and overt propaganda of "Russia" and "Russians"; the information was aimed at promoting the "civil liberation movement of the Donbass." Ukraine, Ukrainians, and pro-Ukrainians were collectively denounced and alienated, labeled "Nazis," "collaborators," and Ukrainian narratives were "lies." "Russia" was associated with Soviet Victory heroism, as a civilizational patron of the Russian diaspora, and the territories of southeastern Ukraine perceived as historically "Russian."

While the purpose of this database was mobilization of supporters of the opolchenie and extending its support network, the propagandists were also instructed on tactics: to use Ukrainian flags instead of Russian during takeovers of buildings to demonstrate that protesters were local Ukrainians or to disseminate a large number of entries to make it look like anti-Ukrainian narratives reflected the majority opinion. A related section on "Strategies and methods of Nazis holding territory" corresponds with the narratives that were spread during protests to mobilize people by inciting fear, such as "Nazi" takeover of buildings and seizing weapons or copying the tactics of Maidan protesters occupying governmental buildings in central and western Ukraine. This was to lead to the main goal of the "Nazi takeover": to legalize their power through the presidential elections on May 25. All these tactics were visibly employed on the ground.

Sasha found out that among the administrators of this platform were analysts from a Russian news agency REX led by historian Modest Kolerov—a Russian citizen from Vladimir Surkov's circle. The identified coordinators of propaganda in the D/LNR were Russian citizens Maxim Polyakov and program producer Vyacheslav Matveyev. Matveyev promoted anti-Ukrainian narratives since 2003, and he was the producer of the aforementioned Orange revolution propaganda video that interpreted the supporters as "diseased." He also communicated with Crimean information agencies assisting the Russian information campaign leading up to, and during, the annexation of Crimea. From March 2014, the same group relocated to Luhansk and the Luhansk oblast where they continued their propaganda as a network named Lugan-Center. This Centre established links with local media platforms, social media,

and local online platforms, and the most popular Luhansk newspaper XXI Vek. Its editor-in-chief Yurii Yurov became a deputy in the LNR People's Council, and the former news editor at the Lugansk Regional TV Sergei Kolesnikov "became one of the leaders of the Kremlin propaganda in the occupied territory" who actively cooperated with Russian intelligence agencies, Sasha adds. The Lugan Center later extended its activities to coordinating Russian aid and equipment for volunteer combatants, and coordination between local territorial defense battalions and the FSB.

Similarly, Russian journalists were reported as present at all key developments in Mariupol: the attack on the Military Unit on April 16 was reported as "Mariupol mothers were begging fascist soldiers to let them come home but were instead shot and killed." The May 9 terrorist operation was reported as an attack by Pravyi Sektor on innocent war commemorators, and the August self-defense of Mariupol as a "Banderite takeover." This played on the established memory of the Soviet Victory or Ukrainian fascism.[30]

There is more nuance to Russian influence. Prior to 2014, the most popular among Ukrainian TV viewers were not political programs but Russian TV entertainment, namely soap operas, comedies, melodramas, crime, and documentary series.[31] Sasha remembered how his friends used to exchange illegally burnt DVDs with the latest Russian series and films; how the most popular books in the Donbas were Russian detective stories, or how heroic Russian documentaries about the Soviet Victory over Nazism were. However, through these sources, people also "consumed" Russian stereotypes: Ukrainian figures were portrayed as narrow-minded, sly, crafty, or subordinate in their qualities to the Russians.

Without realizing it, social, historical, and cultural narratives became part of the social identity of eastern Ukrainians. During Soviet times and before 2014 when the Moscow time setting

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30 Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek, "Dominant Narratives in Russian Politics and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis," in *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, ed. Anna Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa (E-International Relations Publishings, 2016), https://www.e-ir .info/?s=Ukraine+and+Russia%3A+People%2C+Politics%2C+Propaganda+and +Perspectives, 173–185.

31 Szostek, "Russia and the News Media."

changed, Donbas people used to have a tradition to celebrate the New Year twice—the first time being at 23:00, which is midnight in Moscow. They sat in front of the TV and watched the Russian New Year show. When Putin made his annual speech, they corked champagne, "and with his last words clinked glasses to the chimes—'with new happiness!.'"

In 2013 and 2014, clinking glasses was replaced by flying Soviet and Russian flags, putting on St George's ribbons, or holding Orthodox icons for protection. Politics was discussed in churches, in pubs, during rallies, in locals' kitchens, or on benches by panel houses. This is how rumors spread and narratives strengthened: these were the everyday realities and everyday experiences that reflect the resonance of narratives.[32]

But the fact that the narratives rang true also reveals important pre-existing societal patterns.[33] When I spoke with soldiers, both Ukrainian and foreign, who fought in the Donbas in the early stages of the war, they told me the same story: how vividly they remembered the hatred in the eyes of locals when they saw them approach contested areas. Ordinary *babushki* did not need *VKontakte* social network to believe that Ukrainian soldiers came to the Donbas to kill them, or Russian propagandists to persuade them to block roads with icons in their hands.

The importance of culture and history comes to the fore with its diverging myths and narratives that shape and are shaped by histories and memories. This occurs through institutionalizing of personalities, historical figures, events, or holidays.[34] These factors together then create the local contexts that form the basis for "social identity and social cognition for emotions and motivation . . . employed in the context of social movement participation."[35]

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32 Snow and Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant," 208.

33 Jacquelien Van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans, "The Social Psychology of Protest," *Current Sociology* 61:5–6 (2013).

34 Victoria Sereda, "Regional Historical Identities and Memory," in *Ukraina Moderna: Lviv-Donetsk: Sociyalni Identychnostii v Suchasnoi Ukraini* [Ukraine Moderna: Lviv-Donetsk: Social Identity in Contemporary Ukraine], ed. Yaroslav Hrytsak et al. (Kyiv: Kritika, 2007), 160–206.

35 Jacquelien Van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans, "Individuals in Movements: A Social Psychology of Contention," in *Handbook of Social Movements Across*

This analytical basis enables one to explore the most fundamental of questions about mobilization: What made people choose a side, and why did some mobilize while others remained passive? In the remaining chapters, I discuss how the legacies of the history of the Donbas shape people's way of life—the society they live in, the work they go to, the language they speak, the relationship with Ukraine and Russia they have, and crucially, the way they think, as reflected in their social and political behavior.

Disciplines. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research, ed. C. Roggeband and B. Klandermans (New York: Springer, 2017), 103.

Chapter 9

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MARIUPOL RESISTANCE

Resistance to Change

Why did "Russia" have such strong emotional connotations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that it divided communities into "us" and "them," turned friends into enemies, and split families along political lines? Why did my respondents say that a civil war can erupt there?

Some scholars attribute strong and emotional polarization of the society, reflected in Maidan and post-Maidan social interaction to preexisting and distinct sociocultural, sociopolitical, and geographical specifics of the region. These specifics forged among residents diverging historical memories (myths) based on an understanding of the history[1] and in turn produced varying identities within the Donbas.[2] This, to an extent, determined how responsive these identities were to specific aspects of the Donbas region in relation to its Soviet past, whether related to economic considerations,[3] geopolitical factors that shaped the Donbas,[4] or political preferences of the locals.[5] The consensus is that decades of Soviet influence combined with purposeful cultural and social politicizing created in

1 Sereda, "Regional Historical Identities and Memory," 161; Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Istoriia dvokh mist: L'viv i Donetsk u porivnial'nii perspektyvi" [History of Two Cities: Lviv and Donetsk in Comparative Perspectives], in *Ukraina Moderna: Lviv-Donetsk: Sotsiyalni Identychnostii v Suchasnoi Ukraini* [Ukraine Moderna: Lviv-Donetsk: Social Identity in Contemporary Ukraine], ed. Yaroslav Hrytsak et al. (Kyiv: Kritika, 2007), 20–60.

2 Pakhomenko and Podybailo, "*Ukrainskii natsionalizm.*"

3 Mykhnenko, "Causes and Consequences."

4 Michael Gentile, "West Oriented in the East-oriented Donbas: A Political Stratigraphy of Geopolitical Identity in Luhansk, Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31:3 (2015), 201–223.

5 Volodymyr Kulyk, "National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War," *EuropeAsia Studies* 68:4 (2016), 588–608; Volodymyr Kulyk, "Identity in

the Donbas a specific political culture that produced a society susceptible to paternalistic dependency. Whether from political elites that promise economic growth resembling the former rich Soviet industrial past of the Donbas, or on Russia that bears connotations of power, translated into the appeal and status of the Russian language.[6] The Donbas identity is associated with a weakness of self-identification with any unified Ukrainian national idea because its historical development generated various mixed identities.[7]

To illustrate the Donbas identity with an example, I provide an excerpt from a focus group that I conducted with three ordinary Mariupol women. All three worked in an institution concerned with local history (undisclosed for security reasons), resisted the Maidan, and considered themselves *Russkie* (ethnic Russians). I asked them why they opposed the Maidan and supported the Russian Spring:

Olga: Since the Maidan, Ukrainian language has been promoted because we live in Ukraine as a state. Officially, we speak Ukrainian, but our language is Russian. It's because we live in a city that is majority Russian speaking. It's simple. I will never switch to using the Ukrainian language. We know our history, what has happened on this territory, and its connection with Russia. Here was the Russian empire. At first, this territory did not belong to anyone, it was *dyke pole* (wild steppe), and then historical developments formed it, the consequence of which is diverse nationalities. Ukrainian, Russian, Greek, Jewish, and so on.

Never in the history of this city had there been ethnic disputes. Now there are. [Ukrainian politicians] are pressuring us in the sphere of culture and history; they toppled monuments, renamed streets. But this is not the way to change things. If a change is due, let's make it the correct way. Lenin Avenue has been renamed to Peace Avenue,

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Transformation: Russian-speakers in Post-Soviet Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71:1 (2019), 156–178.

6 Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War against Ukraine* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 176–180.

7 Taras Kuzio, *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-soviet Transformation* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 152–153.

while Bandera and other controversial personalities are to have streets named after them?

Elena: And what the nationalists did with the Lenin monument... To come there at night and just put it down. . . . And the statue now? Some Sviatoslav.[8] (She shakes her head). Lenin was part of the culture, part of history that remains the culture and the history of the city to this day; appreciating this does not mean celebrating Lenin himself.

Katya: A monument is a monument of history that has cultural value. Instead, they toppled the statue and, in its place, raised a statue of some Prince Sviatoslav. In the middle of the city, we have a statue that has zero relevance to the city. What I am against is all these changes being done forcefully, by using force. It was done by Azov.

Olga: Yes, Azov. "Heroes." Violence and shootings, looting and stealing in shops. . . . They did whatever they wanted in 2014. This incited negative reactions among the population. And now they come here every year for parades, exhibiting their rifles and equipment. . . . I simply feel uncomfortable.

Who were the separatists?

Olga: You ask who were the separatists in the city? We were! Apparently, us! Whoever did not support the Maidan, opposed the post-Maidan government and these practices, or considers themselves Russian.

Elena: Well, if you mean separatist... in practice it would mean that separatists are the people who agreed with the politics of the Russian Federation, and to this day retain the use of the Russian language. You came here also speaking Russian . . . all those who did not agree with the Maidan would be labelled separatists. This is why we are separatists...

Katya: The whole city is full of separatists! If to speak specifically about the period between March–June 2014, this was the time when many Mariupol citizens took part on the side of anti-Maidan, including armed groups grouped around

8 Svyatoslav was a Prince of Kyiv in the tenth century.

the City Council building. These people were revolting against Maidan, hence, all marked as separatists. This was practically most of the Mariupol citizens.

Olga: In short, people thought that the Maidan revolution led to nothing good; and later we saw this confirmed in regulations of the Russian language and promotion of the Ukrainian. You can't do that here because most people here speak Russian. Like in Kharkov where practically everyone speaks Russian. This region is influenced by the Russian language.

Elena: So, before Maidan there was no differentiating between "Russia" and "Ukraine"; you simply lived your life. Then the general mood changed as Crimea happened without a single shot fired, without victims. Crimea simply did not want to be part of Ukraine.

Katya: And then the [May 11] referendum happened. Though, the referendum itself was not for separation from Ukraine, it was for decentralisation so that we, ourselves, could govern ourselves.

Olga: Yes, so that our factories, metallurgy, business, Ilyich, Azovstal, were managed by and in the city; that the money made here stayed here. Like in Donetsk, they have repaired and developed the city. And look at our roads... we wanted that matters would be handled here similarly. [The referendum] was also a reaction to the 9 May events.

And what changed after the referendum?

Olga: What changed? Nothing. Ukraine left us and Russia didn't want us either.

Elena: Yes; we wanted Russia to take us, but they do not want us. Like Ukraine, like Russia.

Olga: What changed is that we were better-off before the war, under Yanukovych. There was corruption and the salary was not particularly high, but now I pay my utility bills and I have little left; I buy all my clothes in second-hand shops. Really, second-hand shops. Pensions have not risen either. . . . Medication also became more expensive.

Katya: And now we even have to contribute from our salaries towards the war.

This transcript provides an insight into frames that are dominant in industrialized parts of eastern Ukraine, and common stereotypes of the regional identity.

By profession, Marichka is a political scientist who has studied and written about regional identity. According to her, mixed identities derive from Ukrainian-Russian bi-ethnicity—a product of the historical composition of the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti, which "blurs and obscures differences that would distinguish Ukrainian and Russian influences from one another."[9] According to whether they favor Ukrainian or Russian influences, the locals can be divided into three categories.

In the first category are those who believe that the Donbas as a region is a unique territory with its own history that developed independently of the Ukrainian statehood and rejects any symbols and projections of Ukrainian nationalism, including the Ukrainian language. The prominent narrative of this category is that of Donbas exceptionalism/regional patriotism based on the historical myth that the Donbas feeds the whole of Ukraine.

In the second category are those who perceive the Donbas as a historic part of the "Russian world," self-identify as *Russkie* (ethnic Russians), or feel that the Donbas should be integrated into the Russian Federation. According to the Donbas exceptionalism, both categories share positive views on Donbas autonomy or federalization of Ukraine and perceive the Soviet Union and Donbas past within it favorably, even nostalgically.

The third, marginal portion of the population perceives themselves as civic Ukrainians and resists Soviet and Donbas regional identity markers. They aspire for cultural and societal integration into Ukraine and embrace Ukrainian history, culture, and language.[10]

The Donbas, thus, is not just a geographic location, but a territory where people share certain identity markers, particularly in industrial towns and cities where the working class is prominent. Villages within the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti that have not been

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9 Pakhomenko and Podybaylo, "*Ukrainskii natsionalizm.*"
10 Pakhomenko and Podybaylo, "*Ukrainskii natsionalizm.*"

impacted by the industry are traditionally Ukrainian-speaking and identify as ethnic Ukrainians.

In the industrial east, Ukrainian nationalism has been politicized as an essentially exclusivist phenomenon and the enemy of the Soviet internationalism that the Communist Party promoted. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this was reflected in the existence and support for movements and narratives that resisted or undermined Ukrainian statehood. Controlled by their proponents, the media then forwarded narratives of regionalism and hostility towards Ukraine-centric interpretations of history, Ukrainian language, and any criticisms of Ukraine's Soviet heritage. This remained unchanged as Soviet narratives outlived the Soviet Union, and Ukrainian nationalism remained linked with "Western imperialism" that could colonize the space of the former Soviet Union.[11] "On the opposition and resistance to Ukrainian nationalism, Donbas patriotism was created,"[12] Marichka concluded.

Based on my ethnographic research across the industrial parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti, locals' identities are better understood as "resistance" identities. On the one hand, the threat of "Ukrainian nationalism" came in the form of invisible "Maidan fascists," and proponents of "Western imperialism" in the form of "gays" and "liberals" who were perceived as threatening to conservative traditions. The defense against these enemies was resistance mobilization for "Donbass—forever Russian!" that was associated with values, economic stability, leadership, and the status quo. On the other hand, Maidanovtsy mobilized in resistance to this way of thinking, Russian influence, lingering Soviet nostalgia, and proletarian mentality.

The omission of ethnic categorizing is intended. Some respondents told me openly that they considered themselves Russian in an ethnic sense and disregarded their Ukrainian nationality. Their self-identification was reflected in their wish for the region to become part of Russia. For some of them, this wish reflected situational

11 Igor Zhitinsky (ed), *Ukrainskii Fashizm: Vzglyad iz Donbassa: Sbornik Materialov* [Ukrainian Fascism: A View from Donbass: Collection of Materials] (Donetsk: ASTRO, 2008).

12 Pakhomenko and Podybaylo, "*Ukrainskii natsionalizm.*"

(economic and political) considerations rather than deeper social or historical connotations, but for others, this wish reflected nostalgia for the Soviet past. Other non-activists who considered themselves Ukrainian defined their identity as emotional attachment to Mariupol, as a reflection of their way of life and social environment. Some activists who supported the Russian Spring did not consider themselves Russian but claimed Cossack ancestry as their ethnicity, and while they considered themselves citizens of Ukraine, their "historical land" stretched the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, into Russian territory. Their self-identification had a strong connection with the status of the Don Cossacks and their historical tradition as protectors of these lands. These are just a few examples to highlight the point that the question of ethnicity did not produce straightforward answers to motivations for mobilization or choosing sides. Moreover, most of my respondents who did not belong to an ethnic minority found the concept of ethnicity abstract and resorted to civic/territorial definitions: what was written in their passport.

When I asked why pro-Ukrainians mobilized on the side of Ukraine instead of the Russian Spring, Anatoly said: "because I can think critically," as opposed to the "zombies" who believed Russian propaganda. This "othering" reinforced societal divides further because of the outbreak of the war that the other side attributed blame to: the emotions behind peoples' claims and grievances and emotions they attributed to their cause and actions. The emotions people felt created an invisible wall between societies, communities, friends, and even families. My pro-Ukrainian respondents in liberated Donbas territories could not forget the compliance and collaboration of others while they risked their own lives, and some did not (and do) not want to forgive. Thus, while inclusive, this identity is also exclusive, resisting those who refuse to change their views through reasoning, debates, or education.

Narratives are thus a valuable resource to study social mobilization in the environment where the action takes place. Yet, while these identity markers associated with the Donbas teach us about latent preferences and stereotypes, categorizing and generalizing only takes us so far in understanding how, why, and whether these are demonstrated publicly.

Scholars have highlighted that societal divides in this region have always been latent and that a possibility of "separatism" on societal and ethnic basis was unlikely.[13] Marichka, too, conducted surveys on sociopolitical preferences of locals and concluded that separatism from Ukraine would not be the majority choice.

However, being in Mariupol and other major industrial cities like Donetsk and Luhansk in April 2014 would give different impressions: ordinary people, including women with small children and pensioners, were protecting captured buildings day and night from Ukrainian "fascists." Even though they did not actively take part in occupying them or building barricades around them, their behavior reflected their frames. These, though passive audiences and compliant masses, were key social actors providing the substance upon which the mobilization was founded and sustained.

Further, the regional identity that Marichka claims is reflected in Donbas's exceptionalism, Russian-centricity, and favoritism became visible in the social identity that people employed: with the strength of grievances and claims during the Antimaidan and Russian Spring, people "define[d] their personal self in terms of what makes them different from others."[14] Protesters' personal identities were secondary to the social (protest) identities they employed. This was the origin of collective action on both sides of the protests, roadblocks, and trenches and of societal divisions that followed these actions.

But what made them susceptible to employ one social identity or the other? Why did Maidan protesters mobilize for Ukraine in cities of Yanukovych adherents, and those who dreamt of the "Russian world"? Why did they risk their lives when the "Russian world" brought violence and war to the Donbas?

There were two groups among my respondents: passive witnesses and active participants. Active participants who self-mobilized in events in 2013 and 2014 all said the same thing: "I had to do something." This notion was a spontaneous, immediate reaction to specific developments that triggered individual mobilization. In most cases this mobilization was not a reflection of an existing

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13 Kuzio, *Contemporary Ukraine*, 75–77.
14 Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, "The Social Psychology of Protest," 890.

and well-formed civic or ethnic identity but the start of realizing this identity. This was the same for people who mobilized on the side of the Maidan revolution, and in opposition to it. Mobilization for them was a sense of duty and morality, or obligation to oneself, family, and country but also a response to existential threat or an expression of solidarity. As Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans point out, "people experience emotions on behalf of their group when the social category is salient, and they identify with the group at stake."[15] All my pro-Ukrainian respondents experienced some form of physical violence, mental violence (including torture), risk, or threat of violence during their activities in 2014, but these experiences created a strong bond between them. The shared emotions created the basis for their shared identity.

The motivations that prompted people to mobilize united strangers into groups, groups into networks, and networks into movements, and this shared social identity laid the foundations for what Sereda defines as "a sphere of active voluntary face-to-face civil associations and organisations that exist outside of the state, market or family, and through which social cooperation and collective action take place"[16]—or what I call a pro-Ukrainian civil society founded upon individual and collective resistance.

During the 2013 and 2014 mobilizations, this pro-Ukrainian civil society was demonstrated in employment of Ukrainian national symbols and narratives of independence and patriotism, but also in often newly realized pride to publicly demonstrate their relationship with Ukraine. For these activists, Ukraine was synonymous with their family, friends, city, and country that they felt the urge to defend from the enemy. In light of the threat of war and Russian occupation, Ukrainian nationalist fighters like Bandera or the OUN-UPA movements became symbols of national unity and self-preservation free of controversy, associated with the act of resistance against the enemy and Ukrainian independence. This is how the activists perceived themselves. They became more interested in

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15 Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, "The Social Psychology of Protest," 893.

16 Viktoria Sereda, "'I am a man and an active citizen . . . I did not betray my state!': Public Activism in Ukraine after Euromaidan," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 49:2 (2018), 96.

the history of their cities and country, the ongoing war, and some of them became writers of the local history and thus new collective memory. They were eager to show me Ukrainian cultural traditions and share books about Ukrainian history. In this sense, activists and volunteers began to realize their civic identity spontaneously, almost as a by-product accompanying their everyday actions in the fight for an independent Ukraine. Using Shevel's words, people employed the "non-traditional nation-building method"[17] through grassroots, resistance mobilization:

Viktoria: During the events on the Maidan and then after the annexation of Crimea, I acutely began to feel like a Ukrainian.

Marichka: To me it is most surprising when I now see people with a pro-Russian position back in 2014 come out wearing vyshyvanka. People never defined themselves as Ukrainian before the war. During the greatest [August] mobilization when hundreds and thousands of people came to my HQs, only a minority would have spoken Ukrainian. In my experience, Russian-speakers are often bigger patriots than Ukrainian-speaking people.

For other activists and volunteers who self-identified as Ukrainian "patriots," 2014 represented a "realisation of one self," "an awakening of self-consciousness" as a member of a nation, "rebirth," or "an eye-opening" defined as an obligation to their city, or to Ukraine, and reflected in their decision to act.

On the other hand, while social mobilization united strangers on the basis of social identity, it also deeply divided local communities. Before 2014 people lived side by side despite their political differences, but in 2014 these differences became so fundamental that communities became divided into "us" and "them." Marichka identifies this divide according to the markers of Ukrainian nationalism and Donbas patriotism, but this is their reflection, not their basis. These polarized Donbas identities were not only demonstrated in

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17 Oxana Shevel, "The Politics of Memory in a Divided Society: A Comparison of Post-Franco Spain and Post-Soviet Ukraine," *Slavic Review* 70:1 (2011), 138.

opposition to one another but also in passive compliance that translated into passive protest audiences. Most people I observed and engaged with during my fieldwork were essentially apolitical people: apart from mass rallies and commemorations they reserved political debates to the safety of their homes and close circles of friends. Conversations I overheard were similar to the interview with the employees of the local history institute: locals were most concerned with their worsening material conditions. This was an immediate consequence of the life in the shadow of war, but locals were already adapted to this way of life. A common narrative was that Ukraine was never expected to "care about them," but Russia "betrayed" them by not incorporating them into the Russian Federation or by inciting war. While "Ukraine" is talked about negatively and associated with toppling Yanukovych, "Russia" is associated with supporting political and economic stability of the Donbas represented in Yanukovych's rule, in accordance with "installed habits of dependence"[18] and paternalist traditions inherited from the Soviet past.[19]

In this sense, during the Russian Spring people mobilized in resistance to change, and hopes for a return of a leader, whether Putin or the People's Leaders whose names have already been forgotten. When Azov liberated Mariupol, many of them put on Ukrainian vyshyvanka in celebration. Valery explained this behavior as follows:

> If Scots liberated Mariupol, people would put on Scottish kilts. If you have some idiots occupying the City Council who rob grocery stores and someone comes in a vyshyvanka and puts a stop to this, people will go out wearing the same, celebrating. Why? Because those who will bring stability, those will be followed. I will not wear vyshyvanka. Why? Because I don't like the fact that someone makes me wear it. We did not put down [Ukrainian] flag under DNR, but we took it down when the Ukrainian forces came and made it

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18 Kuzio, *Putin's War against Ukraine*.

19 Andrew Wilson, "The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68:4 (2016), 631–652.

> compulsory. No one cared about the war until they began
> to shell Vostochnoe (residential, eastern part of Mariupol).
> Because then people, women, children were dying. Had
> Putin's tanks marched into Mariupol, the next day all would
> be dressed in Russian *kosovorotka*.

When Mariupol was liberated, people rejoiced because they knew that bins would be collected again, and pensions paid on time. Instead of petitioning against collaborators or compliant elites, their lives returned under a "stable" rule of Mayor Hotlubei. After the Russian Spring episode, people returned to submissiveness to social and political realities and apprehensiveness toward change and disruptions to established social, political, and, most importantly, economic status quo.

These nuances also help us understand the power of Russian propaganda narratives. These narratives resonated because they reflected the reality people lived in: their habits, traditions, their opinions, and their worldviews. People remembered particularly vividly violent events even four years after, and their interpretations corresponded with their mental processes and beliefs according to what they saw and heard. The political use of narratives and their ability to trigger emotions thus shows the importance of frames. Ideational frames activated through narratives (particularly about violence) transformed political fighting for the electorate into popular fighting against the enemy. This is where divergent narratives that resonate ideologically and ring true historically inform about the foundations of social mobilization.

Not all violence Ukraine was blamed for was fabricated or propaganda, however. Maidan protesters did attack the Berkut, they were attacking and occupying administrative buildings; Ukrainian soldiers did open fire into a crowd of civilians on May 9. While attributing blame was not always in accordance with factuality, the realities on the ground often confirmed what people thought and believed, which propagandists subsequently exploited. While the Donbas people were susceptible to narratives that resonated with their worldviews and propagandist techniques of framing and narrative dissemination were used for mobilizing purposes, they needed to be

substantiated, and they were most readily substantiated through the use or threat of violence. Witnesses of these events perceived them in situ in an information vacuum, and they interpreted them in a way that was natural to them.

To conclude, this chapter highlights the methodological and analytical advantages (and necessity) of studying social mobilization using narratives and immersion. The transition from an observer to a political actor was a result of a complicated mixture of historical, cultural, social, political, and economic contexts. Studying these contexts in conversation with one another helps us understand societal stereotypes and diversities that shape the way people think and behave. While some factors like violence led to fluctuations in social mobilization, it is more problematic to explain why most people remained passive and never took action.

While scholars observed preexisting ideational and civilizational "othering" of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti from the Ukrainian nation-state based on regional characteristics and regional identity,[20] the 2013–2014 mobilization also reveals othering within the Donbas. It was a combination of violent events, emotions these events sparked, and frames shaped by local contexts that prompted people to choose sides and laid the foundations of the societal divisions we see in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti since 2014: on the one hand, a pro-Ukrainian civil society that created a strong bond between former strangers according to the social identity they employed and, on the other, demonstration of those who resisted the change to their way of life, values, and conservative traditions. In the industrial east, most of these people did so from the safety of their homes. While informing why people mobilized, these regional characteristics also help us understand the least researched part of mobilization—the passivity of audiences. In the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, this passivity, just as active participation, enabled contention to emerge and grow, from protest to war.

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20 Mykola Riabchuk, *Dvi Ukrayiny: realni mezhi, virtualni viyny* [Two Ukraines: Real Borders and Virtual Wars] (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2003); Andrei Portnov, "Ukraine's 'far east': On the Effects and Genealogy of Ukrainian Galician Reductionism," Jordan Russia Centre, August 15, 2014, https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/ukraines-farea st-effects-genealogy-ukrainian-galician-reductionism/#.X3hodWhKjDc.

A Changed Mariupol

While some characteristics are prevailing, Mariupol has been changing. This change has been visible in a cultural and societal sense. In stark contrast to the passivity of most, the pro-Ukrainian volunteer movement supportive of the territorial integrity of Ukraine has over the years grown into a civic movement to cultivate Mariupol into a contemporary and cosmopolitan Ukrainian city.

With each of my visits to Mariupol, I noticed an increase in cultural events organized in the city. Apart from public celebrations of Ukrainian holidays related to Ukrainian traditions like the vyshyvanka day, locals began to celebrate Donbas war-related holidays supportive of the Ukrainian armed forces and volunteers, including Mariupol liberation by Azov. Azov organized annual military parades on the Freedom Square by the Svyatoslav statue they erected around the date of the liberation. Activists started organizing concerts, music, theater and film festivals, art exhibitions, or educational workshops.

Dmytro was among the first who started aiding Ukrainian volunteer battalions in spring 2014. Since 2016, Dmytro also worked with a Mariupol Council deputy on realizing pro-Ukrainian volunteer projects. For this reason he created *Halabuda,*

> an educational hub that hosts online and offline non-formal education events for people of all ages. . . . Our mission is to create opportunities for the development of the intellectual and social potential of Ukrainians. Our goals are to contribute to the development of the community's potential with the help of civic education and support of social projects.

Dmytro wanted to encourage Mariupoltsy to become active members of the society.

Kirilo's activism started with a donation to Ukrainian soldiers in April 2014—his old German war helmet. "They literally had nothing," he explained:

> Everything kicked off after April: permanent assistance to the military, ammunition, food, medicines. . . . In May

> 2020, I started my first project together with the Orthodox
> Church of Ukraine—we painted the Temple in Mariupol
> with traditional Ukrainian *Petrykivka* ornament. . . . After
> that, I created a number of cultural and educational pro-
> jects in Mariupol, such as traditional folklore painting tech-
> niques [workshop], public library of Ukrainian literature,
> exhibition of Ukrainian folk clothes and Cossack culture, or
> restoration of the Temple.

Oleh from Mariupol Ultras joined Azov as a combatant and later
became a business owner. He also opened a café and a pizza stall
Veterano named after a chain of pizza restaurants set up by Donbas
veterans. When he was not at the front fighting, he delivered his
food to units there.

Journalist Anna set up an alternative online newspaper "0629"
not only to report local news and analyze events but also to counter
propaganda, fabrications, and anti-Ukrainian narratives that the
Akhmetov-owned and Russia-sponsored media published. She also
co-authored a book about events in Mariupol in 2014 that I engage
with in this book.[21]

Ivan turned into a writer documenting the 2013–2014 Mariupol
protest period because he had the capacity and knowledge to
describe actors and events with authority. He started writing because
he believed it important to account for the past factually. Without
Anna and Ivan, we would not come so close to understanding what
occurred during the events discussed in this book.

Another sign of societal change is observable in the gradual
increase of the use of the Ukrainian language. When I first arrived
in Mariupol, I used an interpreter fluent in both Ukrainian and
Russian languages. In Mariupol, only one of my respondents—
Marichka—spoke Ukrainian in everyday life. Hence, I learned
Russian to conduct ethnographic research in eastern Ukraine
instead of the Ukrainian language.

Since my first field trip in 2018, I have been following my respond-
ents on social media, observing their activities through posts they
wrote and shared. I noticed an increased conscious decision to

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21 Romanenko, *Mariupol: Poslednii Forpost.*

learn, write, and communicate in Ukrainian. I can only communicate with Ukrainians in Russian; therefore, in conversations with me, they utilize the Russian language. At the start of my research in the east, this was very natural. Even Ivan's and Anna's first books are written in Russian. But as time went on and war dragged on, I started to notice instances of reluctance and even disgust to speak Russian. "I am ashamed to speak Russian," one historian told me.

Marichka recalled how, before the war, Mariupoltsy used to compliment her when they heard her speak Ukrainian:

> People now understand the importance of speaking Ukrainian, especially since 2014 there is a huge surge in the use of Ukrainian language by Russian-speaking patriots. With such a sincere desire, the vast majority of those who were our volunteers and had not had practice in Ukrainian before, are now basically switching to Ukrainian. I read their posts on social media; they consider it necessary after all that they have been through, to speak Ukrainian.

By 2022 practically all of my respondents who identified with the Ukrainian nation-state had switched to Ukrainian. Since February 2022 my respondents-activists only use the Ukrainian language as a sociopolitical statement.

Another change, or rather a continuation of a trend, is the formation of territorial defense groups. Throughout these years, Marichka has been fostering the Mariupol self-defense movement (which she considers her pride). She still teaches and assists the war effort after work. While Marichka defined regional Donbas patriotism, she has been at the center of a new regional patriotism founded upon territorial self-defense.

> The formation of territorial defense is logical, it is correct and a necessity. Everyone understands it, but we in Mariupol probably understand it best, as we still remember 2014, when the [Russian] hybrid activities began.
>
> In 2014 we thought that we can build . . . Ukraine here without understanding that Russia won't stop until it

reaches the next border. Territory after territory. Mariupol, Zaporizhzhya and who knows where next?[22]

In the context of war, the formation of territorial defense groups has been embedded within state policy under the Ministry of Defence, and territorial defense formations have been establishing across Ukraine. Based on her analysis of the security situation in the eastern regions, Marichka proposed that these formations should connect and cooperate, creating, over time, an effective defense system on the local level.

> There are law enforcement agencies, the army, which perform their specific tasks, and there are internal urban processes that the citizens know about better than anyone. . . . Here lies the logic behind the whole security situation. The training provided consists of medical and tactical training, based on the specifics of the landscape. Like the ability to secure the coast, establish reconnaissance channels. Information dissemination should be the driver of this process.[23]

Marichka believed that, had such measures been in place in 2014, the war could have been prevented and the insurgency "strangled in its infancy." With training, civilians could prevent such actions in the future.

"Aggression and occupation do not happen suddenly. The situation was gradually shaken up by hybrid methods. Therefore, thanks to the support of the local population, local guerrillas were able to

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22 Marichka in interview for Roman Tsymbaliuk, "Maria Podybailo. Dialogy z Donbasom. Mariupol: Misto yake oboronyaetsya, voroh ne zakhopit' [Maria Podybailo. Dialogues with Donbas. Mariupol: A City That Protects Itself Will Not Be Captured by the Enemy], YouTube, February 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oNhxSXCLcs.

23 Marichka in interview for Hromadske TB Pryazovia, "U Mariupoli stvoryuyutsya zahony terytorialnoi oborony" [Territorial Defence Squads Are Being Formed in Mariupol], YouTube, September 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hBMcLdt9TY.

keep the city until the arrival of the military. Territorial defense will be organized—there will be no need to fight."[24]

> We did not start this war, but peace and tranquillity depend on us. Because if we are not ready, if we rely on hope that someone else will protect us, [war] will continue indefinitely.[25]

Civilians who joined territorial defense were instructed by ATO veterans and qualified sports coaches and included an all-Ukrainian training session, whereby military-patriotic organizations cooperated with official structures of the armed forces.

This is how one hundred thousand reservists, whom we witnessed defend cities across Ukraine in 2022, originated.

Marichka was not only engaged in volunteering and military matters but also attempted to change the political landscape of Mariupol. With the outbreak of the war in summer 2014 the formerly ruling elites had to take an officially pro-Ukrainian position to remain politically viable. However, Marichka calls this "a conditionally pro-Ukrainian position" because the core of the regional political practice continued. It is the development of oppositional political system that needs to be nurtured, otherwise "our ruling elites remain our business elites."

> There is no political opposition to the established system of Akhmetov; politically, and first of all economically, the system was built and monopolised by Akhmetov's people. This translated into monopolisation of the socio-cultural space as well, also through monopolisation of TV channels. Politics has not really changed in Mariupol: our elections are

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24 See "Mariupol Self-Defence," Facebook, April 2014, https://www.facebook.com/samooborona.marik/?ref=page_internal.

25 Facebook post by a member of "Territorial Defence of Donetsk Region," October 1, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/groups/donteroborona/?__cft__%5b0%5d=AZVRdb1_5MbKgwru8B6wdhPEMYzzJ7E__qasLxoP-qdin29LKurdluhar29cKdhi_47COASnOm4X-EqSRwjRh9Hbi0M37JXjZIuwtuQINT_nr4Ui-1D-1SgKqXAEhoCJqWWZSBbktX2Q8WKeNDjZ_ILvP1DWLZHt5PZj5L8bdg-cuA&__tn__=-UC,P-y-R.

elections without a choice. . . . The monopoly that belonged to Akhmetov, has remained such.[26]

To foster a change, Marichka and other sixty activists—leaders and representatives of civil organizations like Novyi Mariupol or self-defense group *UNA-UNSO Mariupol* (Ukrainian National Assembly—Ukrainian People's Self-Defense Mariupol)—established a "People's Council" as part of the Mariupol city council's executive committee with a view to monitor and oversee the activities of local authorities and Council's proposals:

> [The public sphere is] the most mobile and can solve urgent problems for the city. This practice exists in most countries of the world, which we would like to emulate, and we understand that this is a kind of alternative to local government.[27]

The UNA-UNSO Mariupol is a branch of a popular far-right political and paramilitary organization originally founded in Ukraine in 1990. The Mariupol faction was set up in late 2015. This organization aimed to create political opposition to the prevailing political parties connected with oligarchic practices that still enjoyed majority support of Mariupol residents. According to their official description,

> The purpose of UNA-UNSO is to promote the development of Ukraine as a sovereign, conciliar, independent, democratic and legal state, with the Cossack model of democracy, which harmoniously combines civil liberty with discipline, responsibility and order in the state and to meet and protect their legitimate social, economic, creative, age, national-cultural, sports and other common interests. The victory of UNA-UNSO will give people confidence in the future, the country will have a real master who will unconditionally put an end to mismanagement, fraud, corruption, robbery. We will restore order, build a Greater Ukraine and create an energetic nation. . . . Donetsk region is not just squatting

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26 Tsymbaliuk, "Maria Podybailo. Dialogy," February 9, 2022.
27 Tsymbaliuk, "Maria Podybailo. Dialogy," February 9, 2022.

people eating sunflower seeds and drinking beer with *horil-ka*.[28] People who took action are the hope for the future of the Donetsk oblast. Even though many still consume and believe Russian propaganda, generally, they do not wish to become part of the DNR. "Our Yanukovych" is a slogan that still resonates. So does "They do not listen, they do not hear us." Each of the regions needs to be understood, and it is a question for our government to apply these approaches to social processes.

To induce societal change, however, the key is to recognize why the system is supported by the majority and figure out the remedy. For Marichka there is a "simple recipe built on actual experience":

First of all, it is necessary to build what is defined by sociology and political science as middle class. We don't have it; or have a thin layer. Why? Because we do not have the critically necessary number of business owners. The majority are state employees who are always dependent on the elites, and workers who work for them.

Anatoly put it similarly:

Take Berdyansk city just off of Mariupol to the west. There the situation is reversed. Only twenty percent of the population is *vata*.[29] Why? Because it's not an industrial city; instead of heavy industry, there is tourist business. These are people who have to take care of themselves, not rely on anyone else.

Marichka added that, consequently, in the absence of the middle class, the working class working at someone else's factory, becomes in many respects "their machine"; by taking "their" salary, the workers subscribe to the practices and conditions set by the employer.

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28 Ukrainian vodka.

29 A pejorative slang term for conformists; locals associated with low intelligence; often unemployed persons or alcoholics who are corruptible and susceptible to control by elites.

Many "do not care what flag is flying or who is ruling because what matters most is the salary. There is no self-identification. And this needs to be eradicated." She concluded that

> it is necessary to work with the society on the cognitive level. An independent, self-sufficient, self-employed Donetsk resident is the best thing Ukraine could do. Because then, they will identify with their territory, be it a bakery, a greenhouse, a small factory, which they will not let down or abandon.

To conclude, locals who demonstrated a pro-Ukrainian identity have been creating and fostering a new civil society that challenges established political and social practices, being a force that brought to Mariupol cultivation of civic activism and culture (including political). Their efforts visibly changed Mariupol and part of its society. However, while more locals are building their relationship with Ukrainian tropes, as long as the set political and economic system prevails, deeper societal change will be limited. In 2020, Anatoly estimated the number of self-sufficient Mariupol residents at 20 percent. And instead of categorizing the rest, Anatoly said: if Akhmetov set up a factory in Europe, they would pack their suitcases and flee to Europe. "Give them European living conditions, they will all turn European," he concluded. Such dependencies produce and reinforce conformism, passivity, and working-class mentality that prevail in Mariupol to this day.

I wrote this chapter in 2021. While deeper societal changes take time to come naturally, Russian full-scale invasion from February 2022 may have accelerated some of these processes founded on people's frames and self-identification. But the impact of the war on local communities and regional stereotypes will have to be subject to future research.

Chapter 10

MARIUPOL RESISTANCE II

Душу й тіло ми положим
За нашу свободу[1]

~

We will sacrifice soul and body
For our freedom

"Once we'll become a city that became known to the whole world for the unprecedented resistance to the occupier of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions" were Marichka's words when she collected her award "Mariupol resident of the year 2014." In 2022, the whole world knows of Mariupol and its heroic defense against the Russian army. The aim was to tell the stories of people like Marichka because it is they who have been at the heart of Mariupol resistance since 2013. The resistance was reflected in those who provided humanitarian aid, equipped the army, rescued civilians and soldiers, dug trenches, delivered supplies to the frontline, or dressed and fed the wounded, but also in those who fought for societal and political change.

I wrote this section of the book during the first two weeks of March 2022. I was glued to my Facebook and Telegram channels. Almost exactly eight years have passed since the fall of Yanukovych and the annexation of Crimea. What Marichka and others warned about and prepared for, since 2014, happened.

In the early morning of February 24, 2022, after months of military buildup near the Ukrainian border from Russian and Belarusian direction, Putin streamed a speech in which he announced the start of a "special operation to de-Nazify and demilitarize" Ukraine. This was followed by a speech in which Putin de

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1 A verse from the Ukrainian anthem.

facto denied the Ukrainian right to statehood and nationhood. He claimed Ukrainian territory as Russian land. Under the excuse of protecting Russian speakers and ethnic Russians, he launched an invasion that would see thousands of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians killed.

Putin began the war by advancing on Kyiv, wanting to achieve its fall in a matter of days. However, while he launched an operation to force a subordination and regime change in Kyiv, Ukrainians launched an all-nation resistance to defend their homeland to the last Ukrainian. Since this moment, the latest chapter of Ukraine's struggle for independence has been unfolding before our eyes.

I was meant to be in Ukraine to meet with my respondents once more, in order to see how their lives and environments changed since my last visit. Instead, I am watching how their lives and environments are shattered as I write. I am often losing contact with those who are still in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions because of internet disruptions caused by Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure. Telegram and Facebook have become their lifeline and our only source of real-time updates and communication.

Messages from locals are the same everywhere:

> "Come, quick, tank on the street, just hit the shop opposite"
> "A family of four reported dead in the centre—anyone know their surnames? My sister lives there"
> "Help me find a family member!"
> "Anyone know these addresses? Houses intact or destroyed?"
> "When will this hell end?"
> "Sirens. Basement! Now!"

Two weeks of the Russian war have already caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

On February 22—two days before the full-scale invasion—a few hundred of Mariupol activists gathered in front of the Drama Theatre building in the city centre[2] in what would be their last public gathering before Mariupol becomes occupied again. The reason was that on this day, the deputy of the Russian parliament Leonid

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2 See Map A.2.

Kalashnikov formally recognized the DNR and LNR, with their border encompassing the whole Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti. Up to this point the Republics claimed territories that followed the borders of the contact line, and prior to 2022 the territories would stretch over less than a half of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In order to protest against this, activists urged residents on Facebook to

> Come to the Theatre square to show that Mariupol is Ukraine and that we do not want to become part of DNR or Russia. Bring with you state flags, posters, and a fighting spirit.

The fighting spirit was reflected in the messages people voiced, recalling Russian shelling of Mariupol in January 2015, as the result of which thirty people lost their lives. This was the only direct Russian attack on Mariupol since the start of the war in 2014. Until now, Mariupoltsy feared.

"Now it's time to unite in spirit and physically. Now it's time to get ready and be ready for a serious fight," said one of the protesters gathered by the Theatre. Another explained,

> I came here to show that Mariupol is Ukraine. I am already old. But my voice is still strong to demonstrate to the young that we will fight for a free Mariupol. Just try us. We will shoot at them from every window, every basement, every kitchen. Understand?

"Hands off Mariupol!," protesters shouted, "Glory to Ukraine— Glory to Heroes!"

Everyone spoke, chanted, and sang in Ukrainian.

This reminded me of Marichka's status on Facebook earlier that month that repeated her words from August 2014 when Mariupol awaited Russian tanks: "A city that protects itself will not be conquered." This sentence has become her motto. On February 24 at five in the morning, the time to protect Mariupol came. Marichka started publishing instructions on Facebook on how to behave:

> It has begun. And panic can start too. Friends, be aware!
> For those who had not thought this through: gather medi-
> cines, gather documents, only necessary things. We have a
> plan where to move and what to do. Stay with your family.
> Evacuate your wives, pensioners and children. Act calmly.
> Stay connected but prepare for disruptions. Remain calm,
> stay focused. Trust in the UAF [Ukrainian Armed Forces].[3]

So far, Mariupol—the outpost of Ukrainian control in the Donetsk
region for the past eight years—has been hit the hardest—shelled
from both west and east, every day since the beginning of the full-
scale invasion.

Days are not marked by a date, but by days since the start of the
invasion. In Mariupol, on day thirteen of resistance people began
to bury their family members in their gardens and first mass graves
were dug out. On day fourteen, March 9, 2022, the hospital and
maternity ward in Mariupol was hit by an airstrike. Three civilians
lost their lives, including a child, and seventeen were injured.

Marichka posts every day on her Facebook site. On day fifteen
she posted this:

> On the 15th day of the war, the city of Mariupol suffered
> significant destruction. This is a purposeful crime against
> humanity; to bomb residential areas, drop bombs on the city
> centre. The Centre for Emergencies for the Donetsk oblast, a
> safe place for civilians to go and talk about the situation in
> Mariupol, cynically shelled by GRADs.
>
> According to preliminary data, 36 civilians were killed
> and numerous injured just today. The counting continues.
>
> In Mariupol city fights have begun. City defenders dis-
> rupt attempts of enemy reinforcements, counterattacking
> constantly.
>
> Today, Russia admitted that it consciously bombed the
> Mariupol maternity hospital. I hope the global community
> reacts. And us—we will not forgive the death of a single
> Ukrainian.

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3 Marichka, post on Facebook, February 24, 2014.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov claims that civilian infrastructure is not being targeted. Accordingly, he claims that the hospital had been used as a base for Nazi Azov fighters, and Ukrainian and Western media are lying about civilian casualties. Marichka replies that now, as a consequence of Russia's atrocities, the whole of Ukraine and every new-born Ukrainian are already Azov fighters; that every Russian soldier will "tremble today and fear always" because of their actions against Ukraine; that if they fail to surrender, they "will be sent home in a coffin"; and that no Ukrainian will ever forget what the Russians have done.

Negotiations between Ukrainian foreign minister Kuleba and his Russian counterpart Lavrov are still stalled on the question of a humanitarian corridor for Mariupol. There is no water, gas, or electricity, and the city is under constant enemy fire. By the end of day eleven of the siege of the city, 100 bombs were dropped on Mariupol and 2187 people were reported dead. Civilians are hostages of the situation.

On day twenty of Mariupol blockade, parts of the city are under control of Russians, and fierce urban fighting is underway. The combination of rocket attacks and artillery fire has badly damaged and destroyed 80 percent of civilian buildings. Tanks marked with the sign "Z" have made a breakthrough into the city center. But, like in 2014, defenders of Mariupol are refusing to surrender.

I mentioned earlier how Kirilo launched a project to repair the old temple to act as a center of prayer, community, and Ukrainian culture. Reconstruction was enabled by the effort of volunteers, crowdfunding, and warm suppers. Freshly cooked food fed both volunteers and the homeless. Now, everyone is hungry, and many are homeless. The few humanitarian convoys that made it into Mariupol in the past week have been looted by Russian soldiers at every checkpoint along the way. People have resorted to melting snow because there is no access to fresh water. "Children live on six cookies a day. *Holodomor* (famine) has started in the city and surrounding villages," reads one Telegram post.

Cars only have value if their tanks are full of petrol; those who possess them are fleeing. Many of those who have fled are desperately seeking transport for their families who had to stay. Those who

cannot locate their relatives are seeking them on social media—the Facebook group "Search of relatives and friends in Mariupol" has over 85,000 members who constantly report their missing ones and offer a ride to rescue them: drivers from nearby Mangush and Berdyansk are willing to evacuate, but at a $500 price tag.

If $500 is too high a price to avoid starvation or violent death, people are prepared to pay it to avoid forced deportation by the Russians. As Ukrainian armed forces withdrew from densely populated areas in Mariupol in order to avoid civilian casualties, the Russians took advantage of this to move in. Following this, Marichka reports,

> The Russians have forcibly taken over a thousand people out of Mariupol. . . . Now the Russians treat Ukrainians the same way they did to the Crimean Tatars in 1944! The occupants send Mariupol residents to filtration camps, check their phones and their Ukrainian documents. After this part, their occupying ID card is issued and they are sent into the Russian territory.

Diplomatic talks are politically deadlocked between Russian territorial claims, denazification and demilitarization objectives, and Ukrainian resistance to giving in. In the meantime, Mariupol, the last outpost of Ukraine in the south-east, serves as an omen of what Ukraine could become if the Russian army is not contained.

I spoke with Ivan at the end of March. I had been contacting all my contacts in the occupied areas to find out how they coped and whether there was any way I could help. As a combat-experienced high-ranking officer of the SBU, he had assumed territorial defense of Mariupol. He said that "the city you had known is no more. Just ruins. But we are fighting for every rubble." After relentless Russian attacks, Ivan and the rest of Mariupol defenders were forced to retreat into the last unoccupied part of Mariupol—Akhmetov's iron and steel factory Azovstal.

My favorite way to travel in eastern Ukraine was on local minibuses, and my favorite route was from Mariupol to Sievierodonetsk in the northeast. This route followed the contact line along the Donetsk and Luhansk regions for six hours. Potholes navigated through muddy roads across the steppe, divided by villages and

terrikony—Donbas pyramids made of coal mining waste. But before we left Mariupol we had to cross a bridge over the river Kalmius that split the central district from the factories. There it was—the colossal Azovstal—a seemingly never-ending structure of chimneys and pipelines. Now, its tunnels sheltered Ivan.

My communication with Ivan during the defense of Azovstal was infrequent and brief—he posted updates on Facebook from time to time, and when I saw no post for a few days, I messaged him. He always responded.

27 March. *How are you? Are you holding on?*
"Yes, we are fighting."
~
17 April. *Are you okay?*
"Yes. A little injured but alive."
~
29 April. *Sending hugs! Hold on!*
"Thank you!!! We don't have any other option."
~

On May 8, Ivan wrote a post in celebration of the European Victory Day, commemorating his grandfather who fought in the Red Army. Ivan died on the same day after a Russian rocket hit the section utilized as a hospital. The ceiling collapsed and buried him underneath.

Eight days later, after having sustained two months of daily artillery shelling and airstrikes, the defenders of Azovstal were given an order to surrender. The citadel fell. Mariupol fell.

Those defenders who survived ended up in DNR or Russian prisons, facing show trials and death penalties. One of them was commander Serhii Savinsky. He survived and was released during a prisoner exchange.

During the two months of constant shelling and airstrikes, over twenty-two thousand Mariupol residents reportedly died, and 90 percent of civilian infrastructure was destroyed.

At the time of writing this section of the chapter at the end of August 2022, there are still parts of bodies scattered around the city and graves emerging marked as "Unknown," and there is an overall food and water shortage; Palmolive shampoo costs the equivalent of

twelve dollars, and humanitarian aid is available only to pensioners, disabled, and children under the age of three. Russian rations that residents receive once a month would in reality last less than a week. "There is plenty of work for everyone if you don't have money," one local argued on a Mariupol Telegram channel. Those who cannot work rely on the aid of volunteers, but this is also problematic because resources are scarce.[4]

Approximately one hundred thousand people stayed in the city. Thousands who had decided to leave Russian occupation have been deported to DNR or Russia after the so-called filtration process. The filtration camp is in the nearby town of Bezymenne, east of Mariupol. Here it is decided whether Mariupol residents are relocated somewhere within Russia or within the DNR. An estimated 10 percent of those who fled were identified as "enemy" to the Russian regime.[5] This means being accused of having a pro-Ukrainian position. Once labeled as such, they would be taken to detention centers like the penal colony in Olenivka or the infamous Donetsk prison Izolatsyia, also known as the DNR concentration camp.[6] "Being there is accompanied by long-term interrogations, torture, threats of execution and coercion in to make them cooperate." Others, like doctors and surgeons, are kept in Mariupol against their will because of their specialist profession and shortage of staff.

Abandoned properties that are still intact have been robbed, taken over, or resold by the Russians and their DNR proxies.[7] Physical presence is not a guarantee of keeping one's possessions:

4   Oksana, "Gumanitarnaya katastrofa: kak privozat edu i vodu v Mariupol" [Humanitarian Disaster: How Food and Water Are Brought to Mariupol], *Forbes*, August 2, 2022, https://www.forbes.ru/society/472487-gumanitarnaa-katastrofa-kak -privozat-edu-i-vodu-v-mariupol.

5   "V Mariupoli okupanty prodovzhuyut filtratsiini zahody—Denysova" [In Mariupol, the Occupiers Continue Filtering Measures—Denisova], *Suspilne Novyny*, May 29, 2022, https://suspilne.media/244432-v-mariupoli-okupanti-prodovzuut-filtracijni -zahodi-denisova/?fbclid=IwAR03wXVswsLjyMWHhiv29vEQ9vfNnwnJorW5_HsV Q4fGhhOAOJnxuTiJOpY.

6   Andreas Umland and Stanislav Aseyev, "Donetsk 'Isolation' Prison," *New Eastern Europe*, January 5, 2021, https://neasterneurope.eu/2021/01/05/donetsks-isolation -torture-prison/.

7   "V Mariupoli pocaly prodavaty kvartyry. Skilky koshtue zhytlo v zruinovanomu misti" [They Started Selling Apartments in Mariupol. How Much Is Housing in a Destroyed City], *0629*, May 30, 2022, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3398325/v

The occupying authorities have started assessing levels of damage . . . and prepare to demolish most of the buildings affected by shelling. Mobile teams of the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations and military patrol the apartments that are still habitable. They warn the inhabitants that relocation will take place with the beginning of demolitions. Elderly people are planned to be accommodated in dormitories . . . and their apartments will be occupied by the people involved in the demolition work in the port, the Ilyich plant, and the clear-out of debris. They are given two weeks to find housing if they do not agree to relocate. Owners of buildings that are planned to be demolished, regardless of the condition of the apartments, are literally evicted onto the street. When asked where they live, they answer that it is not a matter of the occupying power. Thus, the occupiers implement two scenarios at the same time—forced deportation to Russia, and forced labour for people of working age.[8]

To stay in Mariupol even by May meant having to behave "almost like animals": hiding in dark basements, drinking water from potholes and radiators, and searching for food anywhere one could, surrounded by decaying bodies. At the end of August, no one knows how many people have died because there is no transparency. I still come across posts on Telegram and Facebook written by IDPs looking for their stranded friends and relatives.

   People who remained in Mariupol did so for reasons that varied: old age, material possessions that would be robbed or occupied by Russians and proxies, nostalgic reasons, and uncertainty about the future outside of Mariupol. "Road to the unknown," was how one of my contacts described her departure; not knowing how long she would spend queuing at checkpoints, not knowing if she would be let past the next one. In the end, it took her two days, but she was free.

-mariupoli-pocali-prodavati-kvartiri-skilki-kostue-zitlo-v-zrujnovanomu-misti-foto?fbclid=IwAR29HaKfLXJhwkNWPGJZ6LlXR0JiBUuFFHjekpitQqonzIyb1lxMb3DEWUw.

8 Mariupol Mayor Andrushchenko, private Telegram channel, May 31, 2022.

Those who had left Mariupol—and it was a difficult decision to make—are scattered across Ukraine or fled the country, mostly to Poland. They are learning the language and looking for jobs that mostly have no relevance to their education or former career. Because of the language barrier, accountants clean houses and retailers lay bricks. They are recreating their future from scratch while living in the past: physically removed from Ukraine, their minds and hearts are still in Mariupol.

But some stayed despite shells to help others. On the day of Russian full-scale invasion, Dmytro's Halabuda turned from an educational space into Mariupol's largest humanitarian hub. Within hours, one hundred locals gathered at Halabuda to offer their help. One of them was Kateryna, the Mariupol city council deputy whom Dmytro had advised:

> Everyone took on a certain work duty: some searched for generators, sand, some brought food and medicine. People accumulated the necessary things in Halabuda, and it became a large-scale centre for volunteer assistance to residents. From there, hospitals, pharmacies, and residents who already lived in bomb shelters received assistance.[9]

Dmytro stayed also because there was no organized effort to aid civilians, namely areas that had been cut off from the city center by cancelled public transport, like the Left Bank. There was a shortage of bread so Dmytro found people who could bake and facilitated pita bakery at Halabuda, with a bread collection point in front of it.

> People came for rations and medicines, basic necessities. It was a huge job of more than a dozen people. But all of them were united by Dmytro. He was able to coordinate clearly. . . . Every day I stopped at Halabuda and told Dmytro what exactly I needed, took the necessary medicines, hygiene

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9 Kateryna Kaluzhna, "Dmytro Chychera znyk bezvisty v Mariupoli. Vin organizuvav holovnyi punkt volonteriv v blokadi" [Dmytro Chichera Went Missing in Mariupol. He Organized the Main Point of Volunteers in the Blockade], *Svoi City*, August 22, 2022, https://svoi.city/articles/230746/dmitro-chichera-znik-v-mariupoli?fbclid=IwAR0dTmLyNmfFbBl3VcYMYmTCOfSb8VjWVuM-ZasebVYlMzF_N4X7mPebZ5E.

products, and then delivered them to people - those who were injured by the explosions. . . . He helped us not to give up and hold on.[10]

The Halabuda staff held on until the first week of March. Then street fights in Mariupol started. No one expected such a swift Russian offensive. By staying, volunteers and their families were increasingly at risk of death, captivity, and torture. Dmytro evacuated his family but decided to stay despite these threats. "We are alive!!! We are fighting!!! Russians are bombing Mariupol with aviation and everything else there is," he wrote on Facebook on March 9. Since then, no one has heard from him. Halabuda continues to aid the war effort from Zaporizhzhya while continuing the search for Dmytro.

Most of internally displaced persons and refugees fled Mariupol through Dnipro. Between February and August, a single volunteer center in Dnipro provided shelter for over 220,000 IDPs from Mariupol and the rest of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti. This hub was established by Kirilo. He had left Mariupol but stayed in Ukraine to help others.

> Together with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, we created the largest humanitarian centre for refugees in Ukraine. . . . Every day, 2500+ refugees from the East of Ukraine get all the help they need here: clothes, medicines, hygiene products, bed linen, food. In three to four days, we use up 20 tons of aid to refugees. Now a centre for social and psychological rehabilitation of refugees is being created.

This center in Dnipro is called "Little Mariupol," and I visited it in August 2022. One room is a presentation room with a library of donated books and a gallery of paintings from Mariupol artists. The next room is a café. The idea was to create free space for all Ukrainian war refugees and to offer them help and education in the form of seminars and workshops related to Ukrainian culture or English language classes. When I visited, I was surrounded by Mariupol survivors: one of them made me coffee and another served

10 Kaluzhna, "Dmytro Chychera znyk," August 22, 2022.

it while I watched the wife of an imprisoned Azovstal fighter play and laugh with her son. For that moment, they were absorbed in a game rather than war, in the relative peace and safety that Kirilo created.

Most people fled Mariupol during the first weeks of Russian shelling, including Marichka or Valery. But unlike Marichka, Valery returned. Initially, he had relocated Iskrennost to a town outside of Mariupol where he remained while street fights were still ongoing. Once Russian control of Mariupol was achieved and shelling ceased, he returned. According to available information, Valery was seen at a Mariupol parade commemorating the May 9 Victory, together with the DNR leader Pushilin. At that time, it was unclear what role he had assumed, but in December 2022, Valery made another public appearance where he was introduced as the head of the Children, Family and Youth Department of the local administration.

"His duties include ensuring and implementing measures for the 'correct' patriotic education of children and youth under the auspices of the Russian Federation. He manages the organization and holding of 'military-patriotic' actions in the city,"[11] states the report.

Part of the military-patriotic activities are conscription and military training of children and the youth. Journalist Anna described Valery's role as a director of the DNR equivalent of "Hitler Jugend." As a result of his collaboration, Valery has been sentenced in absentia to ten years in prison. Whether rebel Misha stayed or fled, I can only guess.

Further, during the first weeks of the Russian occupation of Mariupol, the Ukrainian state had been absent both in organizing or coordinating evacuations and providing humanitarian and material aid to volunteers and refugees. It was volunteers who acted in place of governmental and humanitarian institutions and established the necessary infrastructure.

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11 "Mariupolskogo kolaboranta, yakomu okupanty doviryly vykhovannia molodi, v Ukraini zasudyly na 10 rokiv" [Mariupol Collaborator Entrusted by Occupiers to Raise the Youth is Sentenced in Ukraine to 10 Years], *0629*, May 24, 2023, https://www.0629.com.ua/news/3601575/mariupolskogo-kolaboranta-akomu-okupanti-dovirili-vihovanna-molodi-v-ukraini-zasudili-na-10-rokiv-foto.

It was the same people who were at the forefront of Mariupol resistance in 2013–2014 that have been at the heart of humanitarian and military resistance in 2022. They are the faces of active resistance:

> You're asking if [Mariupoltsy will] come back? For a lot of people Mariupol became a unique city. City that counters the myth for those who think Mariupol—that's a "dormitory" [for factory employees] in between two factories. It is a city of creative people. And exactly these people will determine the future face of Mariupol after [Ukraine's] victory.[12]

The past achievements and current efforts keep people fighting in any way they can. And they expect us—the international community—to fight with them.

I will end this book by quoting a letter Marichka wrote on behalf of Novyi Mariupol, to ask the EU for support against the Russian invasion:

> Yesterday morning the sound of heavy artillery exploding in our area woke the entire city up. Tomorrow, the city could wake up and discover it has been occupied.
>
> From the moment the Russian armed forces entered the Ukrainian city of Novoazovsk . . . Mariupol is preparing for war.
>
> To be more exact, we are preparing a resistance to the Russian-led war. Students have left their studies to join the ranks of the territorial defense battalion in order to protect their native city.
>
> The people of Mariupol are bringing warm clothing, food, construction materials, flak jackets and helmets to their self-organized headquarters. Using their own shovels, ordinary citizens are digging trenches; trenches that are supposed to protect them from the heavy artillery of the invading Russian army. These are not the Middle Ages, but Europe in the 21st Century.

12 Maria Bubnova, private Facebook account, 2022.

Surely, Russia will use its powerful information channels to tell you about the "Kyiv junta" and of "the liberation of Russian speaking people" of the Southeast. If these claims were true, how is one, then, to understand the trenches, camouflage, and bomb shelters? Is this the way liberators are welcomed? No, this is how people welcome an aggressor. This is how people are preparing against occupation by the Russian army.

We are citizens of our city and we are using our right to self-defence. One must not put too much hope into some ceasefire negotiated in Minsk. Unfortunately, we are dealing with those who are accustomed to violating their agreements.

By way of this letter, we appeal to the citizens of cities in the European Union. Please, look at how desperately the people of Mariupol are struggling for their freedom; how devotedly they are responding to the aggression of a much more powerful aggressor. Would you not also do the same if Russian tanks suddenly were to appear in your city?

This is exactly the reason why we are turning to you with a plea to support Mariupol and show solidarity with us—as we stand against Putin's bloody campaign and show we are capable of defense. The way you will show solidarity with us is up to you. Do anything, write to us or even an open letter to Russia's government, organize a protest [feed] on Twitter or a press conference. Of course, such actions will not stop Putin, but—at least—it will help the truth to be heard in this terrible war. Today, just like in the Soviet times, Russia is "liberating" people using its tanks while ordinary people risk their lives to protect their freedom.[13]

This was not February 2022. This was September 2014.

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13 Euromaidan Press, September Contributor, "Mariupol Appeals to the EU Citizens," *Euromaidan Press*, September 7, 2014, https://euromaidanpress.com/2014/09/07/mariupol-appeals-to-the-eu-citizens/.

Conclusion

I am writing this conclusion at a Ukrainian military base somewhere along the 1200 km long frontline. Russian full-scale invasion has been going on for two hundred days. Wives are still waiting for their Azov husbands and Mariupoltsy are still dreaming of coming home. Ukrainians are still fighting for their freedom.

I have been in Ukraine most of the past six months. My first objective was to help Ukraine in the capacity I could: by fundraising, interpreting, and facilitating humanitarian aid and training to soldiers. My second objective was to learn about the war and its dynamics as closely as my contact network enables me to. I saw the sites of crime and destruction that had shocked the world, from liberated Bucha to contested Soledar.

For two months I was embedded with a group of foreign volunteer EOD technicians. I assisted them in evacuating civilians from the heavily shelled Bakhmut area. I sought out people who wished to be evacuated and engaged in conversations with those who refused. I tried to understand those who fled shelling only to change their minds and return home. I watched residential areas being destroyed by rockets, cluster bombs, mines, artillery fire, white phosphorus, etc.

Ethnographic research was a by-product of my war experience, though conversations I had during evacuations helped me better understand some of the shared traits of the regional identity I had observed and described but never experienced in such a violent environment.

Whether to stay or leave was often a question of life and death; but the reasons for staying and fleeing were conditional upon the same premise: the uncertainty of what the next minute and hour will bring. This is what Mariupoltsy must have felt, I kept thinking.

These were the most frequent questions locals asked me during evacuations:

Where are you taking me?
What will happen to me?
Where will we live, and how long for?

My answers sometimes determined whether they left or stayed. For most people, the unpredictability of what awaits them if they flee was scarier than facing shells and bullets. These were some of the reasons they gave for refusing evacuation:

I have no-one. No-one needs me.
I was born here, I will die here.
I would rather take a bullet to the head than to leave my life behind.
    For what?
I am not leaving. I have three dogs.
People like you bring us food, medication. We can stay at home.
I'm too old.
I'm not ready. Come back tomorrow. I will be ready then.
Maybe the Russians won't break through . . .

Their reasoning was less about politics and more about individual frames: while in most cases amplified by the unprecedented and unexpected scale of violence and destruction.

On the second day of evacuations, an old lady, an evacuee, asked: "We stayed during German occupation only to flee Russian 'liberation'?" She shook her head and made inferences about the Soviet past:

> During the Soviet Union we were never hungry, always had clothes to wear. And there were no nations. We all lived as a community, whether one was a Ukrainian or Uzbekistani. Or even a Jew—a person is a person. And whenever one needed anything, someone helped. "You have four children, come, take this flour. You need more milk than me." This reminded me of that Soviet song. . . . What is it called . . . I know! "My house, my street—the Soviet Union!"

This is what one of the key tenets of Donbas regionalism—Soviet nostalgia—meant in practice. It was not political; it was sentimental.

~

The purpose of my ethnographic research in eastern Ukraine was to study social mobilization and the local contexts within which this mobilization occurred, through the lens of individual frames and narratives. I aimed to answer three research questions about taking political action: Who were these people? What were their motives? How were these motives reflected in their actions? The rationale of choosing the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti as my main research locations was threefold. Firstly, I realized the general lack of academic studies about the Maidan and post-Maidan protest period in these regions; not only the Antimaidan and Russian Spring mobilization but also the Maidan support mobilization. A detailed development and course of the former is missing altogether, while the latter is focused on protests in central and western Ukraine, largely Kyiv-centric, and analyzed from a comparative perspective.[1]

Secondly, I realized the methodological potential of immersion to study social movements. It's in allowing to collect original data and from both sides of the contention, in conversation with one another, thereby increasing the depth and objectivity of analysis. Employing my conceptual framework and immersive research can be replicated in any location and environment where collective action takes place. Employing it across the locations where the Antimaidan and Russian Spring movements were active would, importantly, lead to a better understanding of the context and development of the war in the Donbas.

Thirdly, I selected Mariupol as a case study because its residents experienced and participated in all stages of mobilization; and after the scoping visit to Mariupol, I realized it was possible to gather the necessary dataset to study this period. The lack of existing academic studies on the period between protest and war that drove me

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1 Olha Onuch, "Who were the Protesters?," *Journal of Democracy* 25:3 (2014), 44–51; Olha Onuch, "EuroMaidan Protests in Ukraine: Social Media versus Social Networks," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62:4 (2015), 217–235; Olha Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse, "The Maidan in Movement: Diversity and the Cycles of Protest," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68:4 (2016), 556–587.

to generate primary data from witnesses and perpetrators proved particularly important after February 2022.

A similar data set from this period would be impossible to gather now: it was already difficult to gain the trust of respondents of Antimaidan and Russian Spring supporters because they rarely talked about this period with strangers for security or personal reasons. Since 2022, these concerns combined with the societal trauma inflicted on communities by the invasion have only become greater. Further, Russian occupation makes access, thus ethnographic research, impossible. Mariupol, as it was in 2013–2014, does not exist anymore.

To conclude the methodological aspects of this book, immersive fieldwork proved a key method to studying mobilization: it was necessary because-, at first, everyone considered me a spy. Some contacts explicitly asked me this question and others were cautious in their behavior and information they shared with me. Over years of acquaintance, extending my contact network, repeated meetings, and interactions with my respondents helped me develop an air of integrity. I gained my respondents' trust and in return they shared with me their stories. It was stories that revealed the uniqueness and diversity of my respondents' frames and actions during their mobilization.

Focusing on the beliefs, meanings, and values that my respondents assigned to their actions reflected their social reality, on the one hand, and specifics of the region, on the other. This included the regional identity of people, as well as the history, culture, social, and political characteristics that had shaped people's behavior and attitudes. The stories revealed the dynamism of collective action that social movement literature acknowledges but studies the least. The synthesis of social movement concepts and ethnographic research methods allows one to grasp the fluidity of mobilization and its course in all its stages from the start through to demobilization, and thus explore the role of factors such as personal makeup, violence, or emotion in impacting mobilization.

Social movements are reflections of their participants: of what they think, what they fear, what they hope for, and what they believe. The stories show heterogeneity of actors and claimants and a

diversity of motives and actions. Unique in scope and nuance, these stories inform the ideational aspects of mobilization, social and personal identity of participants, the cognitive processes behind their motives for action, and the frames that these actions reflect.

The overarching context within which social interaction emerged and fluctuated was political violence. Violence—whether experienced or imagined—accompanied all cycles of collective action; on the one hand, its power activated latent attitudes and emotional pressures that incited mobilization. On the other, violence led to demobilization.

During my fieldwork, I travelled extensively in the government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions. My aim was to get to know the region and experience life in the shadow of war. I experienced some of what my respondents had experienced: I learned about everyday life in Mariupol from a local family with whom I stayed two weeks; I spent three days with volunteers delivering aid to soldiers at the frontline; I observed locals in the streets, shops, or cafés, accidentally overhearing their conversations. The engagement with my respondents enabled me to understand better the social and political milieu of the east, with its characteristics and specifics. When I interviewed my respondents, we often spoke for hours. They showed me sites I wanted to see and explained to me what I wanted to understand or where to seek answers. My respondents' keenness to have their stories heard and my extensive efforts to get their stories right enabled me to acquire this unique dataset.

While the continuous research over the past five years founded the evidence base for this book, Putin's 2022 invasion pushed me to write about the resistance of a city that no longer exists the way we knew it. After February 24, 2022, instead of demonstrating political views and affiliations in the streets, Mariupoltsy had to make existential choices: whether to evacuate from their homes, hold on and resist a little longer, or live their lives within the "Russian world." Continuing to search for stories about locals' resistance and compliance remains key to observe sociopolitical trends in the region and how the Russian invasion has impacted these trends.

This book can act as a guide to navigate research on social mobilization in high-risk environments. It is about mobilization and

resistance, including the aspect of resistance to change. Unique in social movement literature, I studied mobilization also through immersive engagement with ordinary residents who were mostly passive observers of events. Yet, this was key to uncovering societal trends that enabled and shaped mobilization. Locals conversed most frequently about politics and their economic situation. Among the older generation, the support for Putin's annexation of Crimea correlated with nostalgic reminiscing about past memories related to spending holidays in Crimea and traveling, feeling of societal belonging and closeness, or nostalgia about one's youth and favorable living conditions.

But Soviet nostalgia and Donbas regionalism did not automatically mean pro-Russian sentiments of support for Putin, regional autonomy, the war, or exclusivism and anti-Ukrainian tendencies. Locals who wished for the Soviet past considered the war to be a result of domestic politics, namely Ukrainian elites who overthrew Yanukovych and subsequently stirred civil discontent. The Antimaidan was a support movement for Yanukovych and the political status quo, while the Russian Spring was in this sense a resistance movement against the "illegal coup."

Locals' conversations about politics often focused on the geopolitical "Great Power" perception of Russia and measured against the US. The latter was associated with territorial expansionism and cultural decay. In Ukrainian affairs, this expansionism was linked with the US support for the Maidan, overthrow of Yanukovych, and financing the war.

Further, resistance to Ukrainian national and cultural tropes in the region was in many cases not about "fascism" but about disconnect from the Ukrainian nation-state. This derived from decades of purposeful lack of Ukrainisation of cities formed by Soviet industrialization that brought to the region new (predominantly Russian) ethnicities and nationalities and tied the region to the Soviet Union and Russia. Donbas was linked with industry and wealth and high societal status of Russians and the Russian language. Further, some of those who considered themselves Russian nationalists defined themselves against the Ukrainians whom they considered "lower" or "second class" "subordinates to ethnic Russians." These far-right

tendencies link Donbas regionalism with the interpretation of the southeastern regions of Ukraine as a historically Russian land rather than associating Ukrainians collectively with collaboration with the Nazis.

Lastly, the "lack" of Ukraine one experiences in the Donbas is reflected in the language people speak or instances of uneasiness when confronted with Ukrainian national symbols and public demonstration of Ukrainian identity. These insights and observations shed light on the relationship Donbas residents have with Ukraine and Russia and how they demonstrate this relationship through their social and political behavior.

Thus, ethnographic immersion enables an empirically rich and detailed study of social movements from within the social, political, and cultural environments that shape and affect the emergence and course of collective action. Not only does listening to people's stories enable the generation of original data that would otherwise remain concealed in the memories of witnesses and perpetrators but observing their way of life gives insights into their everyday activities, their living conditions, and their grievances and attitudes—into what constitutes their social reality. This in turn uncovers the psychological dimensions of social mobilization: the emotional pressures that urge people to act, social identity that people employ by choosing sides, and personal identity that makes them choose sides in the first place. Ethnography adds depth and focus to social movement theory on the ideational factors of social movements from below, informing why collective action frames resonate with their audiences.

Inspired by the methodology of political ethnographers who engage in immersive research of collective action, I explored the core traits of the regional identity of people in the Donbas reflected in their political behavior, in the narratives they believed, and in their decision to, or not to act upon them. I connected these traits with their demonstration on the ground as mobilizing but also factors that account for the lack of mobilization. I brought culture, history, emotions, narratives, and stories to theoretical concepts of social mobilization in high-risk scenarios of political violence to further understanding of social action and inaction of audiences.

Passive compliance proved critical for the movement to rise and gain its momentum.

Ethnography was the tool that gave these theoretical concepts their substance and a level of understanding. This is because it promotes empathy toward the subject of inquiry and guides the researcher to ask questions without expecting answers that would confirm hypotheses or expect similar accounts. It forces one to listen attentively to diverging narratives without judgment or subjectivity. Unlike deductions, immersion forces one to be open to new possibilities and thus disrupts our existing frames. Not looking for confirmations enables one to pay attention to the way people talk about some topics, while keeping quiet about others, or how their behavior and expressions reflect the meaning they assign to their narratives.

This war is a war of emotions that united strangers but divided families and that helped create the basis for a Ukrainian civil society to rise, but at the cost of "othering" the Donbas from within. This happened within weeks and lasts still as a disconnect between people who have their own truths and their own interpretations of reality that no confrontations or reasoning alone can change.

Among the existing trends I tried to disrupt is labeling. The Antimaidan, the Russian Spring, and the opolchenie are interchangeably referred to and generalized as "pro-Russian." This not only is reductionist and semantically incorrect but also dismisses the inquiry into the movements' development and course. We cannot label these movements as unified in their ideology or participation (as the label would imply), because they had different organizational and ideational layers and they were heterogeneous in claim makers and perpetrators, audiences, and their objectives. While there was an element of resistance, just as important was the struggle for power and political control. In order to analyze and be true to the findings, distinctions had to be made: my respondents never explicitly self-identified as pro-Russian, and, often, their actions had less to do with "Russia" and more with their grievances (whether ideological, political, or economic) or personal considerations.

Further, to mobilize on the side of the Russian Spring for sentimental, ideological, or nostalgic appeal of the "Russian world" was

one thing but establishing self-defense groups and taking part in the violent takeover of buildings was another. In some cases, people took part for personal gain, feeling of power and status, out of passion, or fear. Rebel Misha is a Mariupol resident who self-mobilised in response to specific events on the ground that he interpreted according to his preexisting beliefs and real-time perceptions. As he said, at the start, no one knew what they were getting themselves into because they were inside the movement, in a situational vacuum. Similarly, ordinary Ukrainians interpreted the Russian Spring according to their own hopes and aspirations. While some dreamt of the Donbas integrated into the Russian Federation, ordinary protest goers never wanted war. Even locals who explicitly supported Putin's foreign policy and voted in the May 11 referendum for the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti told me they felt betrayed by Russia when it crossed the border into the Donbas, just as others felt betrayed by Yanukovych when he fled at the end of the Maidan revolution. By summer 2014, ordinary Mariupoltsy had experienced that life under DNR was, in fact, worse than before: now civilians were suffering. Ideology was replaced with pragmatism of fear that one's home would be destroyed in a war that they did not want or understand. While the August mobilization in Mariupol bore patriotic Ukrainian symbolism, it also carried with it the sober realization that Mariupol is better off than Ukrainian than occupied and shelled in war.

Mariupol became more "Ukrainian" through pro-Ukrainian activism and volunteering movements supportive of the Ukrainian armed formations. This originated in the efforts of a few who organized and fostered the Maidan revolution and aided the effort of the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. The city also became more "Ukrainian" through public demonstration of pro-Ukrainian allegiance during war-related commemorations, cultural events, and holidays. Many, if not most locals, however, stayed the same with the same everyday problems and the same political affiliations. Like in most parts of the liberated Donbas, life either returned to normal or resumed by the necessity of their everyday realities of the residents' lives. While some left their homes for the trenches, most never left their homes in the first place: Mariupoltsy wanted to live

better and wealthier lives, but they were not prepared to fight for it. By remaining passive, particularly by not mobilizing in opposition to the Russian Spring, locals aided its rise and diffusion.

This leads to the last point. Scholars are in dispute whether the Ukrainian local support base for the opolchenie was strong enough for the war to be called civil. When I was asking my respondents (prior to 2022) to characterize the Donbas war, their responses varied. Pro-Ukrainian activists were in consensus to blame Russia for imposing, launching, and sustaining the war. Rebels I spoke with blamed Ukrainian politicians (Yanukovych opposition) directly or indirectly by supporting the Maidan, thereby support-ing violence and "illegal" removal of Yanukovych. Locals with no political affiliation and passive observers swayed to blame "the politicians" and oligarchs—Ukrainian and/or Russian. Locals expressed material grievances (describing the war as a money-making enterprise for the powerful and rich) and the sentiment that as individuals, they cannot impact political developments in the country.

At the same time, journalist Anna told me that a civil war could occur because the traits that Donbas residents bear make them susceptible to the influence of Russia, through alienating from the Ukrainian nation-state. For Ivan, the war developed because of Donbas-specific characteristics that Russia exploited. No one explicitly mentioned language or ethnic grievances as causal for the development of the war, but demands for Russian language status and narratives of protecting Russian speakers were a contributing factor in mobilizing and sustaining the Antimaidan and Russian Spring support base. But this was a reflection of the regional iden-tity and regional patriotism, rather than a singular causal factor. For many, the origins of the war were intertwined with the Soviet and Russian influence on the society, culture, politics, and economy of the region vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia. This is reflected in the narratives that resonated with Antimaidan and Russian Spring sup-porters that are not new as well as in the minority support for the Maidan and pro-Ukrainian movements.

Combining these accounts with documentary analysis of the chronology of events from November 2013 and the variety of groups

and networks of the Russian Spring and opolchenie movements, the onset of the conventional war between Russia and Ukraine is easier to comprehend operationally—the Russian Spring developed into an armed rebellion that was aided by the Russian Federation but supported by a critical mass of ordinary residents both actively and passively. This was enough for a rebellion to sustain itself for the time being but not enough to sustain a war; had Russia not sustained and increased the support thereof, the opolchenie would have crumbled. This was clear by July 2014 in the light of the successes of Ukrainian liberation missions.

The Russian objective after Yanukovych was toppled was to destabilize Ukraine and prevent the May Presidential elections from taking place in the southeast. The method the Russians employed was framing the Russian Spring as a civil affair—a grassroots resistance to the post-Maidan government—that demanded the return of Yanukovych. This is seen in the emergence of "People's Leaders" like Kuzmenko—the local businessman whose charisma and narratives of regional independence and protecting Russian speakers from Ukrainian "fascists" increased popular support for the movement. They were used to disable local administration, take control over strategic buildings and weapons storage, and prepare the referendum of independence. If they tried to claim power, they were replaced. But the locals did not know this; for the Russian Spring supporters, the movement was as Russia framed it: resistance to "Ukrainian nationalists [who] were coming to the Donbas to impose a rule over them like they did in Kyiv."

When journalist Anna said that civil war is possible because the Donbas people are susceptible to Russian influence, she was referring to the regional identity and a specific mentality that made anti-Ukrainian narratives resonate. Tatyana—an activist–laughed when I said I wanted to understand the locals: "Want to understand the people of the Donbas? Let's go out on the street with my Ukrainian flag and you'll understand!-." We stepped onto the street and unfolded the flag. She held one end, I held the other. Seconds later, an older married couple passed us. They stopped, shook their heads offended by the sight, and the male exclaimed: "What are you

doing here with that Poroshenko[2] flag?!" Tatyana burst out laughing and replied: "Poroshenko flag?! This is not Poroshenko's flag, it's the flag of your country!" The couple mumbled something derogatory and then walked off. This was in 2019.

Similarly to journalist Anna, Anatoly called such attitudes the legacies of Soviet and Russian traditions in the Donbas. For him, this was the real reason why the conflict and war developed and the core of what "Russian influence" within the Donbas meant. To make me understand, he asked what language the Donbas people spoke. I said *Russkii*. He replied: "Exactly. The war was possible because the Donbas people don't speak Ukrainian."

This made me recall one overnight train journey from Kyiv to Mariupol. I was traveling with a Donetsk native. He was on the phone as he walked in. He asked me whether he had the lower bed. I confirmed in Ukrainian. Surprised first, he looked at me suspiciously. "I'm traveling with some Ukrainian girl," he said on the phone. To break the hour of silence, I said, in Russian, that I was in fact a Slovak. He shook my hand, and said he lived in Donetsk. We spoke for the next four hours. He confessed he made extra money working on what used to be illegal *kopanki*—piles of mining waste containing low-quality coal that is collected to mix into high-quality coal and sold at full price to make better profit. He was now traveling to collect and deliver contraband back to Donetsk. He had a young daughter and a wife there. I asked him what life is like under DNR occupation and he replied in a way that encapsulates the Donbas mentality: "Normal. And for those who know how to earn money, it's even better than before the war."

If there were to be one takeaway from this book, let it be this: individuals are as critical as masses, ideas as important as material resources, and beliefs and emotions as powerful as weapons.

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2 Petro Poroshenko won the May 25, 2014, presidential elections and was the first Donbas war president who promoted Donbas-unpopular policies such as war mobilization, decommunization policy to remove memorials celebrating the Soviet past, and blocking Russian media and websites to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign.

Acknowledgments

Appendices

Chronology of Events

2013

- November 21—Start of the Maidan revolution on the Maidan square in Kyiv and start of Mariupol Maidan and Antimaidan movements
- November 30—Violent dispersal of protesters by Berkut riot police
- December 1—A massive increase in Maidan protest participation across Ukraine in response to Berkut violence

2014

- January 16—The adoption of anti-protest laws that agitated strong anti-government mobilization
- January 19—The onset of a sustained violent protest cycle on Hrushevskoho street in Kyiv in response to the anti-protest laws, also agitating anti-Maidan and self-defense mobilization in eastern Ukraine
- February 20—The single most violent event of the Kyiv revolution, resulting in the death of both Maidan protesters and Berkut policemen
- February 22—President Yanukovych flees Kyiv following Maidan violence, marking the end of the Maidan revolution
- February 23—The first violent attack against a Maidan protester in Mariupol
- February 26—The start of the Russian Spring movement in Crimea

- March 1—The start of the Russian Spring movement in south-eastern Ukraine
- March 15—Crimea becomes incorporated into the Russian Federation
- April 6—Luhansk SBU is attacked and becomes occupied and weapons are seized, marking the start of the armed opolchenie rebellion
- April 7—Self-proclamation of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic
- April 13—The City Council in Mariupol is attacked by Mariupol and DNR rebels
- April 16—An armed attack of Mariupol and DNR rebels against the National Guard at the Military Unit 3057 in Mariupol
- April 27—Self-Proclamation of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic
- May 2—An attack on the Trade Union building in Odesa by radical Maidan protesters, resulting in the death of Russian Spring protesters
- May 9—A Victory Day commemoration and a terrorist attack on the police Directorate of the Interior Ministry (UVD) in Mariupol
- May 11—Referendum on the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti
- May 17—Self-proclamation of Donetsk People's Republic in Mariupol
- May 25—Ukrainian presidential elections
- June 16—The liberation of Mariupol
- August 26–30—Mass self-defense mobilization in Mariupol as -the Russian army crosses Ukrainian border

2022

- February 24—The Russian president Putin launches an all-out invasion of Ukraine
- February 27—Russian army's advances into Mariupol, start of urban warfare
- March 3—The Russian blockade of Mariupol begins

- March 9—The Mariupol maternity hospital strike
- March 16—The Mariupol Theatre strike
- April–May—Mariupol defenders and over one thousand civilians retreat to Azovstal and defense of Azovstal begins
- May 16–20—Azovstal siege ends by defenders' forced surrender, Azovstal becomes controlled by Russia, and Mariupol occupation is thus complete

Glossary

Anti-protest laws—also regarded as "Dictatorial laws" proposed by the Party of Regions and passed by the Parliament on January 16, 2014 that de facto banned public demonstrations against the government, triggering a violent protest cycle from January 19 to February 21 that ultimately saw President Yanukovych out of office.

Armiya Novorossii (Armeiskii Korpus DNR, LNR) [Army of Novorossiya, Military Corps DNR, LNR]—the armed forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics formed on May 22, 2014. Its objective was protection of the territory of the DNR and LNR against the Ukrainian government. Its core structure consisted of automated and fire brigades, and battalions.

ATO (Anti-Terrorystychna Operatsiya) [Anti-terrorist Operation]—launched on April 14, 2014, by the Anti-terrorist Centre under the formal command of the deputy chief of the Security Services of Ukraine (SBU).

Azov—territorial defense formation of volunteers and recruits, prominent in the Mariupol sector of ATO. Established on May 5, 2014, under the command of Andrii Biletsky.

Battalions—territorial defense formations on both sides of the contention, consisting of volunteers and recruits.

Berkut—riot police force of the Ministry of Interior under Yanukovych, active during the Maidan protests; it was disbanded after the fall of Yanukovych.

Blokpost [roadblock, checkpoint]—a control post of Ukrainian armed forces and the D/LNR armed forces usually made of concrete panels.

BMP/BTR—armored personnel military vehicles.

Donbas (Donetskii Basin) [Donetsk Basin]—a territory within the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti and south-west Russian, rich in natural resources and heavily industrialized.

Donetsk Clan—business-political group centered around oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and Party of Regions leader Boris Kolesnikov, representing an informal system of political governance through business links and crony politics that is common in Ukrainian politics.

Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (DNR) [Donetsk People's Republic]—a self-declared quasi-republic, proclaimed by the opolchenie leader Aleksandr Borodai on April 7, 2014. Following a referendum on May 11, 2014, the DNR declared independence from the territory and governance of Ukraine.

Diverzno-Razveditelnye Gruppy (DRG) [Subversive-Reconnaissance Groups]—paramilitary and military groups performing various tactical (reconnaissance and sabotage) tasks in Crimea and in the Donbas. These groups were formed and organized by locals (Ukrainian civilians or officers) and foreign state and non-state actors recruited by the Russian security services or Russian special forces (Spetsnaz).

FSB RF (Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii) [Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation]—the principal security agency of the Russian Federation, under the command of the President of the Russian Federation. During the Russian Spring, the FSB was responsible for recruitment, financing, training, and control over supportive protest movements, civil organizations, and armed paramilitary formations. Since the establishment of the D/LNR, the FSB has exerted control over its power vertical, including appointing and removing leaders from power.

Gorsovet (Gorodskii Sovet) [City Council]—local administrative body with governing powers, with representatives elected locally, headed by mayors.

GRU (Glavnoe Razvedochnoe Upravlenie) [Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation]—during the Russian Spring the GRU was responsible for the coordination of protest actions, organization, coordination of local and Russian special reconnaissance and sabotage groups active in Crimea and the Donbas. This included distribution of weapons, training, and military advising—the role of the so-called *kuratori*. The GRU exerted its power from the Russian Federation and through the network of kuratori located within the Donbas.

KPU (Komunistychna Partiya Ukrainy)—the Communist Party of Ukraine.

Kuratori [advisers/coordinators]—Russian military agents advising and coordinating the Russian Spring mobilization and opolchenie combat groups. Kuratori provided tactical advice, training of recruits and volunteers, and distribution of weapons. Kuratori exerted influence on political elites and oversaw political events from the onset of the Maidan protests.

Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (LNR) [Luhansk People's Republic]—self-proclaimed on April 27, 2014, by Valery Bolotov, declared governmental and territorial independence from Ukraine on May 12, 2014, following the illegal referendum of independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti on May 11, 2014.

Maidan revolution—the popular revolution that started on November 21, 2013, and ended on February 22 when former president Yanukovych fled office.

Maidanovtsy—collective name for Maidan activists and supporters.

Mariupoltsy—collective name for the residents of Mariupol.

Militsiya [police]—until 2015 the official name for the National Police of Ukraine.

Natsionalna Hvardiia Ukrainy NGU [National Guard of Ukraine]—military-political forces with armed factions and law enforcing functions, under the command of the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine. First functioning between 1991 and 2000, it was reestablished by the post-Maidan government in March 2014.

Novorossiya [New Russia]—a historical term and territorial/cultural myth established during the Russian Empire as an umbrella term for eastern and southern regions of Ukraine that, according to the myth, belong within Russian territory. It was repurposed in 2014 by the Russian Spring and L/DNR leaders for propaganda, recruitment, nation-building., and territorial claim-making purposes, to justify the existence of the L/DNR Republics as indigenous Donbas entities.

Oblast, oblasti—province, provinces/region, regions.

Opolchenie [militia]—collective name for the heterogeneous irregular anti-governmental armed paramilitary formations operating in eastern Ukraine from April 2014, within the borders of the unrecognized D/LNR republics, formed during the civil unrest

and subsequent armed confrontation in the east of Ukraine. The main enemy is the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. The symbols are St. George ribbons, Russian tricolours, and DNR and LNR tricolours.

OUN (Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv) [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists]—a Ukrainian liberation movement in the 1930–1940s that included a paramilitary wing led by Stepan Bandera. In 2014, Bandera was re-employed by opponents of Maidan, as a symbol of Ukrainian nationalism and struggle for independence embodied in the Maidan faction and volunteer movement Pravyi Sektor.

Party of Regions (Partiya Regionov, PoR)—a major Ukrainian political party established in 1997, centrist and pro-Russian in its economic and sociopolitical orientation. Between 2010 and 2014, PoR led the coalition of the Ukrainian parliament and its member Viktor Yanukovych held the post of President of Ukraine.

Podval [basement]—basement of Ukrainian panel houses used by the opolchenie for the purposes of detention, interrogation, or imprisonment

Pravyi Sektor [Right Sector]—Kyiv pro-Maidan protest cluster and pro-Ukrainian territorial volunteer battalion. In the Donbas, a collective term for Maidan supporters and participants, associated with disorder, violence, and radical nationalism. During the Russian Spring, Pravyi Sektor transformed into a volunteer territorial defense movement.

Regional Administration—regional or district administration, governing body presided by regional Councils of parliamentary deputies. Councils have control over regional and local budgets and regulations and are subordinated to the president of Ukraine and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine.

Russian Spring (Russkaya Vesna)—a period between late February and May 2014 marking both a heterogeneous popular and grassroots mobilization and a sociopolitical movement co-organized and coordinated by the FSB and GRU Russian intelligence agencies. It originated in Crimea on February 26, 2014, and from

March 1 it was adopted during support protests across southeast-
ern Ukraine, bearing the same name, and a variety of narratives
with pro-Crimea and pro-Russian, anti-Maidan, and anti-fascist
themes.

Russkii/Russkaya [Russian]—term for Russian ethnic identity and
self-identification.

"Russian world" (Russkii Mir)—sociopolitical and geopolitical
concept developed and adopted by the Russian Federation in the
1990s, based on the idea of encompassing Russian diaspora into
a shared civilizational and geopolitical space.

SBU (Sluzhba Bezpeki Ukraini)—Ukrainian Security Services.

Spetsnaz (Voinskoye Podrazdeleniye Spetsialnogo Naznacheniya)
[Military Special Purpose Unit]—special forces of the Russian
military and intelligence agencies.

Svoboda [Freedom]—a Ukrainian political party, in 2013–2014
allied with, and actively supported, the Maidan revolution. It
became a coalition party of the post-Maidan government.

Titushki—a collective term for mercenary protest-goers, usually
groups of athletic youth wearing tracksuits, face masks, and some-
times carrying bats, hired and deployed by the Party of Regions
to disrupt opposition party meetings, such as the political 2013
movement "Get Up Ukraine" and 2013–2014 Maidan revolution.
Named after one such protest provocateur Vadim Titushko.

UDAR (Ukrayins'kyi demokratychnyi al'yans za reformy Vitaliya
Klychka) [Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms of Vitaly
Klichko]—a Ukrainian political party, in 2013–2014 allied with,
and actively supported, the Maidan revolution.

Maps

)(border crossings

Map A.1 *Mariupol in the wider region with key locations.*
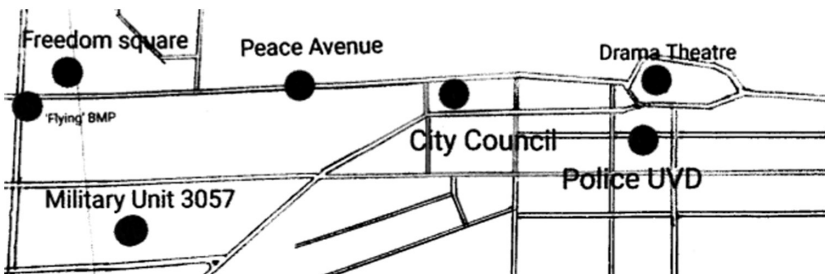
Map A.2 *Mariupol city center and key locations of protest gatherings and contention.*

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Index

The chapters in this book represent successive phases of one story—that of Mariupol, formerly Ukraine's tenth largest city, and the second-largest in the Donbas region. The author conducted her ethnographic fieldwork in this coastal town between November 2018 and August 2021. She was one of the last academics to do research in Mariupol before its invasion and eventual occupation by Russia.

"The book tells the story of the tumultuous months of the Maidan/Anti-Maidan, followed by the 'Russian Spring' and Resistance in Mariupol. Josticova offers us a gateway into the dynamic realities of a diverse set of actors. In addition to story-telling reminiscent of Alexievich, the work show-cases the abundant potential of immersive ethnography to disaggregate, expose, and explain the complex, fluid, and highly contingent nature of social mobilization. It weaves together a polyphonic tapestry of narratives carefully embedded in the rich political, social, and historical context of the Donbas and the city of Mariupol itself. Readers will also be grateful that Josticova follows her characters into 2022, providing a testimony to this city and its inhabitants. It deserves to be widely read."

Sarah Whitmore, Oxford Brookes University

About the Author

Hana Josticova is a political ethnographer, currently working as a Research Associate at Central and Eastern European Studies (CEES), University of Glasgow. Her research is centred around the origins of social mobilisation in the context of protests, rebellion and war in the Donbas, Ukraine. She is particularly interested in researching individual mobilisation in high-risk environments, and its underlying social, cultural and political factors.

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