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ARTICLE

Failing to Fight for the "Russian World": Pre-War Social Origins of the Pro-Russian Secessionist Organizations in Ukraine

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Abstract

The existing literature explains the war in Donbas and the rationale for why conflict broke out there while failing to do so in other Ukrainian provinces, such as Odesa or Kharkiv. Local pro-Russian organizations could not attract considerable attention and support in the pre-war period in all parts of Ukraine, except for Crimea. The social marginalization and negligible influence of the pro-Russian organizations among the locals presumably stemmed from their weak social ties among the local population. The question is why they had such weak social embeddedness in the local societies despite relatively popular pro-Russian sympathies in these regions? Surprisingly, nobody has sought to explain the social origins of the pro-Russian movements as a source of their weakness and failure to be sparked by the anti-Ukrainian rebellion in 2014.

Keywords: Donbas; Rebellion; Pro-Russian organizations; Ideology; Nationalism

Introduction

Why did secessionist pro-Russian organizations in southern and eastern Ukraine have weak preexisting social embeddedness despite relatively widespread pro-Russian sympathies among the local population? What were the primary reasons for such low public support? A large proportion of eastern and southern Ukrainians had believed Soviet myths of Russian-Ukrainian "fraternal brotherhood" (Kuzio 2019). On the other hand, only a tiny minority in all Ukrainian provinces supported open secessionism, except for Crimea. Running battles between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces in March–May 2014 showed how Kharkiv and Odesa were swing cities where the former eventually prevailed (Kuzio 2015a, 163). If the pro-Russians were successful in all restive regions, Ukraine would have lost a third of its territory and direct access to the Black Sea (Dzutsati 2020).

The existing literature explains why rebellion was sparked in Donbas while failing in other places but pays no attention to the reasons for the weak embeddedness of pro-Russians in Donetsk and other large cities, such as Odesa and Kharkiv. There are differences between these largest cities in terms of the ethnic composition, local elites, economic structure, level of education, and so on, but these differences do not explain why the pro-Russian secessionist movements were such marginal phenomena in all of them.

Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa are part of the Ukrainian territory that coincides with Russian President Vladimir Putin's demarcation of Novorossiya or 'New Russia' – a term that dates from eighteenth-century Russia's conquest of Ukraine (Dzutsati 2020; Clover 2016, 324). This imperial

narrative of Novorossiya encompassed more than one-third of Ukraine, where Putin saw Russian speakers who, he maintained, "needed Russian protection" (Stebelsky 2018).

Those three Russian-speaking cities experienced the largest number of pro-Russian rallies against the incumbent in spring 2014. However, Novorossiya failed to attract many adherents and has been abandoned. Pro-Russian sentiments did not imply that the east and south of Ukraine were willing to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. The majority opposed secession (Stebelsky 2018).

The central argument of this work is that pre-war pro-Russian movements' marginality was caused by their unpopular radical ideology, inept leadership, and patronage of the local elites. Party of the Regions (PR), the dominant party in the region controlling distribution of local patronage and rents, was using the pro-Russian rhetoric. However, the party was not radical enough to mobilize people against the state because the PR's officials hoped to profit from participating in the state affairs as they did during Yanukovych's rule in 2010–2014.

This article analyzes pro-Russian secessionist movements in the three selected cities whose leaders were willing to engage in anti-Ukrainian political violence in 2014 and begins by introducing the theory on the social origins of pre-war fragmented organizations. Such organizations fail to incite large-scale political violence or transform into weak and fragmented rebel groups that must rely on the external support and/or other actors to raise their chances of military success against the incumbent state.

Ideology and leadership were scrutinized as the key aspects shaping the social ties of the preexisting (fragmented) organizations. The explanation of the case selection of Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa is followed by an empirical section. The empirical findings illustrate the essential reasons why ideology, leadership, and local elites' patronage were the reasons of the pro-Russian organizations' inability to mobilize the local population against the incumbent government.

External Patronage and Domestic Actors in Donbas War

Even after more than seven years since the Donbas war's breakout, the scholars are still divided on whether we can speak about a "hybrid war" between Russia and Ukraine and emphasize its external causes or focus on the conflict's internal drivers. These alternative views of the conflict, however, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Covert deployment of Russian forces in a hybrid warfare does not exclude that there also was local initiative for rebellion. Domestic actors are mixed with both direct and indirect Russian military intervention (Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 802; Katchanovski 2016).

Most experts agree on Russia's decisive role in the rebellion's breakout because incipient rebels had insufficient resources and were mostly not determined enough to engage in war (Kuzio 2020, 108, 120; Wilson 2014, 2016; Mitrokhin 2015; Winnyckyj 2019). Nevertheless, these local actors had a role to play in the rebellion, and we need to understand how this local support varied (or not) across Ukrainian regions regarding the social base of the pro-Russian secessionists.

Explanatory power of other factors – such as economic dependence on the Russian market (Zhukov 2016) or identity-based explanations referring to some form or combination of fears for physical or cultural survival and/or fear of losing advantageous social and political position (Kudelia 2016; Giuliano 2015, Kulyk 2019, Sotiriou 2016; Matveeva 2016) – have been criticized as intellectually reductionist and essentialist (Portnov 2015). In Nitsova's opinion, the validity of these explanations diminishes when Donbas is considered in a comparative perspective because other regions, such as Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk, have a relatively similar ethnic and linguistic composition as that of Donbas (Nitsova 2021).

The importance of language and ethnic differences in Eastern Ukraine were overridden by more practical political support networks (Dzutsati 2020). Donbas War is not an ethnic conflict as Russian speakers are fighting in both Ukrainian security forces and Russian proxy forces (Kuzio

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2020, 107). The external state was supposed to use the political support networks as a tool for recruitment of agents in the incumbent territory (Dzutsati 2020). Were these preexisting support networks, however, strong enough and ready to challenge the incumbent?

Dzutsati identifies the networks of previous support for Yanukovych as those responsible for providing a vehicle for driving Russian influence in the Donbas (Dzutsati 2020). I claim that the situation on the ground has been more complex and complicated. First, we need to identify the driving forces behind the rebellion except for external patronage. In an attempt to explain why the rebellion broke out in Donbas and not in other regions with relatively high pro-Russian sympathies, the extant literature points to the factor of local elites.

Literature juxtaposes local elites in various cities and provinces with the Donbas elites. Portnov and Buckholz compare the Donbas local elites with those in Dnipropetrovsk; Stebelsky and Platonova compare them with local elites in Kharkiv; Nitsova compares Donbas elites with local elites in both cities, Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk (Portnov 2015; Buckholz 2017; Stebelsky 2018; Platonova 2021; Nitsova 2021). All these authors agree that preferences, strategies, and actions of the local elites are a key determinant in the distinct political outcomes across Ukraine, along with external support.

The role of the local elites in Donbas was not so straightforward as in other conflicts where the secessionist elites led the rebellion against the incumbent government. Elites in Donbas were not interested in seceding from Ukraine or stirring up a war. They sought to preserve their influence at the regional level by using popular unrest as a tool to extract concessions from Kyiv, a dangerous game that they ended up losing. They did not take action to prevent the escalation of violence and separatism in the critical initial stages of the rebellion (Nitsova 2021).

The Party of Regions ("*Partiya rehioniv*," or PR), the political machine connected to the Donetsk and other local elites, did not function as a base of preexisting support for the rebellion because the PR-related local elites in other regions sided with the state at a critical moment (Nitsova 2021; Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 805). PR leaders often labeled their opponents as "fascists" and a threat to Russophone culture, which reinforced PR's position as a focal point for political coordination of the Donbas' residents. Nevertheless, the party's rhetoric avoided making explicitly separatist demands (Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 805–806).

PR appealed to voters with pro-Russian sympathies, claiming good relations with Russia as its priority in foreign policy. However, as Taras Kuzio noticed, it was a typical Eastern Ukrainian ideologically amorphous populist political force, uninterested in handing the Donbas, their fiefdom, over to Russia (Kuzio 2015c, 105–106). The party did not stand for an ideology or any particular policies but was used as a tool for gaining access to state power for the purposes of self-enrichment (Nitsova 2021). It combined left-wing paternalism, Soviet nostalgia, and big business as one of the most populist parties in Ukraine (Kuzio 2015b, 177–178).

PR had its Russian nationalist wing with people like Oleg Tsarev, Vadym Kolesnichenko, or Dmytro Tabachnyk (Kuzio 2020, 117; Kuzio 2015c, 105–106). However, they were not so influential within PR. The party absorbed the pro-Russian electorate, which could have hypothetically voted for more radical and marginal secessionist political subjects. Pro-Russian voters did not care much about the ideology of the party. A stable, paternalistic, and disciplined PR's electorate prioritized the economy and stability (Kuzio 2015b, 177–178).

The local elites from Party of Regions were unwilling to become a vanguard of the pro-Russian secessionism and could not provide the necessary political support network for the rebellion and external actor. It was conflict entrepreneurs, second-tier officials, and little-known individuals in their communities who mobilized support and mounted a rebellion (Nitsova 2021). That is why the analysis of the pre-war social ties of the marginal pro-Russia secessionist organizations is the key to the understanding why the external actor had to enhance the capacities of the incipient rebel forces, which had no capabilities to directly confront the incumbent government.

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Social Origins of the Pre-Rebel Organizations

Paul Staniland explains in his path-dependent social-institutional theory that a focus on state-centric variables – from per capita GDP to regime type to counterinsurgent doctrine – in the study of rebellion has overpromised and underdelivered because rebels are fighting forces that should be analyzed on their own terms, not as pale reflections of state power and purpose (Parkinson and Zaks 2018, 280). Staniland is a follower of "institutionalist turn" in the literature on rebellion, which considers social and institutional embeddedness as major conditions affecting individual decisions and behavior (Wittek 2010). Institutionalists seek to explicitly link social factors such as social embeddedness (i.e., individuals and organizations' pre-war and wartime roles and relations) to the likelihood of individual participation in rebel efforts.

The focus of this new research agenda has rested on exploring the causes, dynamics, and effects of group fragmentation and factional contestation within the rebellion (Brenner 2016). Staniland's works respond to Jeremy Weinstein's economic theory linking the rebels' behavior to their initial resource endowments and organizational discipline. Weinstein argues that its resource base best explains the character and conduct of a rebel organization. Resource-rich movements have the ability to attract "opportunistic joiners" through short-term payoffs, while resource-poor movements are forced to rely on social ties and endowments – for example, shared beliefs, common expectations, norms of behavior, and trust (Weinstein 2007; Forney 2015).

Staniland responds to Weinstein by claiming that not all rebel groups with access to the resources are opportunistic; this is because resource wealth is associated with both undisciplined rebel fragmentation and disciplined organization building. Staniland's work presents a challenge to both state- and resource-centric approaches to understanding rebellion. He explores the origins and trajectories of insurgent organizations by focusing on pre-war social networks – that is, systems of relations. His resultant theory aims to understand, on the one hand, when rebels can generate military and political power and, on the other hand, when insurgent challenges instead shatter into fragmentation and collapse (Staniland 2014; Brenner 2016, 24).

Founding social networks of organized rebellion are a critical variable in the cohesion and unity of rebel organizations. Where the founding social ties are weak, fragmentation will frequently be the result. The pre-war social ties remain important during the war, even as they undergo profound transformations (Lidow 2016, 13; Woldemariam 2018, 33). Explanatory power of pre-war social bases is indirectly confirmed by other authors, such as Balcells and Steele with their empirical findings that displacement of the civilian populations during the civil wars is more prevalent in localities where a rival's political base exists and is revealed in elections (Balcells and Steele 2016).

Preexisting networks are particularly useful because starting wholly new organizations is difficult in the face of repressive state power. Pre-war politics determine the initial organization of rebel groups. Variation in social bases can be identified by examining patterns of social connections and interactions across organizers and within local communities prior to the war. Non-violent pre-war bases can create integrated and effective rebel groups. The trust, information, and shared political beliefs embedded in these networks help organizers construct new institutions and convert old organizations to new purposes in the chaos of an escalating war (Staniland 2012, 150; Staniland 2014, 17).

The historical roots of social bases limit the freedom of action of organizers trying to get a rebellion off the ground. The weakness of the social ties leads to fragmented organizations, whose organizers are unable to draw on any kind of strong social ties to build their new group. They desperately try to recruit from wherever they can, with disastrous consequences for their organizations. Organizers try to mobilize rebel groups but fail because they lack the capacity to generate collective action or build any kind of control (Staniland 2014, 17, 21–24, 32).

Weak social ties of the pre-war political networks may overlap with the support of the same community for the external state, which delegates the rebellion to the networks with weak social ties (see Dzutsati 2020; Salehyan 2010). The external patronage may weaken or strengthen the social ties

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of the rebel groups according to the preferences of the external state (Staniland 2014, 53). Dzutsati argues that the principal will be more likely to target the areas where it has the best networks of its supporters, and the incumbent state will be more likely to encounter more resistance there (Dzutsati 2020).

As the fragmented organizations are prone to rapid, often fratricidal failure and decay, the attraction of the external patronage can be one of the tools for the nascent rebel groups to enhance their weak social ties and overcome the collective action problem. Opposition groups conspiring to start a rebellion may face a choice between contracting with a foreign government and relying on their own efforts and resources. Accepting assistance from foreign states promises to augment the rebels' capabilities because foreign patrons can help overcome large power asymmetries between states and rebels and help the opposition mobilize resources quickly (Salehyan 2010).

To understand why the incipient pro-Russian rebel forces were fragmented, lacked a hierarchy, and unified command center or any coherent ideology (see Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 802), we must go back to the pre-war era and scrutinize the preexisting social ties of the pro-Russian secessionist organizations in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Arguably, the popular support to anti-Ukrainian rebellion in 2014 was weak and non-institutionalized in the early stages of the rebellion due to the lack of organizations with strong social ties ready to organize the rebellion.

The pre-war social conditions are significant for the shape of the rebel movement under any circumstances – if the social ties are strong, rebel movement tends to be coherent with strict hierarchy. However, if the social ties are weak, the rebel movement tends to be fragmented, decentralized, and without strict hierarchy, which often leads to failure and decay, and the only way to enhance its social ties and fighting capabilities is external support. Pro-Russian organizations in Odesa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk present a strong case, demonstrating that social ties are indeed important for a rebellion's breakout even if they are weak in all of the investigated places and have to be enhanced by the external actor to make the rebellion happen, which was exactly what occurred in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014. The so-called "people's republics" were able to succeed without strong social ties because of Russia's direct interference.

Ideology and Leadership in the Fragmented Organizations

This work aims to discuss the importance of the would-be rebel groups' pre-war social origins and the roots of their weakness. It can only be guessed how many rebellions failed before they had even started. Many naive guerilla groups entered the jungles of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to fight against the state only to realize that their fight was futile, such as Teoponte Guerilla in Bolivia in 1970, led by inexperienced university leftist students who eventually died in the jungle without inciting any interest within the local societies (Kapuscinski 2007).

There are many hypothetical reasons for the weakness of the fragmented organizations' social ties. This work has no ambition to provide a comprehensive list of all factors that may facilitate this weakness and subsequently result in the rebellion's failure. The primary contribution of this article is to explain how the ideology and leadership of the fragmented organizations may cause their weak embeddedness in the local society. This article argues that ideological and leadership issues lie specifically at the roots of the weak social ties of fragmented pre-rebel organizations.

Before a rebel group takes up arms, its members may have been involved with a political party or social movement. As a result, they may already enjoy a degree of local support when the organization captures new territory (Mampilly and Stewart 2020). The social bases that are most likely to be the pre-war core of a future rebellion include opposition political parties, underground revolutionary groups, anticolonial nationalist movements, autonomous religious organizations, peasant associations, and networks of dissident student activists. Such groups have the "ideational resources" to challenge the state; even their activities before the war are non-violent. Social bases are structures of collective action and social interaction in a society (Staniland 2014, 19).

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A coherent ideology is needed to give a widely shared meaning to a rebel collective's actions (Kudelia 2019, 285). Ideology shapes relations between members of a group and outsiders and among members themselves. It serves as a shortcut, communicating the group's raison d'être to all audiences they seek to reach, including supporters, allies, and enemies (Togdemir et al., 2021).

Leadership is another crucial factor for the social origins of the organizations determined to transform into rebel groups. It is central to the process of mobilizing and overcoming divisions within the organizations. Established leaders control resources, command preexisting loyalties, symbolize group identity, articulate group interests and demands, and manage coalitions. Thus, they have ample means for overcoming the rebel collective action (Gurr 2015, 43).

In this article, leadership does not represent just the personalities of the leaders and their biographies. Rather, the analytical dimensions related to their social embeddedness in the local societies are observed in this study, because leaders of the pre-war organizations should be relevant actors in the local society in order to claim high level of social embeddedness. It means they have to be popular, competent, able to secure resources for their political organizations, and experienced in organizing the social networks.

The weak social embeddedness of fragmented organizations can be a barrier to collective action. Having no authoritative local leaders, mobilization would be impossible without support from outside. If the rebel group lacks extensive local support and funds – perhaps because their views are at the fringes of society – the group is more likely to seek external patrons (Salehyan 2010).

Case Selection and Data

The overarching logic of this explanatory case study is that the differences between the largest cities in Eastern and Southern Ukraine in terms of the ethnic composition, local elites, economic structure, level of education, and so on do not explain why the pro-Russian secessionist movements were such marginal phenomena in all of them. The largest cities as a category were chosen because they envisage the concentration of every administrative province's economic and political activities with complex political networks and interests. This article relies on data from primary sources – from six local experts from Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa – which concretize rich, secondary literature on pro-Russian organizations in those parts of Ukraine. The interviews were semi-structured and anonymized so as not to compromise the identities of the interviewees.

Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Donetsk, and Zaporizhzhya are the largest Russian-speaking Ukrainian regional administrative centers in eastern and southern Ukraine. Pre-war opinion polls by the Razumkov Center and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) confirm that the east and south of Ukraine are more pro-Russian than the center and the west. In all aspects related to Russia, EU, NATO, and foreign policy, the east and the south had always been more pro-Russian than the rest of the country no matter whether the polls were taken before the war or as recently as June 2021 (National Security and Defense 2012, 2013, 2014; Mostova, Rakhmanin and Vedernikova 2014; KIIS 2015, 2021).

Another criterion for this case selection was the political turmoil in cities in the east and the south in spring 2014. The most violent and potentially destabilizing anti-Ukrainian manifestations occurred in Donetsk (and Luhansk), Kharkiv, and Odesa. The anti-Ukrainian protests of 2014 were supported only by a minority of Kharkiv's citizens – as was the case in these neighboring regions. Nevertheless, pro-Russian views were more prevalent in Kharkiv than anywhere else in Ukraine (besides the conflict-torn Donbas region). Odesa is also a city with a distinctive identity and highly prevalent Russian language usage, which Moscow had identified as a weak spot for Ukraine (Shapovalova and Jarábik 2018).

In four other provinces – Dnipro, Zaporizhzhya, Kherson, and Mykolaiv – pro-Russian sentiment had been lower than in Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa. Dnipro became the base for Ukrainian volunteer battalions heading to Donbas. The threat of pro-Russian violence had been quashed by the positions of local elites, led by oligarch Ihor Kolomoiskyi who financed these

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battalions and used his wealth and influence to combat pro-Russian movements (Buckholz 2017). In 2014, Andrii Portnov called Dnipro a "bastion of civic Ukrainian nationalism" with no chance for pro-Russians and a city where local elites adopted an unequivocally pro-Ukrainian position (Portnov 2015).

Pro-Russians in Zaporizhzhia and smaller cities in the south, such as Kherson and Mykolaiv, failed miserably. They were fragmented and unable to mobilize people. Any attempts to destabilize the situation in Zaporizhzhya ceased on April 13, 2014, one day after Igor Girkin seized Slovyansk. That day, pro-Russian leaders mobilized around 200–300 people, encircled by far more numerous pro-Ukrainian activists, who pelted the pro-Russians with eggs and flour. This is why this day is known in Zaporizhzhya as "Egg Sunday." The pro-Russian uprising collapsed as quickly as it had started, and its leaders fled to rebel territories in Donbas or Crimea (*TSN* 2016a; Kuzio 2019).

The small pro-Russian tent city in Mykolaiv was dispersed by approximately 200 pro-Ukrainian activists on April 7, 2014, effectively stopping any attempts to destabilize the situation in the city. The pro-Russians found little public support among the local population (Mishchenko 2020). In Kherson, leaders of pro-Russian marginal organizations had no credibility among the locals and were unable to mobilize people to the streets. There was no discernible leader among them. The composition of the activists indicated a lack of coordination among the disparate groups (Nikitenko 2014).

Luhansk was not included for two reasons. First, the city is relatively small (463 thousand according to the 2001 census). Second, political developments in this city mostly copied the events in Donetsk – the economic and political center of the industrial Donbas region. The time period for mapping the activities and ties relevant for the genesis of a potential rebel organization in the 2014 pre-war period begins with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Ideology of the Pro-Russian Secessionist Movements in Ukraine

The ideological background of the pro-Russian secessionist movements in Ukraine is, according to Marlene Laruelle, the convergence of three underlying ideological paradigms – "red" (Soviet), "white" (Orthodox), and "brown" (Fascist) – promoted by Russian nationalist and hardline ultra-conservative circles. All of them are anti-liberal and anti-democratic. For that reason, there had been no liberal pro-Russian political organization or movement active in Ukraine in the pre-war period. These anti-democratic ideological platforms eclectically mix political orthodoxy, Soviet imperialism, and neo-fascist tendencies (Laruelle 2016).

This eclecticism is reflected by the concept of the "Russian World" ("*russkiy mir*"), coined by Putin's regime as an anti-Occidental and anti-liberal synthesis of nativist nationalism and socialist legacies – an intellectual concept promoted by pro-regime hardliners such as Aleksandr Prokhanov. The "Russian World" is an anti-modernist, intellectual instrument trying to prove that Russia is a self-sufficient, distinctive, and unique state-civilization. The central geopolitical trope became an irredentist striving for "reunification," associated with the idea of "recollecting the Russian lands" of the "hardcore" "Russian world" in Ukraine, Belarus, and Northern Kazakhstan (Suslov 2018, 343–345).

The "Russian World" blends two doctrinal traditions, trying to build an alliance between different anti-liberal tendencies. The first one can be called "Soviet imperialism" – a broad term that includes, but is not limited to, the Eurasians. It means an imperialism built around control of the Eurasian territory of the former Soviet Union. The second tradition – political Orthodoxy – is an attempt at a "Red-White" reconciliation that should enhance the country's sovereignty. Russia should follow the tradition of the Russian tsars as the builders of the empire and the tradition of Stalin as the creator of the Soviet civilization. The imperial model is detached from the regime's nature because it endorses both tsarist and Soviet regimes (Laruelle 2018, 136–144).

The mouthpiece of this Eurasianist worldview in Ukraine had been the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine ("*Prohresyvna sotsialistychna partiya Ukraiiny*"; PSPU), founded in the mid-1990s

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by Natalia Vitrenko (Wilson 2014, 199). The PSPU mixed Stalinism, political orthodoxy, Soviet imperialism, anti-liberal homophobia, and Russian chauvinism. It was the most extreme anti-western party in the political arena. The PSPU entered the parliament in 1998 with 4.04 % of votes and won 14 seats. Since 2002, the party's election results declined, and it never reentered the parliament again. In 2007, it fragmented and left the active political competition.

However, Vitrenko maintained close ties to the Russian Eurasianists, led by Aleksandr Dugin. Dugin called Vitrenko a leader of the pan-Ukrainian resistance (to the US). Vitrenko promoted the idea of creating a political union of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, rejected any form of Ukraine's rapprochement with the West, and labeled all advocates of Ukraine's independence as Ukrainian ultranationalists or outspoken Nazis (Shekhovtsov 2017, 187).

The Ideology of the Pro-Russian Movements in Donetsk

In Donetsk, the first pro-Russian organizations, founded in the early 1990s by the Kornilov brothers Dmitrii and Vladimir, were the so-called Inter-movement ("*Inter-dvizhenie*") and Civic Congress of Ukraine ("*Grazhdanskiy kongres Ukrainy*"), later known as Slavic Party ("*Slavianskaya partiya*"). These small organizations ideologically evolved from Soviet anti-western, anti-democratic, and anti-Ukrainian socialist pan-Slavism. They launched their agitation with public calls for preserving the Soviet Union combined with the great-power Russian chauvinism, supplemented by proclamations about the artificial nature of the Ukrainian nation, its culture, and language (Skorkin 2016; Sizov 2015).

Following the Orange Revolution in 2004 in the polarized Ukrainian society, the ideological profile of Donetsk-based, pro-Russian organizations was inclined either to "red-brown" national bolshevism or neo-fascism. Donetsk Republic ("*Donetskaya respublika*"), one of the leading groups in post-Orange Donetsk, albeit still marginal, was inspired by the Russian national-Bolsheviks as well as another pro-Russian group in Donetsk, Donbass Rus' ("*Donbasskaya Rus*"), tied to PSPU (Buntovskiy 2016).

Neo-fascist tendencies had been represented by Pavel Gubarev, a former member of the Donetsk chapter of Russian National Unity ("*Russkoe natsionalʹnoe edinstvo*"; RNU), the largest of the fascist-style parties in Russia in the 1990s (Jackson 1999: 34–37). Some leading members of the Donetsk Republic were also inspired by Russian neo-fascist thought, such as that of Aleksandr Matyushin who describes himself as an "orthodox fascist" close to the Moscow-based militant nationalist Russian Image ("*Russkii obraz*") organization (see more in Horvath 2021). These groups viewed Donbas as an inextricable part of the "Russian World" and Russian Orthodox civilization (Kudelia and Zyl 2019, 806).

The Ideology of the Pro-Russian Movements in Odesa

Pro-Russian organizations in Odesa promoted a similar eclecticism. One of the most vocal promoters of such ideas had been the local pro-Russian party, Motherland ("*Rodina*"). The ideologue of Motherland was the historian Aleksandr Vasilyev, Odesa's councilman in 2010–2014 and admirer of the proto-fascist, anti-Semitic Black Hundred movement from tsarist Russia. Vasilyev administered the media resources of the party's chairman Igor Markov (see Odessa Daily 2014).

The national-Bolshevist and Eurasianist "red-white" ideology was promoted by some smaller groups in Odesa, such as Youth Unity ("*Molodezhnoe edinstvo*"), led by Anton Davidchenko since 2008, or Dozor ("*Dobrovolnoe obshchestvo zashchity obiedinnenoi Rusi*"; *Voluntary Association for the Defense of United Rus*), founded in 2008 by Maria Bilchak (Osinskiy 2011).

The political Orthodox strand had been represented by several marginal organizations and Cossack groups linked to the local Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. One of them was the group Orthodox Cossacks ("*Pravoslavnoe kazachestvo*"), founded in 2010 by Alexandr Lutsenko and composed of the local Afghanistan war veterans. The leading mouthpiece of political

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Orthodoxy in Odesa was Valerii Kaurov, with his small organization United Fatherland ("*Edinoe otechestvo*").

The "brown," neo-fascist, ideological paradigm was represented, as in Donetsk, by several people connected to the local chapter of Russian National Unity (RNU), led by Dmitry Maydannik. He changed his name to Odinov after the pagan god Odin to conceal his Jewish roots. RNU members popped up in the neo-fascist Slavic Unity ("*Slavyanskoe edinstvo*"), founded by Odinov in 2008–2009 (*Liva sprava* 2010).

The "red" wing had been represented, besides by the inactive Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU), by the revolutionary Marxist group *Boroťba* (The Struggle). This declaratively far-left organization cooperated with the Russian nationalists and was led by former Nazi skinhead Alexey Albu, who had been expelled from KPU.

The Ideology of the Pro-Russian Movements in Kharkiv

Kharkiv confirms the eclectic ideological background of the pro-Russian movements in Ukraine prior to the war in Donbas and their unification around an anti-Ukrainian Russian nationalist platform. The local chapter of revolutionary Marxist *Boroťba* maintained close ties to Kharkiv's Russian imperial nationalists and neo-fascists, who tried to convince the international community that a bloodthirsty Nazi regime rules Ukraine (Vygovskiy 2016).

The "white" Orthodox part of the pro-Russian movement was represented by Sergei Moiseev and his association Trinity Rus ("*Rus triedinaya*"). Moiseev sees Kharkiv as the capital of a "Greater Novorossiya" stretching from Kharkiv to Odesa (Sarafanov 2015). Moiseev and local pro-Russian Cossacks maintained close ties to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The only militant pro-Russian group in Kharkiv, the Bulwark ("*Oplot*"), led by former police officer Evgeniy Zhilin, mixed "red-white" ideological strands of the pro-Russian movements. The other prominent pro-Russian figure in Kharkiv, described as an anti-Maidan ideologist, Konstantin Dolgov, propagated through his online media outlet, Glagol, a "white" ideological strand of orthodox monarchism on the verge of "brown" neo-fascism (Interview 1).

Discussion on the Ideology of the Pro-Russian Movements

An extreme ideology among rebel groups may be a potential tool for increasing public awareness, public support, and prestige (Tokdemir 2020). That would enhance their social ties within and across the local communities, but it was not the case in Ukraine. Ukrainian society, including its pro-Russian segment, has never really sympathized with radical and secessionist political movements – despite the grim socioeconomic conditions in the country. Even the war with Russia beginning in 2014 did not raise the electoral gains of the radical nationalist Ukrainian parties – except for higher public acceptance of such organizations – due to their involvements in the fights against Russia's rebel proxies (Umland 2020).

The main common denominator of the pro-Russian movements was the anti-Ukrainian platform, which denied Ukrainians their right to their national culture, state, and language. Anti-Ukrainian hate speech, however, was insufficient as a uniting factor for overcoming the fragmentation within this milieu. Openly secessionist anti-Ukrainian nationalism was unpopular even in the parts of Ukraine traditionally perceived as pro-Russian. Russian nationalist and ultra-conservative imperialism, portrayed as the antithesis of Western political models, was not as popular in Ukraine. Many people were inclined to Russia because of the putative economic stability, higher wages, and pensions (Stebelsky 2018; Kuzio 2015a).

Soviet imperialism and political Orthodoxy did not attract masses of supporters prior to 2014. People focused instead on socioeconomic issues, despite the belief of Russian president Putin and his circle that the majority of people would rise against the pro-western Ukrainian government in spring 2014. Dugin's concept of Eurasia as an imperial form of Russian nationalism and other

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nationalists had nothing to offer, with no appeals to social populism (see Clover 2016). Russian nationalist stereotypes and myths about Ukraine and Ukrainians also had little basis in reality (Kuzio 2019).

The pro-Russian secessionist groups in Ukraine shared similar eclectic ideologies based on anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, "fascist" labeling of pro-western Ukrainians, and anti-democratic and anti-liberal views. There were little ideological struggles within this milieu, as the ideology of the secessionist organizations was both similar and inconsistent. The only significant difference was a strong sense of regional identity in the case of Donbas secessionists. Regional identity became an ideological platform for a small network of secessionists who drew on historical myths to justify Donbas' separation from Ukraine. The history of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Republic, which existed in 1917–1918 as a separate entity, became a reference point for a generation of radical pro-Russian activists in Donbas (Kudelia and Van Zyl 2019, 806).

During spring-summer 2014, the anti-Ukrainian secessionist mobilization relied on a set of disparate ideational frames rejecting the legitimacy of the new pro-western Ukrainian government, characterizing the power transfer in Kyiv as a "neo-Nazi coup," amplifying threats of Ukrainian nationalist violence against locals, and calling for integration with Russia. These ideological frames were hardly sufficient to produce an instant mobilizing effect and encourage widespread recruitment to the pro-Russian movements (Kudelia 2019, 285). The fragmented pro-Russian secessionist organizations could not provide ideational resources for the anti-Ukrainian mobilization to foment rebellion against the incumbent government.

The Leadership of the Pro-Russian Secessionist Movements

The majority of the pro-Russian secessionist leaders in Donetsk, Odesa, and Kharkiv had been connected to the PSPU. This party served as the central networking organization with ties to small and fragmented pro-Russian groups. PSPU-connected groups in Donetsk had been represented by Donbass Rus', the network around Pavel Gubarev, local Cossacks, and Orthodox monarchists in neighboring cities. Proletarian Donbas was one of the PSPU's strongholds. Igor Markov balloted for PSPU in Odesa in 2006, but he later founded his Motherland party. PSPU supported local militant pro-Russian Cossacks in Odesa, such as Aleksandr Lutsenko who balloted for PSPU in local elections. A similar situation could be observed in Kharkiv, where PSPU or its satellites cooperated with local pro-Russian Cossacks and other organizations and activists.

Leaders in Donetsk

The ideological background of the Slavic Party, the most radical pro-Russian political party in Donetsk in the 1990s, and Kornilov's Inter-movement were similar, but Kornilov and his entourage tried to appear more intellectual (Interview 2). The leader of the Slavic Party, Aleksandr Bazilyuk, and his supporters were mocked as a negligible circle of fanatics. The successor of these groups, the Donetsk Republic (DR), was founded in December 2005 by Andrei Purgin, Aleksandr Tsurkan, and Oleg Frolov.

Purgin was probably the only leader with organizational and rhetorical skills. He looked successful, as he had a moderate income from his building materials shop (Interview 6). Tsurkan, an older man working in a Donetsk hospital, talked about the need to form an army of homeless people, as they have nothing to lose. Even Purgin supposedly made fun of Tsurkan, who called himself "the angel of darkness" (Populyakh 2016). Frolov, the third leader, was jailed before the DR's foundation for failing to pay alimony and trading pirate CDs on the local market (Interview 6). Later, they started to accuse one another of collaboration with Security Service of Ukraine ("*Sluzhba bezpeky Ukraiiny*"; SBU) and Ukrainian nationalists (Kazanskiy 2010). Tsurkan died in 2009, and DR disseminated conspiracy theories that SBU poisoned him with mercury. DR leaders, in general, were considered by the broad public to be part of the urban fringe.

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The people around Donbass Rus' did not enjoy significantly better reputations. Its leader, Natalia Bilotserkovskaya, worked in an auditing company from Shakhtarsk. Others worked in the Donetsk National University, inflating the numbers of the organization's members and public rallies attendees by enlisting their students in exchange for credits (Interview 6). Gubarev, a PSPU city district deputy in Donetsk in 2006, worked as an advertising agent and a Grandfather Frost entertainer, the Soviet equivalent of a Santa-for-hire (Wesolowsky 2019). Leaders of some other marginal groups, or rather just one-man empty-shells, probably had mental disorders, such as Aleksandr Khryakov, known for his aggressive behavior in public.

Leaders in Odesa

Pro-Russian movements in Odesa were centered around Motherland ("*Rodina*"), founded by Igor Markov. He was the most prominent representative of the radical pro-Russian movement in the city. Markov was allegedly tied to the local criminal underworld, and the party was rather a tool for his business interests. He was probably the only leader of the local pro-Russian forces with significant human, financial, and media resources, compared to other leaders of the fragmented pro-Russian movements in Odesa.

The rest of the leaders were either absolutely unknown to the broader public or infamous because of scandals and financial frauds. Valerii Kaurov, as the representative of Orthodox monarchism, was deprived by the court of his position as chairman of the supervisory board of the Credit Union "Ukraine" for financial scams and machinations (Relihiya v Ukraiini 2011). He was tried several times for fraud, quarreled with Markov, and lost support and credibility among the pro-Russian radical circles in Odesa (Nekhlyudov 2007; Sukkulentov 2015). The rest of the radical pro-Russian figures were self-declared intellectuals (publicists, university teachers) and unknown to the broader public.

Leaders in Kharkiv

The only leader connected to the city's vibrant political and economic life, and therefore not an urban fringe figure, was Evgeniy Zhilin, a former police officer with ties to the local criminal underground. Zhilin led several fight clubs to prepare foot soldiers and hired thugs ("*titushki*") for engaging in pro-Russian violence and criminal activities. He was allegedly ideationally motivated and sought to raise the youngsters in the spirit of Russian imperial nationalism. Zhilin had some economic resources, as he participated in money laundering and other criminal activities (Interview 1; Carroll 2014).

The rest of the "leaders" were more publicists than political activists or leaders of the militant shock troops in the Kharkiv streets. They pretended to be the leaders of various small organizations and foundations (Derkach 2017b). The pro-Russian figures – Anton Guryanov, Yurii Apukhtin, Dmitrii Gubin, Konstantin Dolgov, or Aleksey Samoilov – had no significant number of supporters. They were rather publicists, self-declared experts, or university teachers without a considerable following.

Samoilov was deputy rector of the International Slavic University, defunct since 2013. This author of the Kharkov People's Republic's "constitution" called himself an Orthodox Soviet imperialist (Andreeva 2015). Dolgov was rather a publicist who got support from the Russian Consulate in Kharkiv for his political and media activities at the expense of the "old-school" local pro-Russians (Interview 1).

Qualities of the Leaders

The biographies of the pro-Russian "leaders" reveal that people from different social backgrounds formed the leadership of the pro-Russian secessionist movements. In all cases, except for Igor Markov, and to a lesser extent Yevgeniy Zhilin, they had not even the slightest influence in local

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society. The lack of charismatic and competent leaders was one of the biggest issues in the pro-Russian milieu, thus explaining the weak social ties to the local communities.

Their status as outsiders made them unattractive to the local population as they were unable to appeal to the masses. These leaders could be interesting for local elites only as paid provocateurs useful for local political struggles. The leaders did not fit into higher politics as representatives of the local societies or as potential leaders of the disenfranchised, oppressed, exploited, and discriminated-against locals because no such things existed in Ukraine. If the people were oppressed and exploited, then it was by local elites, not the central government, which had little say in local matters.

Another problem was their ambitious approach and incessant competition within this milieu. The leaders were jealous of the success of anybody else from the pro-Russian milieu. These ambitions were linked to the pro-Russian leaders' wish to live comfortable lives as affluent citizens with access to funds from whatever source. Some pro-Russian leaders of the anti-Maydan Ukrainian cities allegedly embezzled money collected in spring 2014 and spent it on cars and other symbols of high social status (Interviews 1, 4).

Officials working at the Russian funds and institutions supporting the pro-Russians in Odesa and Kharkiv via Rossotrudnichestvo reportedly participated in embezzlement schemes. They financed local marginal figures via local clientelist networks, particularly so-called "professional Russians" who made a profession out of pro-Russian activism (Apukhtin 2018).

Social Ties and Fragmentation of the Pro-Russian Organizations prior to 2014

The pre-war horizontal ties between organizers and vertical ties between organizers and local communities within a social base determine the strength of central and local organizational control when would-be rebel leaders mobilize. Groups that begin as fragmented find it very difficult to change and are likely to be marginalized. Horizontal social ties link people across space and connect different geographic and social sites. Strong horizontal linkages underpin collective action and interactions among geographically or socially mobile leaders who are not fixed to a particular local community. These individuals are not bound to local communities but instead operate beyond them. Vertical social ties are created by relations of information, trust, and beliefs that link organizers to local communities. Such ties make them more likely to cooperate with, obey, or listen to an organizer who attempts to mobilize a local community (Staniland 2014, 21–22).

Odesa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk have had neither a prior history of large-scale secessionist movements, which could have provided activist networks for mobilization, nor competent and/or charismatic leaders able to lead the people to fight against the incumbent (Kudelia 2019, 285). Horizontal ties of pro-Russian secessionists across the Ukrainian regions were virtually non-existent due to their marginalization in their own localities. No strong cooperation or coordination between the radical secessionist groups from Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa had been observed as they jealously defended financing from their sponsors among the elites, whether local or from Russia. However, some secessionist organizations had ties to the Russian nationalists, loyal to Kremlin. Donetsk Republic, for instance, had close ties to the Eurasian Youth Union ("*Evraziyskiy soyuz molodezhi*"; ESM), a pro-regime nationalist vigilante organization founded in order to prevent the Orange Revolution-like processes in the Russian streets (Kozhevnikova 2007). ESM provided the most important connecting link between Russia and the DR (*Fakty.ua* 2014; Bessonova 2015).

Local elites tied to the Party of Regions regularly funded marginal pro-Russian groups as instruments for their own political purposes and struggles, which led to the impression that pro-Russian secessionists were mere stooges of the local patrons and had no agency (Kuzio 2020, 112). That might also facilitate their further marginalization. These pro-Russian groups in Donetsk and other cities have always been unpopular and fragmented (Skorkin 2016). With the onset of the rebellion, there was no centralized rebel organization, leadership, or hierarchy.

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Vertical Social Ties of the Fragmented Groups in Donetsk

The secessionist pro-Russian groups in Donetsk have always been marginal. Electoral results of the Slavic Party never exceeded 1% in Donetsk, and, in other provinces, the party won even fewer votes. Local elites have used the party for political provocations, especially against Viktor Yushchenko and his pro-Western political party Our Ukraine (Skorkin 2016; Interview 2). All political activities in Donetsk were under the strict control of the Party of Regions since the early 2000s. This political machine had a monopoly over local politics, and all political organizations were in the orbit of the PR (Skorkin 2016).

The Orange Revolution in 2004 served as a trigger mechanism for instrumentalizing the radical pro-Russian organizations by local elites in Donbas, which was afraid to lose power after their patron Viktor Yanukovych was unseated in Kyiv for the first time (Interview 2). Radical pro-Russian organizations were created and sustained to create the illusion of secessionism to blackmail Kyiv during Viktor Yushchenko's rule (Kazanskyi 2010; Bessonova 2015). Russia financed neither the Donetsk Republic nor Donbass Rus', although both organizations established ties to Russian nationalist movements loyal to the Kremlin.

The Party of Regions secretly funded the Donetsk Republic, Donbass Rus', and others with small sums, enabling them to survive (Interview 6, Kazansky 2010). The Donetsk Republic and Donbass Rus', as the principal pro-Russian actors in Donetsk, had no political influence whatsoever. They regularly scrambled for money donated by local authorities and attracted little public support. Pro-Russian organizations in Donetsk were more a decoration than real political forces. They were unsuccessful in preparing the ground for pro-Russian rebellion.

Vertical Social Ties of the Fragmented Groups in Odesa

The pro-Russia organizations in Odesa, with the exception of the Motherland ("*Rodina*"), were extremely fragmented, with membership in single digits. As a mouthpiece of radical pro-Russian sentiment, the Motherland party won 3.77 % of votes in Odesa in 2010, the last local elections prior to the war in Eastern Ukraine. Markov was even a national deputy in 2012–2014 as the only leader of radical pro-Russian organizations in Ukraine. Davidchenko and Bilchak, the respective leaders of their small organizations, competed for Markov's financial support (Interview 4).

The ability to mobilize pro-Russian nationalists has always been low in Odesa. More moderate political heavyweights skillfully used pro-Russian rhetoric, such as Sergey Kivalov, or people with extensive political connections and ties to organized crime. They were more effective in capturing the pro-Russian electorate. Violent street politics have never been popular in Odesa. The marginal pro-Russian leaders scrambled for resources from local political elites struggling for power and mostly rallied around pro-Russian Ruslan Bodelan as he fought against his political competitors, led by Eduard Hurvits. Bodelan and Hurvits' political-criminal networks struggled for control over economic assets in the city, such as cargo seaports and smuggling rings, from the 1990s to 2010 (Varis 2017).

These local patrons frequently used political marginals, the so-called manually controlled activists ("*ruchnye aktivisty*"), for the political struggle against their competitors by means of political provocations, blackmail, and smear campaigns. Among those financed by Bodelan were Markov and his Motherland party, Kaurov, a veteran of Odesa's pro-Russian movements, or chairman of the Stalin Party, Valentin Doroshenko (Nekhlyudov 2007, *Novoe vremya* 2018).

Orthodox monarchists and Cossacks enjoyed the support of the Metropolitan in Odessa and Izmail of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, Agafangel (Alexei Savvin), who had ties, according to local sources, to Russian military intelligence (Interview 4; Sukkulentov 2018; Derkach 2017a). Agafangel is one of the most conservative and pro-Russian clergymen within the Moscow Patriarchate. He has been based in Odesa for years and has significantly influenced congregations and local politicians (Dubovyk 2015).

Unlike Donetsk, controlled by Yanukovych and Akhmetov's clientelist networks centered around PR, the Russian state funded pro-Russian activities through the Rossotrudnichestvo in the Russian

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General Consulate in Odesa. Markov allegedly maintained close contact with this structure (Ivanov 2017). Smaller organizations competed for funding, but the effect was close to zero as the local organization stayed on the fringe, and a huge part of the money was probably stolen (Dubovyk 2015).

Vertical Social Ties of the Fragmented Groups in Kharkiv

Kharkiv, along with Odesa, has no prior history of pro-Russian movements in the 1990s. The first of them emerged in the 2000s but had no resonance in the local society. The pro-Russian policy has been advocated for, as in other Ukrainian provinces, by Communists, the centrist Party of Regions led by prominent politician Yevhen Kushnarev (killed in 2007), and the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The public figures of the pro-Russian movements in Kharkiv were unable to attract the sympathies of the local population. Zhilin, the Bulwark's leader, was popular among the sportsmen but not among the local population, although he periodically appeared on various public actions and media as a sport clubs' organizer (Interview 1, Argument.ua 2014).

The public activities of fragmented groups consisted of round tables and ceremonies at the openings of monuments, such as the monument to Russian Tsar Aleksandr III, installed in the Kharkiv province in October 2013. Sometimes they organized rallies to promote the official status of the Russian language or jointly with communists on May 9. Street violence was not frequent. There were several clashes with Ukrainian nationalists, led by Andrii Biletsky and his Patriot of Ukraine party, which later evolved into the Azov battalion in 2014 (Shapovalova and Jarábik 2018).

Local pro-Russian organizations were even more fragmented than in Odesa and were comprised of dozens of small, often one-man "organizations" seeking support from the Russian Consulate, local elites, and the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (Derkach 2017b). Cossacks and orthodox monarchists got support from the church. The role of the local elites is still unclear. It is evident that Bulwark had to have some backing from local patron Hennadiy Kernes, Kharkiv's mayor since 2010. Everything was under his control or controlled by his people, including sport clubs, various financial machinations, and money laundering operations (Interview 1).

(No) Insurgent Violence as an Outcome

The will of the pro-Russian movements in Kharkiv and Odesa to instigate a rebellion and become rebels is observed through their support for the political violence in Donbas once the rebellions in their respective cities failed.

Rebel Violence in Donetsk

No pro-Russian organization in Donetsk was ready for political violence, and neither of them had paramilitary wings. The Donetsk Republic unsuccessfully attempted to organize its paramilitary units. That effort consisted of one or a few trips beyond Donetsk to shoot airsoft guns, drink alcohol, and take pictures (Interview 6; Kazanskiy 2010; Skorkin 2016). Sergei Buntovskii from Donbass Rus' failed to form a militant pro-Russian hooligan group out of the second-rate Metallurg Donetsk Club. Football hooligans from the prestigious Shakhtar Donetsk club were pro-Ukrainian (Interview 3 and 6). The same was the case with hooligans from Odesa and Kharkiv, who defended pro-Ukrainian activists from pro-Russian militants. Many of them later entered the Ukrainian volunteer battalions.

With the onset and culmination of the Euromaidan, small groups around Andrei Purgin from the Donetsk Republic tried to mobilize pro-Russia supporters during January-February 2014. When Yanukovych fled to Russia in late February 2014, pro-Russian secessionist organizations had up to one hundred active members in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, out of a population of nearly seven million, ready to engage in anti-state violence. Without authoritative leaders, the pro-Russian secessionists desperately needed a boost from an external actor. Gubarev admitted that in early March 2014, his militant group consisted of no more than twenty members (Gubarev, 2016, 108).

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On April 6, 2014, mobs in Donetsk and Luhansk seized state administrative buildings, but their enthusiasm began to crumble, not knowing what to do next. No one was ready for actual fighting (Gubarev 2016, 161; Zhuchkovskiy 2018). The militants, a chaotic network of several dozen uncoordinated people in a city with one million inhabitants, had no leadership. Russia had to step in more decisively and openly intervened in the process on April 12, when Igor Girkin's group of more than 50 militants arrived in Sloviansk, assisted by secessionists from the People's Militia of Donbass, led by Gubarev (Zhuchkovskii 2018, 20). Sloviansk became the stronghold of an anti-Ukrainian rebellion, sparking an occupation of the neighboring towns (Kudelia 2019, 286–289).

Local PR officials unsuccessfully tried to use the turmoil as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the incumbent government, but once they lost the control over the situation, they left the region. The only high-ranking PR official, who was directly and publicly involved in the rebellion, was parliamentary deputy with a criminal background Aleksandr Bobkov, who openly financed the rebel groups, such as Zakharchenko's *Oplot*. The 2014 KIIS Survey shows that only 20% of those who intended to vote for the Party of Regions, and 15% of those who intended to vote for the Communist Party, favored regional secession from Ukraine and joining another state, or forming an independent state (Katchanovski 2016). Transforming minority support for separatism in Donetsk (27.5%) and Luhansk (30.3%) was only possible because Russia provided far more resources in its "full spectrum conflict" to these two regions (Kuzio 2020, 109).

Rebellion's Failure in Odesa

Odesa never experienced large-scale political violence between 1991 and 2014. Occasional violent clashes between Ukrainian nationalists and pro-Russians were the only symptoms of small-scale political violence. However, it had no influence on political life in the city, and the clashes were relatively rare. The only fatality from those clashes was a young Ukrainian nationalist, Maxim Chayka, who was stabbed to death in April 2009. Odesa has always been considered a trade city that does not like turmoil and political violence, which would endanger business (Interview 4).

The so-called anti-Maydan in Odesa was divided into two principal and competing groups in spring 2014: Odesa's Militia and People's Militia. Odesa's Militia was led by local neo-fascists Dmitrii Odinov and Denis Yatsyuk. People's Militia was led by the Davidchenko brothers and Alexei Albu from Borot'ba. Both groups mobilized about 200–300 militants, ready to fight pro-Ukrainian activists in the streets, including people from neighboring Transnistria and nationalists from Russia. Published wiretaps of Putin's advisor Sergey Glaziev show that the local General Consulate supported the pro-Russians, and funds were handed to Odinov and Davidchenko as respective leaders of the pro-Russian militias (Meduza 2016).

Despite the tacit support of some local patrons and officials, the pro-Russians lost their fight on May 2, 2014, when 48 people died. The first victims were pro-Ukrainian activists shot dead during the clashes in the city center, which were provoked by the armed pro-Russians. That sparked retributory violence, culminating in the tragic events at the Trade Union House (*Odessa Daily* 2014). The Ukrainian activists appeared to be better organized and more numerous. Once the pro-Russian forces were defeated in May 2014 and local elites sided with the incumbent government, many leaders fled to the rebel territories to fight for the "Russian World" or went underground to plan subversive and terrorist attacks.

Leaders of the Motherland party fled to Moscow. Markov's deputy chairman Vadim Savenko, the acting Odesa councilman, joined the rebels in Luhansk province due to his military experience. Other party leaders – Markov, Vasilyev, and Dmitriyev – ended up in Moscow and frequently participated in anti-Ukrainian TV propaganda shows. Odesa's Militia leaders Odinov and Datsyuk fled to Crimea, where they assisted in recruiting fighters for the rebel group Ghost ("*Prizrak*"). Yegor Kvasnyuk, former leader of the ephemeral United Rus ("*Yedinaya Rus*") and journalist inciting hatred against Ukrainians, joined the rebel group Odessa located in Krasnodon in Luhansk province but later fled to Moscow. Boroťba militants (Albu, Voitsekhovskiy, Petrovskiy,

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Vallenberg) fled to a rebel-controlled enclave and joined the rebel group Ghost, commanded by Alexei Mozgovoi. Davidchenko and Dolzhenkov were arrested in Odesa by the SBU.

Some pro-Russian activists turned into militants or terrorists and, with the support of the Russian secret services, organized subversions and terrorist attacks. Orthodox Cossack groups participated in a bombing campaign in Odesa in 2014–2015 (Mitrokhin 2015). Ruslan Dolgosheya, a former military special forces officer, was detained for planning terrorist acts in Odesa in 2015. Dolgosheya was a leading member of the pro-Russian Cossack group and military club Black Sea Knight ("*Chernomorskii vityaz*"). The efforts to destabilize the situation in Odesa – and the whole of Bessarabia – by subversive and bombing campaigns failed.

Rebellion's Failure in Kharkiv

Sporadic violence between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian activists occurred in the streets of Kharkiv before 2014. The only organization that was able to fight the Ukrainian nationalists in the streets was Zhilin's *Oplot*, which protected events connected to the celebration of Soviet history where clashes with nationalists were expected (*TSN* 2016b; *Vesti*.ua 2016). During Euromaidan, Zhilin organized hired thugs in Kharkiv and "exported" them to fight protesters in Kyiv. Zhilin fled to Moscow immediately after Yanukovych's unseating in February 2014. Some *Oplot* members moved to Donetsk where a rebel group with the same name was formed. Zhilin was assassinated in a restaurant outside Moscow in September 2016.

Kernes, the main patron in Kharkiv since 2010, played with pro-Russian sentiments in the city but recognized that the only method of retaining power was to make a deal with Kyiv (Nitsova 2021). The pro-Russian movements were extremely fragmented and chaotically split during the attempts to declare a local "people's republic." Three pro-Russian groups were conflicting with each other: Kharkov Defenders ("*Zashchitniki Kharkova*"), led by Yudaev, Logvinov, Makarov, and Massalov; South-East ("*Yugo-vostok*") led by Apukhtin, Guryanov, and Aleksandrovskaya; and People's Unity ("*Narodnoe edinstvo*"), the smallest group, consisted mainly of members of Boroťba. Each group had its plan, and there was little to no collaborative thinking (Carroll 2014). These groups quarreled about the political goals and methods of their activities (Moiseev 2020, 268).

Violent clashes occurred in mid-March 2014 in front of the seat of the nationalist Patriot of Ukraine when pro-Russian militants from the *Oplot* came to seize their office. Ukrainian nationalists appeared to be ready to fight back and killed two pro-Russian militants in the standoff. The breaking point was the seizure of the regional state administration building on April 6 and the declaration of the Kharkov People's Republic. However, one day afterward, Special Police Forces stormed the building and arrested more than 60 people without a single shot. That was the end of the rebellion in Kharkiv. Konstantin Dolgov, allegedly the main beneficiary of the Russian Consulate's financial assistance in Kharkiv, was supposed to instigate the rebellion but spent a large sum on a luxury car and fled to Donetsk (Interview 1).

Pro-Russian resistance to the new Ukrainian state authorities came in the form of sabotage, explosions, and shootings. The SBU reportedly foiled 35 of 39 cases of terrorism, identifying 23 criminal groups with more than 80 participants. In February 2015, an improvised explosive device killed 4 people during a march commemorating the Euromaidan victims. The separatist resistance in Kharkiv eventually died out. Even so, violence continued, which was mainly a side effect of an influx of firearms and explosives stemming from the war to the southeast (Shapovalova and Jarábik 2018).

Conclusion

This work goes beyond the static notion of the rebel groups' structure by exploiting Staniland's explanatory potential of the pre-war social networks of rebel organizations. It illustrates the importance of pre-war social ties and understanding why the fragmented pro-Russian organizations were not the driving forces in the breakout of rebellion in the regions with relatively high pro-Russian sympathies.

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Prior to 2014, the pro-Russian secessionist movements had nothing to offer to the local population. People in Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Odesa were generally uninterested in Russian imperial and nationalist projects. The majority of the pro-Russian electorate in eastern and southern Ukraine supported non-secessionist mainstream parliamentary parties that pragmatically instrumentalized pro-Russian narratives.

In this article, the three primary reasons for weak social ties of the preexisting pro-Russian secessionist movements have been identified: unattractive ideology, inept leadership, and dependence on the patronage of the local elites. Locals were interested in resolving their grim material situation instead of ideological concepts detached from the reality on the ground and far from everyday people's concerns. That is why many people supported Russia but not the local pro-Russian secessionist movements with their views on the fringes of society.

The pro-Russian leaders were uncharismatic, incompetent, and inexperienced, often willing to raise their social status through their engagement in local politics and get funds from local elites or Russia through its diplomatic channels in Kharkiv and Odesa. Leaders of the ephemeral pro-Russian organizations regularly scrambled for financial resources from Russia or local elites, unwilling to share the (small) spoils.

The dependence on the local elites' patronage was another reason for their weak social ties, as they could be perceived as mere stooges and pawns without their own agency, authenticity, and credibility. Once the local elites decided to side with the incumbent government and the local pro-Ukrainian activists took to the streets, the fate of the pro-Russians in Odesa and Kharkiv was sealed. When they lost the protection of the local elites, they were unable to mobilize people for their political cause. The pro-Ukrainian side in these ostensibly pro-Russian provinces was more successful in mobilizing its activists and supporters, despite the similar shortage of the (material) resources.

The empirical findings demonstrated that there were insufficient social conditions for rebellions to occur without external support. The rebellions could not have worked because of the weak social ties of the pro-Russian organizations. In the end, this problem was bypassed by the Russian direct military and financial support to incipient rebels in Donetsk (and Luhansk). Pre-war pro-Russian radicals were marginal groups unable to mobilize large masses without the assistance of local elites in all observed regions.

The broader implication of the central argument develops Staniland's arguments by suggesting that the weak pre-war organizational core of a future rebellion with an unpopular ideology, inept leadership, and the local elites' patronage tend to evolve into fragmented rebel organizations, which must rely on external support and other exogenous factors to increase chances for overcoming the collective action and challenging the incumbent government.

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Interview 5. 2018. Former member of pro-Russian organization Donetsk Republic and fighter in Ukrainian voluntary battalion after 2014, *Interviewed by author,* November. Online Call.
Interview 6. 2019. Political blogger, journalist, and commentator originally from Donetsk, author of several books on local elites and political affairs in Donbas, *Interviewed by author*, August. Kyiv, Ukraine.

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