

Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022

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The 400-day-long occupation of Ukraine has cost thousands of lives and billions of dollars and continues to threaten global stability to this day. In the aftermath of Russia's February 2022 attack on Ukraine, there has been an increasing number of studies, articles, books, and commentaries, including a book co-authored by Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll entitled *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*, which provides vital information to understand the context that preceded the 2022 invasion by focusing on the events between Russia and Ukraine from 2013-2021.

Ukraine is a bridge between Europe and Russia and thus has an important geopolitical and geoeconomic position. In forging its independence, it was forced to choose between starting the process of NATO/European Union membership with the support of the United States or to continuing its Russia-centered politics and joining the Eurasian Economic Union. With the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine voted in favor of the West, but Russia, which considered this process a threat to its national security in the context of NATO's expansion, could not accept this move and intervened indirectly (Kulalı-Martin 2024).¹ Thus, Ukraine turned into a proxy conflict. The book analyzes the causes, processes, and consequences of the War in Donbas between 2014 and 2021. The authors argue that it is analytically useful to consider the pre-2022 conflict not as a simple proxy war between Russia and the West but as a civil war. In this sense, the authors used descriptive research methods in the book.

1 For a recent discussion of NATO enlargement, see Kulalı-Martin, Yeliz. 2024. Goodbye to Russia, Russia and Russia! Finland's New NATO Chapter Within the Framework of Shelter Theory. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 21, 81: 27-44.

The book consists of eight chapters. In the first, the authors argue that the nomenclature of the war in Ukraine is controversial and that the war has been labelled as a “civil war” to claim that Russia is not involved in the war. The second chapter explains the theory of the book by proposing a three-actor strategic game in which peripheral elites in Russian-speaking communities, national elites in Kyiv, and elites in the Kremlin anticipate each other’s strategies.² It is argued that the game is played in two stages. In the first stage, elites within Russian-speaking communities try to coordinate to threaten secession or not, and in the second stage there is bargaining between capital and the potentially provocative community. This section emphasizes that if the bargain breaks down, the Russian government can intervene.

The third chapter tests the book’s theory by focusing on three major crises in Ukraine between 1991 and 2014: The declaration of independence and Crimean autonomy in 1991-1992, the Donbas offensive and Crimean separatism in 1993-1994, and the Orange Revolution in 2004. The chapter emphasizes that Russian-speaking communities can adopt the “Russian narrative” and Russia can support them. The Russian narrative emphasized the common history and suffering of Russians and Ukrainians, while the Ukrainian narrative highlighted their different histories and the violence inflicted upon Ukraine by a Moscow. These narratives should not be confused with the analytical narrative used in other parts of the book, which is a style of presentation designed by the authors to test a formal model.

The fourth chapter describes the Maidan events,³ which started with a mass social mobilization following the Ukrainian government’s rejection of the EU trade agreement and culminated in regime change. For the first time, Ukrainian police used excessive force against Maidan protesters, while a radical sub-group of protesters used violence against the police in response. Eventually the pro-Russian Party of Regions⁴ collapsed, and power passed to the pro-Western opposition. This was a crisis of political constitutionalism and was naturally analyzed differently in Russian and Western sources.

The fifth chapter describes Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the decisions by Russian-speaking elites in the region about remaining loyal to the Ukrainian state or Moscow. Taking advantage of the unrest in Ukraine, Russia deployed troops stationed in Sevastopol to the peninsula. Subsequently, Russian special forces, the so-called “green men”, seized the Crimean parliament and government buildings. As a result, the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic

2 “Domestic order in Post-Soviet Eurasia is held in place by three kinds of players anticipating each other’s strategies: 1) central political elites in Russia, 2) central political elites in the neighboring state, and 3) community-level elites in the periphery of that state. This triadic relationship is a defining feature of post-Soviet politics since Russia has the potential to insert itself into bargaining between its communities and titular capitals.” (p. 26).

3 Western and Russian sources agree that the Russian-Ukrainian war started on the Maidan. Russian-speaking people on the Maidan were given leaflets by Russia: if this change is a coup d’état by fascists, then the Ukrainian people should arm themselves and demand protection from Russia. This information was spread in Crimea and in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Russia still believes that the government in Ukraine is a thin layer of CIA-backed “fascists” and that once Ukraine gets rid of these CIA-backed “fascists” there will be a “real” Ukraine, which is essentially pro-Russian and wants to reintegrate into the Russian world.

4 In 2010, the former pro-Russian Ukrainian political party came to power after its candidate Viktor Yanukovich won the presidential elections and a parliamentary coalition was formed.

of Crimea, which met on March 6, 2014, decided to hold a referendum on the annexation of Crimea to Russia.

The sixth chapter compares the annexation of Crimea with the “Russian Spring” in eastern and southern Ukraine. The question was whether the interstate border would change again. The Russian Spring was a large-scale uprising of pro-Russian public opinion in the regions of Ukraine in response to the coup in Kyiv in 2014. It was supported by the Russian Federation, which stood up to protect the population in the then south-eastern region of the neighboring country. Following Crimea, Donbas also made its choice. In April 2014, representatives of the administrative-territorial units of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions declared the creation of two new states: the Donetsk People’s Republic (*Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika*, DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (*Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika*, LNR).

The seventh chapter describes the processes that collapsed the social order in eastern Donbas. New social actors emerged in the region, new militias took control of the territory, and the unrecognized republics of the DNR and LNR emerged. As Ukrainian forces retook their territory in August 2014, it was unclear whether Russia would send troops to help pro-Russian groups, although the Russian military shelled Ukrainian border troops and sent weapons. The realization that no law enforcement agencies could make arrests encouraged some groups and drove new communities of local actors into a sustained uprising.

The eighth chapter analyses Russia’s military interventions and the signing of the Minsk Agreement, supported by France, Germany, and finally the United Nations Security Council, which led to diplomatic deadlock on the one hand and the further “Ukrainization” of Ukraine and the further Russification of the DNR/LNR on the other. The final part of the chapter describes Putin’s decision to abrogate the Minsk Process and launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The emphasis on Ukraine’s activism in *Ukraine’s Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*, especially through the civil war paradigm, was noteworthy in highlighting the importance of violence as a catalyst for both pro- and anti-Maidan activists. It underscores that most of the initial mobilization was done by people with Ukrainian passports, which is what makes it a civil war. Furthermore, after Crimea, Russian-speaking Ukrainians were fighting other Russian-speaking Ukrainians over the future borders of Ukraine. The authors’ assertion that the term civil war applies primarily to the first months of the war in Donbas will not be welcomed by Russians sympathetic to Ukraine and observers who support the Russian narrative of the war.

This book is recommended for those who want to know about the processes in Ukraine and the War in Donbas, as the authors have done an excellent job of describing the complex situation in Donbas between 2014-2022 by consulting various sources. Nonetheless, there are some factual errors. To name a few, the authors claim that all separatist warlords are from Russia, citing Motorola and Givi (p. 158), but Givi was from the Donetsk region, as was Zakharchenko (p. 93-180). They also claim that the Donbas battalion was “destroyed” in

Ilovaisk (pp. 168-169), but this information does not reflect the reality, as this battalion lost part of its personnel in Ilovaisk, but then actively participated in other operations in January-February 2015.⁵ For Ukrainian experts, such errors lead to the conclusion that the War in Donbas was not sufficiently researched by the authors. It is also noticeable that the authors repeat the crude generalization, often used by Russian sources, that Crimea was “gifted” to Soviet Ukraine in 1954.

5 Mazur, Yevgeniya. 2021. Fighting for Shirokino: How the Enemy was Pushed Back from Mariupol. *24TV*. February 15, https://24tv.ua/ru/boi-za-shirokino-vraga-otodvigali-ot-mariupolja-glavnye-novosti_n1542822 (accessed March 15, 2024). Nesterenko, N., V. Smirnov, M. Trofimova and V. Scherbachenko. 2020. *Observance of Human Rights and Norms of International Humanitarian Law in the Village of Shirokino, Donetsk Region during the Armed Conflict in Donbass*. Kyiv: East Ukrainian Center for Public Initiatives, p. 128.