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New Wild Fields: How the Russian War Leads to the Demodernization of Ukraine's Occupied Territories

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Abstract

This article explores Russian occupation policy in Ukraine as an adaptive tactic of Russia's grand strategy and a manifestation of its military culture. Based on a comparative analysis of the Russian occupation policy during the hybrid and conventional stages of the Russian-Ukrainian war, including the employment of a de facto state playbook, we find both continuity and shifts in Russia's approach. Although the main shift lies in the change of Russia's conflict management in neighboring countries from reactive to proactive, the main continuities are the subordination of occupation policy to Russia's geostrategic interests and path dependence in its military culture, which together lead to the employment of brutal violence against civilians and the demodernization of occupied territories.

Keywords: Occupation; policy; entrenchment; de facto states; demodernization; armed conflict; Ukraine; Russia

Introduction

Russian revanchism under the guise of security rhetoric rather than the benefits of cooperation and trade has been a priority, shaping the relationship between Ukraine and Russia since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Contemporary European security architecture was created with the eastward enlargement of NATO and the European Union, and the European Security Strategy identified neighboring countries as a "ring of friends" in which the EU must pursue a policy of democracy promotion and stimulate democratic reforms (Council of the European Union 2003). Therefore, Russia has formulated its policy toward Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries through the prism of its competition with the EU and NATO. In turn, for Ukraine, the primary security interest has always been strengthening its statehood and independence from Russia. This was achieved by establishing a course for European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the constitution of Ukraine and reducing Russia's leverages and linkages through political, economic, and infrastructural rapprochement with the EU. In February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin explained his decision to start a so-called special military operation, arguing that the disposition between the West and Russia in Ukraine became critically unfavorable for Russia. In fact, Russia has admitted that it lost its competition with the West in Ukraine. The goals Putin declared in his address for invading Ukraine ("demilitarization" and "denazification," which means the termination of Western military support for Ukraine and, consequently, Ukraine's entry into Russia's geopolitical orbit with likelihood of erasing Ukrainian national identity) pose a serious threat to Ukraine's sovereignty, particularly, and to contemporary European security architecture, generally (Bloomberg 2022).

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Thus far, the geopolitical competition between the West and Russia toward Ukraine has encountered two peaks of intensity. The first peak was in 2013–2014 during the mass protests at Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square in Kyiv. After the victory of the Euromaidan revolution and understanding the difficulty of returning Ukraine to its geopolitical orbit, Russia annexed Crimea and established two proxy states in eastern Ukraine, which acted as leverage for the destabilization of the pro-Western political regime in Kyiv. The exhaustion of gray zone conflict opportunities stimulated Russia to move from a hybrid to a conventional war, using the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic (referred to jointly as the DPR/LPR) as a springboard for an open military invasion.

During the Russian war of 2022 (the second peak of intensity), Russia shifted from hybrid annexation and occupation of the Ukrainian territories via unidentified military or proxy forces to direct military occupation and annexation. Not only the goals and nature of Russian warfare changed during the first year of hostilities (from a colonial-style, short-term invasion by a professional army to a long-term war of attrition by a mobilized army); the Russian occupation policy also changed. In our article, we argue that Russian occupation policy is more than mere victories and defeats on the battlefield.

Our focus in the following analysis is on understanding what drives Russian policy toward the occupied territories in the Russian-Ukrainian war. We start from the empirical observation that although Russia's strategic goal toward Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries has remained unchanged for many years (their return to Russia's geopolitical orbit), Russian occupation policy is an adaptive tactic that Russia employs for the achievement of its military, political, and economic objectives. This tactic is twofold. First, it targets the governments of the countries whose territories were occupied, and second, it targets the populations of those occupied territories.

The analysis of Russian occupation policy, including the de facto state playbook during the 1990s, 2000s, and 2020s, shows both continuity and shifts in its ways and means. A comparative analysis of two cases of Russian occupation policy in Ukraine during the hybrid war (2014–2022) and the conventional war in Ukraine (2022–present) reveals the primary factors that influence this policy as a tactical tool in the Russian grand strategy. Although the policy is adaptive depending on several factors, it is subordinated to Russia's geostrategic and geopolitical interests of a higher level, constituting the most important continuity in the Russian approach to conflict management. Analyzing the Russian occupational playbook as a variable tool confirms that the consequences of either direct or proxy control are always the demodernization of the occupied territories regardless of the role and importance of the occupied territories for Russia.

Methodology

The article develops an argument that the current Russian approach to conflict management is rather proactive, where a variety of occupation policies are tools of adaptive tactics. We highlight several shifts in Russian occupation policy and the set of factors that have affected it. The intensity of hostilities (the hybrid warfare during 2014–2021 vs. the 2022 high-intensity conventional warfare) has affected the speed of change in the Russian occupation policy and the diversity of tactics employed. Stated differently, there is a growing range of tactics used; however, their objectives remain subordinate to the Russian geostrategy. The empirical part of this article confirms the argument that Russian occupation policy differentiates between those territories of geostrategic value to Russia and those that Russia can exchange as bargaining chips in peace deals. The difference in approaches is also visible in the populations and economies of the occupied territories. Unlike Russian policy toward Crimea and the land corridor to Crimea along the coast of the Sea of Azov, Russian support for the DPR/LPR is merely tactical and the latter territories are used to achieve Crimean-related objectives (recognition, security, and logistics).

In line with established standards of good practice in case study research, we rely on the textual analysis of relevant documents, official statements, and participant observations as our primary

sources for data collection, as these allow us to use covariation and process tracing as our main methods of data analysis. Using multiple sources also allowed us to compensate for limited access to policy makers in Ukraine and Russia. First, this article develops a theoretical framework for understanding Russian occupation policy regarding the changes and continuity of its strategic military culture. Then, this article conducts a case study using a chronological approach, tracing the processes that underlie the evolution and implementation of Russian occupation policy in Ukraine and its results on the ground.

Between Influence-Seeking and Imperialism: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Russian Occupation Policy in Ukraine

The existing literature on Russian occupation policy in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has two characteristics.

1. A growing pool of empirical data mainly reports from human rights organizations on the war crimes committed in the occupied territories and a significantly smaller body of academic publications in the field of Russian occupation policy.
2. There is a significantly smaller but growing pool of academic and policy papers on the relationship between the peculiarities of Russian command decision making and the Russian military-political strategy, of which occupation policy is a part.

Regarding the latter, the academic and think-tank discourses can be roughly divided into two groups. According to the first group, Russia invaded Ukraine as a result of miscalculation, particularly due to the weak situational awareness of the Russian authorities, whose decision to start the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was based on an incorrect assessment of the military potential of Ukraine (primarily, its readiness to fight) and possible support of Ukraine from the West (Dalsjö, Jonsson, and Norberg 2022; Jonsson and Norberg 2022). Therefore, just as the Russian command is learning during the first year of the war—adapting to new realities and changing the type of war from low to high intensity and the concept of the army from a small professional army to a huge conscription army—Russia’s occupation policy is also changing depending on numerous factors, the most important of which is resistance of the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian population in the occupied territories.

The second group consists of various publications not united by a single methodological approach, whose authors go beyond explaining the Russian invasion by the mistakes of the Russian authorities. Said authors link the characteristics of the Russian war and occupation policy with (a) the imperial past and the colonial wars of Russia and the Soviet Union (Marples 2022), including the territory of modern Ukraine (see, for example, Snyder [2022a] on the Russian colonial war), (b) peculiarities of the modern Putin political regime and decision-making system (Tsygankov 2012; Etkind and Minakov 2018; Etkind 2022), or (c) traditional Russian military culture (Facon 2012; Monaghan 2022). What unites these publications is a focus on the modernization–demodernization processes of the Russian state and society that took place after 1991 and the *path dependence* of modern Russian strategic and military cultures on Russia’s past experience. Accordingly, as occupation policy is a manifestation of military culture, the modernization–demodernization processes that affected the Russian state and society manifest themselves in the features of Russian occupation policy.

Although “demodernization” is a broad term, nuanced in economics, social sciences, and humanities, some primary features are widely acknowledged including “regressive social, economic, and political conditions, existential angst, distrust, endemic conflict, and creeping authoritarianism” (Bone 2010, 737). Many of these elements can be seen in the regime Russia imposed on occupied Ukrainian territories due to the export of Russian institutions and the employment of societal destabilization tactics (Malyarenko and Kormych 2023). According to

Touraine (1995), demodernization is “the divorce between acts and meaning, economy and culture” (99), followed by the transformation of “cultural identity into a communitarian spirit which is enhanced and used by authoritarian leaders” (Touraine 1998, 204). Overall, these definitions may provide certain explanations of the current Russian regime’s decision making and policies that appear irrational from the economic point of view but are inspired by imperialist, revanchist, and authoritarian motivations. For instance, Russian policies that result in a constant decline in trade turnover effectively go against the rational perception of healthy economic ties as an instrument for keeping states in the geopolitical orbit. For example, in 2013, approximately 27% of Ukraine’s trade was with Russia; however, it started declining annually at the start of the hybrid aggression, and by 2018, Russia’s share had fallen to 11.3% while the share of other former Soviet republics in Ukraine’s trade remained almost unchanged for the same period (Bhutia 2019). In addition, one may trace notions of sunk-cost fallacy in the Kremlin’s rhetoric on its decision to invade Ukraine, which represents irrationalities in decision making by escalating commitment to the previously chosen course of action to justify prior material and political investments (Taliaferro 2004, 184). For example, Putin’s address on Russia’s “recognition” of DPR/LPR on February 21, 2022, included many references to specific assets on Ukrainian soil, which Putin claimed were “built in their entirety by the Soviet Union or even date back to Catherine the Great” and to the different benefits Ukraine enjoyed from Russian loans and trade preferences after 1991 (Address by the President of the Russian Federation 2022). Thus, in this sense, the Russian invasion was articulated as an attempt to get all that back through direct control or securing Ukrainian loyalty.

Throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the Russian empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, had a long history of occupying stateless territories and the territories of other neighboring states, for the capture of which Russia fought colonial wars of varying intensity (Lieven 1995; Arbatov 2006; Inozemtsev 2017).

Russia’s colonial wars are a highly politicized topic, particularly in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Although there is a consensus among academics that the colonial wars were the primary means by which Russian (and later Soviet) statehood was created, expanded, and strengthened, there is debate about the objectives and character of Russia’s colonial wars, particularly toward Ukraine, the concrete measures of the Russian policy toward occupied territories in the past and current wars, and the consequences of such occupation (Hagen 2015, 2016; Abalov and Inozemtsev 2020).

The ongoing Russian war against Ukraine is obviously a colonial war directed at seizing territory and assimilating the population (Mälksoo 2022; Marples 2022), the goals of which, as a mixture of geostrategic interests and messianism, were formulated by Russian President Putin in his above-mentioned address on February 21, 2022, and earlier in his article in the summer of 2021, entitled “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (President of Russia 2021). As Snyder (2022b) noted on the latter, Putin’s perception of history was soaked by irrational ideas of predetermination and how history was supposed to go, which constituted his subjective rationale for the war against Ukraine. The first signs of such messianic rhetoric, closely linked in Russian contemporary geopolitics, can be traced back to at least the famous Putin speeches at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 and constitutes the continuity of Russia’s approach toward neighboring states. However, the ways and means of applying such an approach vary from building mutually advantageous relations with former Soviet republics to competition with the West through the employment of soft or hard power against imperial resentments (Tsygankov 2015).

By linking Russian occupation policy with the modernization–demodernization process of Russian strategic military culture, we consider the adoption of the Gerasimov doctrine of hybrid warfare, including a gray zone conflict and the employment of *de facto* states as leverage, as an element of Russian strategic military culture’s modernization. From 2014 to 2022, despite the annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in eastern Ukraine, the Russian way of hybrid warfare in Ukraine featured only limited military intervention combined with informational, cyber, economic,

and diplomatic measures. Compared with the period of the conventional war, which started in February 2022, Russian hybrid warfare allowed more flexibility by balancing between the West and China (Chivvis 2017; Suchkov 2021; Muradov 2022). However, nonmilitary leverages (corrupting the Ukrainian elites, expanding the Russian world, and promoting autocracy) were subordinated to Russian geostrategic goals. As Way (2016) noted, autocrats are less concerned with destroying democracy than with maintaining their geopolitical power.

However, this modernization only partially affected the Russian military-political system, as the modernization processes were slowed by operational and conceptual inertia (Renz and Thornton 2012; Bukkvoll 2016; Thomas 2016). Russian leadership has traditionally accepted the external benefits of modernization, such as modern technologies; however, it has resisted changing the “archaic core” of the Russian state and society, such as “traditional values” and relations between the Russian state and society (Thornton and Miron 2020). According to Facon (2012), although Russia has lost its status as an empire and superpower, as well as a significant part of its territory and population, it continues to live with inherited imperial cultural habits, including a profound feeling of insecurity and great power aspirations.

Since the Russian strategic military culture has undergone modernization (a turn toward low-intensity conflict and hybrid warfare) and reverse development (a return to mass conventional warfare), occupation policy as a tactic shows even greater variations in its changes.

Russia's Occupation Playbook before and after 2022

The secessionist conflicts in post-Soviet countries, which resulted in the establishment of de facto states, can be considered part of a longer “tradition” of similar conflicts in Eastern Europe that date back to the late 1980s (Relitz 2022). Markedonov (2022) differentiated between secessionist identity conflicts, which originated in the conflict relations between national elites following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and the conflicts created and/or escalated during the 2000s as leverages in geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Consistent with Markedonov's logic of two generations of post-Soviet conflicts, the five-day war in August 2008 that ended with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the hybrid period of Russian aggression against Ukraine (2014–2022), including the illegal annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, contained a significant component of *artificiality* and *instrumentality*. Artificiality is understood as a third party intensifying the tension and escalating the violence between two parties engaged in a dispute, which until then had no insoluble contradictions, thus constructing a conflict. Instrumentality is understood as the use of a constructed conflict as leverage on a country's domestic and foreign policy (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018; Potočňák and Mares 2022). The notion of artificiality and instrumentality is particularly true in relation to the conflict in the Donbas, which is frequently portrayed as a separatist conflict, despite the presence of anti-Maidan attitudes and grievances of the local population that would not have been possible without the participation of Russian mercenaries (Bukkvoll 2015; Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016; Marten 2019). The tradition of artificiality and instrumentality has continued in the Russian policy of creating proxy regimes in the newly occupied territories of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in 2022. For example, this strategy revealed itself in the so-called referendums in occupied Ukrainian territories, where Russian authorities claimed from 87%–99% support for joining Russia (Kramer 2022). On the contrary, during July 6–20, 2022, an opinion survey was conducted on both government-controlled and occupied after February 24, 2022, territories, and the following question was posed: “Who do you consider yourself to be first of all?” Almost 85% of the respondents chose the option “Citizen of Ukraine.” Only a little more than 6% considered themselves residents of their settlement or region (KIIS 2022).

Having analyzed Russia's de facto state playbook in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2020s, we found both continuity and differences in Russia's approach and employed tactics. The main difference was a change in the Russian approach to conflict management in the post-Soviet space and beyond,

switching from the reactive use of emerging opportunities to the construction of opportunities. In the 1990s, as Russia was institutionally and economically weak and undermined by civil wars and frequent threats of terrorist attacks on its own territory, the Kremlin's foreign policy sought to create leverage based on the management of already existing conflicts in the post-Soviet countries by either supporting the Russia-friendly separatist movements and de-facto states (Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Ossetia) or acting as a mediator (Karabakh). The watershed was Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, when he declared a shift to a more aggressive Russian foreign policy. One year later, during the five-day war in 2008, Russia demonstrated its willingness and capacity to employ its armed forces for the achievement of its foreign policy goals. The prompt restoration of business as usual with the West after the invasion of Georgia additionally convinced Moscow of the effectiveness of its occupation playbook. For example, Dmitry Medvedev referred to the previous experience at the meeting of the Russia Security Council on February 21, 2022, ahead of "recognizing" the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR. He emphasized, "I remember 2008 quite well ... after a while [the West] would get tired of the situation and ask to return to the negotiations because the Russian Federation means more to the world community than Ukraine" (Kremlin 2022).

The illegal annexation of Crimea constitutes a special case among Russian occupations in the Russian-Ukrainian war in terms of both the so-called prevailing ripe moment (Zartman 2001) and the prerequisites for the occupation, such as the critical weakening of the Ukrainian state during the political regime change in Kyiv in February 2014 and the unprecedented anti-Maidan and pro-Russian attitudes of the local population. For example, according to an independent opinion poll conducted during February 8–18, 2014, 41% of Crimea's residents were in favor of unification with Russia (Paniotto 2014). However, despite this, Russia entered Crimea gradually with covert occupation tactics, implemented by local collaborators and special operations forces—so-called green men—during the first stage of its invasion (Suslov 2014; Bukkvoll 2016).

Until the start of the Russian army's open invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the cases of Crimea and Donbas were considered separately when analyzing and managing the Ukrainian crisis. First, Russia illegally annexed Crimea under mere threat of force, whereas the Donbas during 2014–2021 was a comparatively intensive armed conflict in which the belligerents employed heavy weaponry. Therefore, the international community primarily tried to stop the violence and prevent further escalation in Eastern Ukraine. Second, from an international law perspective, the illegal annexation of Crimea was a clear sign of an international conflict between Ukraine and Russia, whereas the Russian hybrid tactics in Donbas and the wide use of DPR/LPR proxies enabled, at least formally, debates on the type of conflict being waged (international, noninternational, or both types simultaneously; Wilson 2016; Giuliano 2018). Finally, Russia's goals with respect to Crimea and Donbas as well as Ukrainian policy toward its occupied territories were different. While the Kremlin refused negotiations on the reintegration of Crimea with Ukraine, it formally declared that the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR territories belonged to Ukraine, although it did not follow its declarations in practice. Russian occupation policy toward Crimea and Donbas was also different, demonstrating two occupation scenarios: direct occupation or a proxy occupation through the establishment of de facto states.

The Russian occupation playbook also demonstrates the continuity of tactics. However, continuity does not mean the formulaic application of tactics to different situations without analyzing their effectiveness and applicability. As Ukrainian and Western military experts note, the Russian army, whose strategy in the 2022 war was initially based on an incorrect assessment of the situation in Ukraine, demonstrated the ability to learn (Ryan 2022). Similarly, Russian policy toward the occupied territories is adaptive and changes depending on several factors but remains subordinated to geostrategic and geopolitical interests of a higher order, constituting the first important continuity in the Russian approach. The occupied (at the time of writing) Ukrainian territories of the Crimea, Zaporizhia, and Kherson regions and Abkhazia are of geostrategic value for Russia because Crimea and Abkhazia allow it to significantly increase its zone of influence in the Black Sea, where it borders NATO countries; whereas, the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions provide a land

corridor to Crimea from the Rostov region, without which Crimea remains logistically vulnerable. Less important for Russian geostrategic purposes, Transnistria and the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR have been used as leverage on the politics of Chisinau and Kyiv, without Russia having to directly annex the territories. At the time of this writing, despite the formal illegal annexation of the DPR/LPR, virtually no Russian formal institutions have entered the territories and the border regime between Russia and DPR/LPR has remained in effect. The similarity of Russian policy toward Transnistria and Donbas also lies in the fact that to resolve both conflicts, the Kremlin proposed autonomy (the Kozak Plan and the Minsk Agreements) to incorporate the pro-Russian proxy republics into Moldova and Ukraine, which were rejected by both Chisinau and Kyiv, respectively.

The second continuity in the Russian approach lies in the use of occupation and occupied territories as bargaining chips for making beneficial peace deals. This tactic was first attempted when Russian “vacationers” (cover invasion of the Russian army) were withdrawn from the suburbs of Mariupol in August 2014 in exchange for the signing of Minsk 1, and it was repeated in the 2022 war. Russian propaganda depicted the withdrawal of its troops from Kyiv suburbs in the spring of 2022 as an exchange for the promise of a peace agreement in Istanbul and the withdrawal from Snake Island in the summer of 2022 as part of an Istanbul grain initiative. This leads to two conclusions. First, even though Russia seeks to maximize the use of the occupied territories’ resources, occupation (direct or through a proxy) remains a tactical tool and a second-best option, and the value of the occupied territories is compared with the value of the proposed exchange. Second, as the conflict is a multiactor interaction, Ukraine’s position is also important in choosing Russia’s tactics in relation to the occupied territory.

Finally, extensive empirical evidence supports the continuity of Russia’s occupation policy to maintain control over the occupied territories and the economic consequences of such occupations. Proven effective in establishing control in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, Russia employed societal destabilization, segregation, and political repression in the newly occupied territories. In all cases, demodernization was the consequence of occupation.

Crimean Scenario of Russian Occupation—The Entrenchment

After the illegal annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, Russian policy toward Crimea can be explained more by the term “entrenchment” than “development.” This has been evident in the implementation of a militarization policy, the redirection of economic and social connections, the expansion of the Russian sociocultural space, and the exporting of Russian political institutions. For Russia, the primary rational argument beyond its policy toward Crimea is the geostrategic value of the peninsula. By annexing Crimea, Russia has become the central geostrategic player in the Black Sea, significantly expanding its control not only through the Black Sea coast and the territorial waters of the annexed Crimea but also through its exclusive economic zone. Russia could block the navigation of Ukrainian and foreign ships in the waters around the annexed Crimea and through the Kerch Strait (Delanoë 2014; Åtland 2021; Kormych and Averochkina 2022). At that point, Russian “entrenching” emphasized the fortification of the Crimean Peninsula by military means and transforming it into a hub for projecting power throughout the Black Sea region. In four years, from 2014 to 2018, the number of Russian military personnel in Crimea increased from 12,500 to 31,500, and Russia employed its “Crimean” capabilities both for hybrid escalation in the Sea of Azov and to support hostilities after February 24, 2022 (Kormych and Malyarenko 2022).

However, the Crimean Peninsula also plays a significant role in current Russian revanchist and imperial narratives and practices. As Finnin (2023) noted, the Russian expansionist land empire always considered Crimea one of its most prized colonies. He also emphasized that the Crimean Peninsula was a long-lasting Russian ethnic-cleansing project. It started in 1857 with the Russian czar’s order to cleanse the Tatars from the entire Crimea and replace them with Slavic peasants from the empire’s internal provinces, which reduced the share of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula from

80% to 25%. Stalin's deportation of the whole population of Crimean Tatars in 1944 completed the cleansing. Hereby, the illegal annexation of Crimea marked the turning point in the Russian return to imperial politics, which included forced assimilation and purposeful efforts to change the demographic composition of the territory (Kontorovich 2017). The only difference was in its extension, which targeted not only Crimean Tatars but also local Ukrainians.

After the illegal annexation in 2014, Russia stimulated the replacement of local incumbent Ukrainian elites and the migration of the population from different regions of Russia to Crimea as an element of its entrenchment tactics on the peninsula, directed at the erosion of local Ukrainian identity. In an interview with the *Den* (2021) newspaper, Ukrainian human rights activists considered the migration of Russian citizens to the annexed peninsula to be a Russian "migration weapon." In accordance with the data presented in the UN Secretary General report on human rights in Crimea, 140,000 Russian citizens had moved to Crimea as of June 2020 (United Nations 2020). As Kontorovich (2017) noted, Russia has an explicit policy of attracting Russians to the occupied territory, which includes the provision of free agricultural land to Russian citizens, active subsidies in tourism, and massive infrastructure projects. Similarly, the Kremlin conducted an intensive personnel rotation, appointing public officials from Russian regions to positions in Crimea, thus destroying the integration of local Ukrainian economic and political elites and forestalling possible protests. In addition, Russian occupation authorities in Crimea moved to effectively eliminate the Tatar and Ukrainian languages from being taught in schools. Due to official declarations in 2019, a total of 6,100 (3.1%) children studied Crimean Tatar and 249 (0.2%) children studied Ukrainian languages in 15 Crimean Tatar language-medium schools and one Ukrainian language-medium school. However, human rights activists revealed that there were no schools in which all subjects were delivered in Ukrainian. In Crimean Tatar-medium schools, education was provided more often in Russian than in Crimean Tatar (Crimean Human Rights Group 2019).

The most tangible changes occurred in the economic sphere. According to statistical data collected by Eurasianet (2021), the creation of a free economic zone in Crimea made it possible to attract 1.73 trillion rubles (about \$27.68 billion) of investments from 2014 to 2022, the structure of which primarily consists of state investments in agriculture, construction, the food industry, and tourism. For the years of annexation, the Crimean average annual GDP growth was 3%–4%. However, according to the value of the integral index of economic activity, Crimea is almost two times behind the Krasnodar Krai and about 17.6% of the population lives below the poverty line. The implementation of the "Socioeconomic development of Crimea—2025" plan made it possible to build the Crimean bridge, the Taurida highway, and two thermal power plants in Sevastopol and Simferopol, as well as reconstruct the infrastructure of airports and seaports. Nevertheless, both Crimea and Sevastopol remain depressed regions "with a lower investment rating," whose welfare is supported only by direct budget investments. Thus, Russia has exported to Crimea its economic model with prevailing state enterprises and large state-affiliated projects. This has significantly reduced entrepreneurialism on the Peninsula. In 2014, before the illegal annexation, there were 15,553 private small and medium enterprises and 116,200 entrepreneurs in Crimea, employing about 35% of the workforce. By July 2018, these figures had plummeted to 1,382 small and medium enterprises and 55,328 entrepreneurs and the share of small business employees had declined to 19.5% (Ballard 2019). In addition, both Russian military and economic entrenching have a predatory character that causes numerous environmental issues including significant pollution due to Black Sea Fleet activities, the operation of drilling facilities, the Northern Crimea chemical industry, and the desalination plants' construction (Babin et al. 2021).

However, the Crimean Peninsula remained logistically vulnerable in the supply of goods, electricity, and water. In April 2014, Ukraine, which provides about 85% of Crimea's needs for fresh and industrial water, cut off the flow of water to Russian-annexed Crimea through the North Crimean Canal. In 2015, Ukraine halted the supply of electricity to the Crimean Peninsula. The construction of the Crimean Bridge partially solved the problem of supplies and transit. To maintain the normal functioning of the Crimean Peninsula, particularly the military infrastructure,

the Kremlin needed the land corridor to the Crimea along the Azov and Black Sea coasts. The first Russian attempt to create a land corridor to Crimea can be traced back to August 2014, when Russian “vacationers” invaded Ukraine and approached the city of Mariupol.

Donbas Scenario: Republics Created for the War

Within the framework of the Donbas conflict, the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR and Kyiv governments from 2014 to 2022 are examples of parties that initially did not have irresolvable contradictions and intentions to fight. An external actor, Russia, artificially constructed and escalated this conflict. From the very start, the creation and maintenance of DPR/LPR appeared to be a second-best option from Moscow’s perspective, compared with regaining control over Ukraine through a pro-Russian government in Kyiv after the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–14. Even this second-best option was a scaled-down version of unsuccessful Russian attempts at creating “Novorossiya” in nine Ukrainian regions (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018; Mykhnenko 2020; Potočňák and Mares 2022). The self-proclaimed DPR/LPR established the systems and structures through which Russia was able to control armed groups and the populations of the occupied territories. First, social destabilization and political repressions made the Ukrainian elites, bureaucracy, and active population leave Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014–2015. The change in elites made it possible to appoint pro-Russian proxies to key management positions. Second, separatist warlords and their rebel troops were united and subordinated to a single command within DPR/LPR structures (army, police, and security services; Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016; Marten 2019).

Unlike Crimea, Russia did not export its political institutions to the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR, allowing them to create their own “constitutions” and legislation. The political systems of the DPR/LPR are even more repressive and authoritarian than the Russian ones, demonstrating a return to rudimentary and inhuman Soviet norms. For example, the “constitutions” of DPR/LPR allowed the death penalty for “treason and espionage,” according to which every Ukrainian citizen could be executed. With the establishment of DPR/LPR power in Donbas, the ruling warlords liquidated even decorative democratic institutions, such as a fair judicial system, political parties, free media, and local self-government. For eight years, the unrecognized states of the DPR/LPR controlled the territories in which the laws of neither Ukraine nor Russia apply. In contrast to the annexed Crimea, the territory in which Russia spread the Russian sociocultural space and the ideology of the Russian World, in Donetsk and Luhansk, local authorities implemented state-sponsored projects to create the identity of the “people of Donbas” (Sasse and Lackner 2018; Malyarenko and Wolff 2019). The use of proxy forces allowed Russia to avoid legal responsibility for acts of aggression and occupation, taking advantage of mediation in the conflict between the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR and Kyiv while nevertheless maintaining command and control over the situation (Koven 2021). Force and threats to use force against civilians were widely used. Examples include indiscriminate and provocative shelling in urban areas and significant limitations on the human rights and freedoms of residents of the self-declared republics and IDPs including the freedom of movement and imprisonment and deportation of pro-Ukrainian activists (US Department of State 2021).

Support for the idea of secession from Ukraine in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was significantly lower than in Crimea, which led to a higher level of repression against the local population and a higher number of internally displaced persons from the territories controlled. For example, according to UNHCR (2021), the number of IDPs from Crimea to Ukraine was about 49,000 from 2014 to 2022. Thus, the number of IDPs from Crimea was no more than 2% of the population. At the same time, the number of IDPs from the territories of self-proclaimed DPR/LPR was 1.4 million or 40% of the population.

In addition, the difference between the Crimean and Donbas occupation scenarios is particularly noticeable in the economic sphere. Although the hostilities affected the economic stagnation of the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR, the recent ECHR ruling confirmed that “areas in eastern Ukraine in

separatist hands were, from May 11, 2014, and up to at least January 26, 2022, under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation” (European Court on Human Rights 2023). Thus, the Russian occupation policy has also been among the factors accounting for the economic situation in the region.

During the period between 2014 and 2022, Russia’s economic policy toward the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR was carried out in line with Russia’s general efforts to force Ukraine to implement the Minsk Agreements, integrating the DPR/LPR with Ukraine as an autonomous regime. In practice, this meant that, while keeping the DPR/LPR as leverage upon Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy, Russia did not invest in the maintenance and development of the economy and infrastructure, ensuring a minimum level of population survival through social payments to school workers, hospitals, government agencies, the army, and police and welfare payments to representatives of socially vulnerable groups (Malyarenko and Kormych 2023).

As a result, despite Russia’s spending of 500 billion rubles (about \$8 billion) on the DPR/LPR over eight years of proxy occupation (Kommersant 2022), the economies of the self-proclaimed republics have undergone significant stagnation. In 2018, Donbas’s total GDP in constant local currency prices dropped to just 38.9% of its 2013 level (Savelyeva 2022), and the industrial output of the occupied territories of DPR became three times lower than the government-controlled part of Donetsk province, whereas before the war they were almost equal (Mykhnenko 2020). Even placing the DPR/LPR economy management under Russian supervision through ZAO VneshTorgServis, registered in South Ossetia, did not save the industry from severe contraction and nonpayment of wages (Skorkin 2021).

Various factors have led to the rapid retardation of the occupied territories’ economies. The first factor was the cutting of economic and transport connections with Ukraine, which began in 2015 and gradually strengthened by 2018 after the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the Law of Ukraine 2268-VIII. However, although Kyiv abandoned the reintegration of the DPR/LPR by military means, it stimulated the economic and social strangulation of the occupied territories, which should have motivated their residents to move to Ukraine-controlled territories. Trade relations between the government-controlled and occupied territories stopped entirely, although the consequences were painful for the Ukrainian economy as well. Nevertheless, as part of a zero-sum diplomatic game with Russia, Kyiv’s policy of isolating self-proclaimed republics was consistent throughout all hybrid periods of conflict (Milakovsky 2018). As an alternative to the strategy of complete isolation, Kyiv has always considered the Transnistrian scenario (economic and social reintegration of de facto states without political reintegration) undesirable because its implementation would strengthen Russia’s levers of influence on Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy (School for Policy Analysis NaUKMA 2021).

The second factor is the nature of the economy in the occupied Donbas territories—an old industrial, export-oriented economy based on metallurgy, chemical production, and the coal industry—which was unprofitable and received subsidies from the Ukrainian state budget before 2014. In the 1990s and 2000s, the restructuring programs of some unprofitable industries failed due to corruption involving Ukrainian officials and oligarchs. At the same time, many Ukrainian Donbas enterprises were direct competitors of Russian industry. Thus, after gaining control over the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR, Russia adopted a policy of dismantling local industry, a time when the most technologically advanced enterprises were transferred to Russia and the equipment of dozens of others was sold for scrap (Promyslovyi Portal 2020). The remaining industrial DPR/LPR enterprises periodically either stand idle or operate at 30%–40% capacity; only the food industry (dairy, meat, and bakery products), oriented toward the local market and controlled by leaders of the occupation administrations, has witnessed some development. However, most food products are imported from Russia (Gmyria and Kobets 2021).

After the full-fledged invasion began in 2022, the Russian government announced large-scale investments in the economy of the DPR/LPR; however, this appeared questionable. For example, the DPR/LPR authorities estimated the needed funding at about \$57 billion, which was much more than the whole spending of the Russian Federal Target Program for Crimea in 2014–2020 (about

\$16 billion). Furthermore, Russian spending on reconstruction of newly occupied Ukrainian territories is classified, and there is evidence of a program named “Special Infrastructure Project” for 2023–2025 that costs \$6.1 billion (Kass 2022). In practice, since February 24, 2022, the most substantial Russian “project” toward the DPR/LPR was the forcible mobilization of at least 100,000 people, many of which have already been killed or injured in hostilities (*Euromaidan Press* 2022).

Just as in Crimea, Russia employs its “migration weapon” in the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR and newly occupied territories for entrenchment. On May 15, 2022, Russia lifted restrictions on its civilians’ entry into the DPR/LPR that had been in place since 2014 (*RBC.RU*, 2022). On December 31, 2022, the Russian government issued Decree No. 2565, refinancing the loans issued to Russian citizens for purchasing or building houses in the “territories of the DPR/LPR, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts.”

In aggregate, DPR/LPR played a primarily utilitarian role in Russian occupation policy toward Ukraine. First, they were considered leverage and possible bargaining chips toward forcing Kyiv to recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea and admit Russian geostrategic interests. Later, after the start of the full-fledged invasion in 2022, DPR/LPR became a military hub, one of the biggest suppliers of cannon fodder, and the most devastated battlefield of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Zaporizhzhia and Kherson: Grab All the Land You Can

The occupation playbook, which Moscow has applied in the Ukraine territories seized in the 2022 war, particularly in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts of Ukraine, includes both continuity and novelty of ways and means. First, the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts became the first Ukrainian territories to be occupied due to a purely conventional military operation. On February 24, 2022, the south of Ukraine appeared to be relatively unprotected from an invasion from Crimea, which enabled the rapid Russian advance toward Mariupol and the occupation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. It also created the threat to Mykolaiv and Odesa; thus, for some time, part of the Russian strategy seemed to be to take the entire Black Sea coast of Ukraine, in effect creating a land bridge from Russia all the way to Transnistria in Moldova. From a military perspective, the Russian occupation of the eastern part of Kherson and southern part of Zaporizhzhia oblasts was the main strategic success of the Russian army. Later, this success was partially offset by the retreat of the Russian army from the city of Kherson and the West bank of the Dnipro during the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the fall of 2022.

However, the military aspect is not the whole picture. First, the vast majority of the population in these areas considers themselves ethnic Ukrainians (i.e., “Ukrainians by nationality”), with this number being 87% according to an opinion poll conducted in late April 2022; only 5.5% identified themselves as ethnic Russians. Furthermore, only 8% of respondents supported the idea of unification with Russia in a poll conducted before the war started (Reiting Group 2022). Thus, the context in which Russia’s occupation of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia is unfolding is extremely different from that of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in 2014.

The second difference is the accelerated pace of establishing the occupation regime. Even in the Crimean scenario, annexation operations occurred from February 20 to March 25, 2014, when Russia seized the last Ukrainian military units and warships in Crimea (Kofman et al. 2017). Thus, the presence of Ukrainian authorities and military personnel in Crimea persisted for more than a month. At the same time, Ukrainian mobile operators formally operated in Crimea until mid-August 2014 (more than five months after illegal annexation), when their equipment was transferred to specially established Russian enterprises (*Kyiv Post* 2014). In the Donbas scenario, the Kremlin was able to pursue a gradual approach to entrenching and legitimizing its proxy occupation of the DPR/LPR, establishing them over a period of more than eight years as de facto states with their own political, security, economic, and social institutions.

In the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, due to the presence of large numbers of Russian troops and the military and economic pressures that Moscow faces, this timeline is much more compressed

and lacks even the thin veneer of legitimacy that Russia tried to create in Donbas after 2014. Importantly, this approach also reflects a fundamentally different objective now pursued by Moscow: instead of creating and using de facto states as levers of influence over domestic and foreign policy choices, Russia is now seeking to maximize what it understands as “security” by establishing full direct control over geostrategically valuable territories through their formal annexation.

However, the methods used by Russia have generally remained the same as those used in 2014, which in turn were modeled on “state-building” efforts by Russian proxies decades earlier in Transnistria. Similarly, to the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk nine years earlier, the expulsion of local Ukrainian elites from Kherson, Mariupol, Berdyansk, and Melitopol during the Russian invasion facilitated the transfer of power to local pro-Russian elites willing to cooperate with Russian occupation forces (Stevenson and Rodionova 2022). This set the scene for the implementation of various tactics to establish and consolidate full control over the occupied territories.

In the first stage, any local Ukrainian resistance was crushed by brutal force, including civilian massacres (Mutch 2022). This began prior to the actual occupation, with the systematic and indiscriminate shelling of populated areas intended to instill fear in the local population and either force them to flee the area prior to the arrival of Russian forces or to submit to the occupation afterward. This tactic was attempted on the outskirts of Kyiv and Kharkiv—as is evident from the atrocities in places such as Bucha and Irpin—but failed in both cases. Simultaneously, humanitarian aid from within Ukraine and from international organizations for the occupied areas of the Kherson oblasts has been blocked by Russian soldiers since early March (Haroun 2022), which has forced the local population into a growing dependency on Russian handouts of food and medicine.

The use of terror during the first stage of the Russian occupation was followed by the forcible imposition of the Russian “system.” The main challenge for the Russian occupiers was Ukrainian local self-administration, which, unlike the Russian one, appeared to be independent due to effective decentralization reform and difficult to control. Thus, Russia abducted local councilors and municipal employees as a form of pressure and intimidation (at least 53 cases, which included the abductions of 23 mayors, were recorded in the first four months of occupation; Nebrykut and Kliuzhev 2022). Overall, the failure to absorb Ukrainian local self-administration made Russian occupation authorities resort to replacing it with military-civil administrations and imposed fake mayors. This stage of consolidating territorial control occurred in the newly occupied territories of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, and Donetsk oblasts in summer–fall 2022.

Apart from establishing general control, Russian efforts focused on the absorption of newly occupied Ukrainian territories in three main spheres: economic, cultural, and sociopolitical.

The difference in approaches to the occupied territories (both new and old) that are of geostrategic value for Russia and those that are intended to act as bargaining chips or serve as a resource base and platform for further invasion was particularly evident in the economic sphere. Although the infrastructure of the cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, whether occupied by Russia directly or through the proxies before and after 2022, was destroyed during the hostilities, Russian investments in building a new infrastructure are directed exclusively to the territories located along the land corridor to the Crimea—for example, to Mariupol and Novoazovsk but not to the old industrial cities of Donbass: Donetsk, Luhansk, Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, and Popasna (Coydash 2022).

In the newly occupied territories along the Sea of Azov—unlike the DPR/LPR, which Russia used to recognize as Ukrainian before its illegal annexation in September 2022—logistics with Russia developed rapidly, including railway connections, maritime transport, and the provision of electricity and water to the Russian territory from occupied territories. For example, Russia reopened railroad connections between Kherson oblast and Crimea on March 23, between Zaporizhzhia oblast and Donbas on April 15, and between Zaporizhzhia oblast and Crimea on June 6 (*IZ. RU.* 2022). According to the Russian government, a high-speed road and railroad are to be built along the occupied territory of the Sea of Azov, connecting Rostov-on-Don and Crimea. Russia also

seized the seaports of Mariupol and Berdyansk, almost intact. Of the 60,000 Russian construction workers employed in the reconstruction of the occupied territories, 28,000 worked in Mariupol (Kass 2022). The construction is financed by the Russian budget. According to the development plan, urban infrastructure must be restored by 2025 (Meduza 2022). For comparison, for eight years of Donetsk and Luhansk's proxy occupation, transport infrastructure connecting them with Russia was never renewed or developed.

Both in the case of the DPR/LPR from 2014–2022 and the newly occupied territories, local occupation administrations stole (“nationalization”) cash from the Ukrainian banking infrastructure and property from state monopolies and private owners. However, in the case of the newly occupied Ukrainian territories, there were two assets of exceptional importance for Russia and both were Crimean-related: water and power plants.

In the first month of the occupation, Russian authorities opened the North Crimean Canal, which Ukrainian authorities closed in 2015, to supply water from the Dnipro to the annexed Crimea (Texty 2022). In contrast, even though the population of the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR has suffered a water shortage for almost the entire nine-year occupation, Russia has never attempted to solve the problem.

After announcing the illegal annexation of the occupied territories, Putin issued a decree declaring the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant federal property under the control of the Russian state corporation Rosatom (Reuters 2022a). The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant seems instrumental in solving the Crimea energy issues because the Kremlin failed to make such a proclamation after 2014 (Association of Reintegration of Crimea 2022).

In addition, Russia established a scheme in which Crimean ports became a hub for exporting agricultural products from the newly occupied Ukrainian territories in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions under the guise of being from Russia (Kormych and Averochkina 2022). For example, Crimean food exports rose fiftyfold following Russia's invasion. The port of Sevastopol shipped approximately 462,200 tons of agricultural goods, such as grains, oilseeds, vegetable oils, pulses, and proteins, between March and June 2022, whereas for the whole of 2021, it shipped only 8,000 tons of comparable products (Quinn 2022).

The occupied areas of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts have been forced to adopt the Russian ruble as a legal tender and have been incorporated into the Russian taxation and banking systems (Taylor and Westfall 2022). At the same time, as links to Ukraine have been cut off, all trade, logistics, and transport infrastructures of the occupied territories are being reoriented toward Russia. Furthermore, in contrast to the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR, the Kremlin is not relying on proxy agents, such as banks and companies registered in Abkhazia, but rather on Russian entities, such as Promsvyazbank since June 2022 and the Bank of Russia since December 2022 (Zhurzhenko 2023).

There has also been a focus on high-speed integration in the telecommunications sphere. Starting in May 2022, Russia redirected all internet traffic in the occupied territories through its infrastructure (Reuters 2022b), just like in the Crimean scenario. Since June 2022, two Russian mobile operators, MirTelecom and 7Telecom (subsidiaries of Miranda Media and K-Telecom, respectively), have started operating in occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts using equipment seized from Ukrainian operators (Antoniuk 2022). This was accompanied by the introduction of the Russian +7 country code. The introduction of Russian mobile operators in DPR/LPR is planned for 2023.

In relation to political institutions, immediately after the occupation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts by Russian troops and before their annexation by Russia (March–October 2022), they were administered by the so-called civil-military administrations set up by the Russian occupation forces. The authority of these administrations was legally undefined and, therefore, did not even create a pretense of rule of law. The installation of local pro-Russian collaborators in these administrations was to give governance a thin veneer of local participation (Stevenson and Rodionova 2022). After the formal annexation, the export of political elites and institutions from

Russia to the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts occurred faster and with greater intensity than to the DPR/LPR, which can be explained by the different statuses of these territories within Russia (oblast versus republic) but also by the local populations' varying agency and support for the occupation. For example, our analysis of the composition of the governments of the four annexed territories appointed after their formal incorporation into Russia on September 30, 2022, shows that the governments of the DPR/LPR have largely remained unchanged, and the newly appointed members of the government (primarily law enforcement agencies) are natives of Donbas, whereas members of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblast governments are former Russian officials. The difference in occupation policies toward new and old occupied territories also manifests itself in the varying approaches to applying Russian citizenship legislation (illegal and illegitimate in relation to residents of all annexed territories) to the policy that mobilizes individuals into the Russian army. Residents of the DPR/LPR have been forcibly mobilized in the armies of the self-proclaimed republics since the beginning of the Russian invasion (the decision to include the first and second army corps of the DPR/LPR in the Russian Armed Forces was made only on December 31, 2022), whereas residents of the occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions can participate in the war on the side of Russia only on a voluntary basis. Ukrainian resistance persists in the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts, and the Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in May shows the potential to liberate occupied territories. As a response, Russia will likely “double down” on the brutality of its occupation. An occupying power confident that it will permanently integrate and develop these territories would hardly engage in such activities.

In the cultural sphere, the civil-military administrations and Russian authorities introduced Russian educational standards, forcing schoolchildren and teachers to enroll in Russian language courses, imposing Russian as the sole language of instruction in schools, and using imported Russian textbooks while destroying Ukrainian books in schools and libraries (Pankiev 2022). Our analysis demonstrates that the main difference in Russia's educational policy toward the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts and the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR relates to identity politics. For example, for the eight years of the proxy occupation, educational establishments in the DPR/LPR relied on their own human resources, libraries, and equipment and they developed their own educational standards, but in the newly occupied territories, teachers were either brought from Russia or local teachers were sent to Russia for mandatory retraining, and students immediately switched to Russian educational standards and textbooks. In the DPR/LPR schools, “History of Ukraine” was replaced with the locally developed “History of Homeland” (a combination of Russian empire and Donbas history), whereas in the newly occupied territories, the replacement became “History of Russia” with Russian textbooks (Cedos 2022). There have been instances when postindependence Ukrainian sculptures and monuments were replaced with Soviet-era ones (*The Guardian* 2022). Broadcasting is also limited to Russian TV and radio channels.

The deindustrialization of the occupied territories in the economic sphere manifests itself as a sharp shift toward a resource economy under conditions of having undeveloped financial and credit systems. The basis of the economy of the newly occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts is agriculture, spanning a wide range of agricultural sectors (Malyarenko and Kormych 2023). Therefore, these regions are likely to retain their specialization under the occupation, strengthening Russia's agricultural potential and its influence on global food security. However, under the conditions of Russian occupation, there is a question regarding the ownership of agricultural lands and infrastructure, hitherto owned by Ukrainian and foreign agricultural holdings but now seized by Russia. Furthermore, some have suggested that the Kremlin's rhetoric, describing the 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a “special military operation,” and its claimed goals of “denazification” were designed to evade obligations to follow the law of armed conflict in Ukrainian areas under Russian control, primarily those demanding respect for, “unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country” (Longobardo 2022, sec. 2, para. 2).

The demodernization of the newly occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya oblasts (here, we do not consider the newly occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the industry and infrastructure of which were destroyed because of hostilities) has been occurring under the influence of the following factors.

First, there are direct consequences of the Russian occupation policy itself such as looting local citizens and businesses and dismantling the economic potential of occupied territories. Numerous examples of such behavior from Russian occupiers were revealed after Ukrainians liberated Kherson and the western bank of Dnipro (Lovett 2022).

The second factor is the ambiguous regimes of occupied territories, where Russia's failure to follow International Humanitarian Law has led to rapid and complete disruption of social and economic connections with Ukraine and other states. This, combined with general international sanctions toward Russia, has complicated investments, financial transactions, and product exports.

Third, entire strata of the population have left the occupied territories—principally entrepreneurs, the middle class, employees of financial organizations, those in the information and communication fields, and the creative urban class—whose economic activity is possible only in a market economy.

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis of Russian occupation policy cases demonstrates a transformation of its tactics in line with the growth of Russian revanchism and geopolitical ambitions based on a change in military strategy from hybrid to conventional warfare and a change in military-political tactics during the war in Ukraine. The creation and maintenance of *de facto* states in the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, was an element of the Russian strategy of indirect war; however, with the transition to conventional war, the Russian command replaced the exercise of influence through its proxy agents with direct occupation.

The Russian occupation policy demonstrates continuity, which is connected, first, with the subordination of Russia's occupation policy to its geostrategic interests of a higher order and, second, with path dependence and the conceptual and operational inertia of Russian strategic thinking, which inevitably led to a return to the "old" military culture of colonial, barbarian wars and the demodernization of occupied territories.

Although the best option for Russian aggression is gaining control of the whole Ukraine, the second-best option appears to be a Crimean-centric stance. First, proxy-occupation through the self-proclaimed DPR/LPR was the means of changing the agenda of the illegal Crimean annexation. Second, the DPR/LPR were used as a military hub and cannon-fodder suppliers for the occupation of the Ukrainian south (particularly for the seizure of Mariupol). Third, Russian entrenching and attempted illegal annexation of newly occupied Ukrainian territories can be explained by four main factors: a land bridge to Crimea, water to Crimea, electricity to Crimea, and food supplies to Crimea. Thus, the possibility of Crimea deoccupation may be considered a factor that has the potential to substantively reduce the likelihood of future Russo-Ukrainian conflicts.

Given the change in Russian occupation policy—from presumed leverage over Ukrainian foreign and domestic policy to direct occupation—the trajectory of any occupied territory is likely to be a fast track to absorption and subsequent annexation. Yet, as the current war continues, there is also a danger that the Kremlin will regain the military initiative in areas that it considers geostrategically more important for expanding throughout the Black Sea coast and the city of Odesa.

As the Russian-Ukrainian war becomes protracted, there is a probability that the Russian army will capture new Ukrainian territories. Thinking strategically, the Ukrainian government and its Western allies must develop a comprehensive deoccupation policy, combining "during-occupation" and "post-deoccupation" measures that, when taken together, can prevent Russia

from its entrenchment in the occupied Ukrainian territories, save human lives, and facilitate future reintegration with Ukraine.

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