



# The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class

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## Foreword

At the end of 1965, the *apparatchiks* of the Communist Party of Ukraine received an outrageous samizdat – in Ukrainian: *samvydav* – entitled “Internationalism or Russification?”. It argued that behind the facade of fraternal coexistence of peoples in the USSR, there lurked a **Great Russian chauvinism** that prevented the real development of national culture, suppressed the history of non-Russian peoples, promoted Russification and encouraged Ukrainophobia. Using references to Lenin’s writings, the manuscript argued that this was the result of “a complete revision of Leninist party policy on the national question, a revision carried out by Stalin in the 1930s and continued by Khrushchev in the last decade.”<sup>1</sup>

The author of these words, Ivan Dziuba, a native of the Donetsk Oblast, a Ukrainian literary critic and dissident, died only recently: on 22 February 2022. The attack on Kiev began a mere two days later.

Russian representatives have laid out various arguments to justify and legitimize the invasion. The emphasis they put on the various objectives of the so-called special operation is also changing, from the protection of the self-proclaimed “people’s republics” in the East to the “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine, to regime change or the creation of a corridor from the Donbas to Transnistria. However, a central message has gradually crystallized from their statements: first, the Ukrainian state has no claim to existence, at least within its current borders; and second, there is in fact no separate Ukrainian nation, it is a mere variant of the **triune Russisan Nation** which includes Great Russians (i.e., Russians), Belarusians, and Little Russians (i.e., Ukrainians and Ruthenians).

The actions of the Russian military in occupied territories reflect this. Soldiers remove signs in Ukrainian and all sorts of Ukrainian symbols.

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation is based on the Ukrainian original, which is available [online](#). The manuscript was published in English in 1968, thanks, in part, to the Slovak scholar of Ukraine, Juraj Bača (1932–2021), who helped [bring it](#) to the West. He was later [sentenced](#) to four years in prison in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. A more recent English edition is also available [online](#).

FSB agents interrogate school principals and teachers. The emerging military-political administration has announced the **transition** of the education system to the Russian curriculum and instruction in Russian only. Many refugees who pass through the “**filtration camps**” find themselves thousands of kilometers away from their home, deep in the territory of the occupiers. There are speculations that the existing “republics”, as well as possible new formations of this kind (e.g., in the Kherson Oblast), could become part of the Russian Federation.<sup>2</sup>

The current war against Ukraine is *irredentist*: its aim is to bring back to the empire (“federation”) a territory it considers its own. According to this view, Ukraine has only been lost temporarily, and is inhabited by a population that has simply forgotten its true national identity. The theory and practice of this conflict is the same Great Russian chauvinism that Dziuba protested. Sometimes, it appears in its classical, tsarist and Orthodox form, at other times, it employs Stalinist imagery in which the cult of the Great Patriotic War plays a central role. A bizarre mixture thus emerges. The **new coat of arms of the occupied Kherson Oblast** makes references to Tsarist symbolism. At the same time, the occupiers raise **red flags** with a hammer and sickle that once heralded the doom of the Romanov dynasty. One can only make sense of this hodge-podge if one understands that the unifying ingredient is Great Russian chauvinism.

The national question, so **central** to the concerns of revolutionaries operating on the very same territory over a hundred years ago, plays a key role in this war. That is why this conflict appears to some as anachronistic, out of place in contemporary Europe. Over the last seventy years, most European countries have experienced conflicts related to national self-determination only in the form of anti-colonial uprisings that took place in the global South (i.e., the numerous wars in Africa or Southeast Asia), or in the form of separatist struggles that were much less intense (e.g., Northern Ireland, the Basque Country). The bloody demise of Yu-

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<sup>2</sup> Another option is the integration of Ukraine or its occupied part as a quasi-independent member of the so-called **Union State**, a supranational entity that currently unites the Russian Federation and Belarus.

goslavia has simply been forgotten, albeit unjustly. Like the **six wars of 1991–2001** that accompanied the breakup of the Balkan federation, the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be seen in the context of the transformation of “state socialism” and the failure of its attempts to resolve the national question on the former territories of the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary.

The deep crises and subsequent economic and political changes that these states have undergone since the mid-1980s have brought to the surface national tensions that the Eastern bloc regimes tried to keep in check. At the same time, nationalism – from its extreme chauvinist versions to the “peaceful”, civic ones – played a key role in legitimizing movements against Stalinist regimes. It experienced a major renaissance in the political arenas of the new states. The calm division of the ČSFR into the Czech Republic and Slovakia or the peaceful “reunification of the German nation” after the fall of the Berlin Wall were exceptions. The demise of the USSR was accompanied by a series of armed conflicts, from **clashes between demonstrators and the militarized police and army** to the brutal wars in Chechnya. Russia’s war with Ukraine, which began in 2014, is a continuation of this series, while the invasion in February 2022 is but an escalation of an existing conflict.

The current war can only be understood against the background of the development of Ukrainian capitalism and its specifics. In this text, we trace it from Ukraine’s independence and the emergence of regional and sectoral “clans” within the capitalist class, some of which had close links to the economy of the Russian Federation. In politics, the competition of these clans took the form of vying for lucrative positions that allowed access to state resources. The national question – in part, for historical reasons – became part of this struggle and was used as an instrument of mobilization by the political projects of the oligarchs. While the power of the clans acted as a brake on *economic* development, their rivalry was the basis for the *political* instability. The latter culminated in 2013–2014 with the Euromaidan, the emergence of self-proclaimed “republics” in the Donbas, as well as the beginning of a military conflict with Russia.

In a future article, we will analyze the challenges posed by the current invasion to workers in both Ukraine and Russia and examine the question of what position they should take on the conflict.

## Clan capitalism

Ukraine became independent in 1991 following a referendum in which more than 90% of voters voted in favor.<sup>3</sup> Until 2014, Russia accepted this result and recognized Ukraine's existence in a sort of regime of "limited sovereignty". Ukraine was tied to its larger neighbor by economic relations<sup>4</sup> and Russia was able to use its local clients to influence internal political development. The latter has long been turbulent.

The period of economic transition in which Ukraine followed, to some extent, the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, quickly created a new capitalist class. At first, it was composed mainly of "red directors" (i.e., the managerial cadres of the Stalinist regime), and later also of broader layers – from the ranks of the technical intelligentsia, various parts of the state apparatus and the criminal underworld. The 1990s were a true Eldorado for this class, though often quite dangerous for its individual members. Using both legal and extralegal methods, it seized key enterprises and banks, which it either stripped of all assets or concentrated into giant holdings and investment groups. Profits were exported to tax havens. At the same time, it be-

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<sup>3</sup> This was about 76% of all eligible voters. In Crimea, support for independence was the weakest, at around 54% of the vote. Similarly in Crimea's Sevastopol, which was a separate constituency – 57%. In Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, however, almost 84% of those who voted were in favor of independence. Wikipedia summarizes the results in detail.

<sup>4</sup> As recently as 2013, imports from Russia accounted for 29% of total imports of goods; exports to Russia accounted for almost 23% of Ukrainian exports of goods. By 2020, both indicators had dropped to 11% and 6%, respectively (see [oec.world](http://oec.world)). On the other hand, exports to the EU15 already accounted for a larger share of total Ukrainian exports than exports to Russia in 2002. Thus, the dependence of Ukrainian industry on Russian gas and oil has played a decisive role.

gan to take control of the media and politics. Unlike its predecessors in the Stalinist *nomenklatura*, it also managed to integrate itself into the global capitalist class, at least in terms of the use of its **consumption fund** (yachts and luxury properties abroad, jets, as well as private investments in international financial markets).

Meanwhile, Ukraine's real GDP per capita **was in steady decline**— up until 2000. Average life expectancy **decreased** from 70.5 (in 1989) to 67.7 years. Non-payment of wages,<sup>5</sup> work in the informal economy, and a **decline in purchasing power** became everyday realities for the Ukrainian working class. Although the numerous **strikes**, marches, hunger strikes, and blockades have managed to score some local successes (e.g., the payment of wage arrears, postponement of privatization, etc.), they failed to change the overall course or create a broader movement.

The story so far is not that different from the Russian one.<sup>6</sup> However, the centralization and consolidation that Putin implemented after the Asian financial crisis and the collapse of the ruble (1997–98) never took place in Ukraine. Putin gradually nationalized some energy companies, built a “**power vertical**”, whose backbone was formed by security service cadres and various personal friends, and subordinated the oligarchs to this structure. The latter has since overseen the distribution of rent derived mainly from fossil fuel extraction. Ukraine's domestic capitalist class, by contrast, has remained divided into competing “clans” that are tied to specific sectors of the economy and geographic regions.<sup>7</sup> The rivalry between these factions of Ukrainian capital has been the basis of political instability.

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<sup>5</sup> A specific feature of the Ukrainian (as well as Russian) transition was that official unemployment never reached a level close to twenty percent, such as in Poland (2002) or Slovakia (2001). Workers in enterprises that ran into trouble remained formally employed but were not paid – although in many cases they continued to work. Sometimes they received payments in kind instead of cash.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, in many respects it is also reminiscent of the history of other former Eastern Bloc countries, including Slovakia.

<sup>7</sup> The history and structure of the “clans” is described in “**The Oligarchic Democracy**” by Sławomir Matuszak. See also “**The Consolidation of Ukrainian Business Clans**” by Viatcheslav Avioutskii.



The numerous movements of political protest which often also voiced social and welfare demands were always co-opted by a political project of one of the groups – either from the very beginning or gradually. The “Ukraine without Kuchma” (2001–2002) and “Arise, Ukraine!” (2002–2003) protests were directed against President Leonid Kuchma, involved in several scandals, including the murder of a journalist. The “Orange Revolution” (2004–2005) was in response to the electoral fraud of the then prime minister and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych, as well as the suspicious privatization of Ukraine’s largest steelworks in Kryvyi Rih (Dnipropetrovsk Oblast), in which Kuchma’s brother-in-law was involved along with the former Donetsk gangster, Rinat Akhmetov. The movement “Rise up, Ukraine!” (2013) opposed President Yanukovych and his attempts to consolidate power. Finally, the Euromaidan (2014) was a reaction to his decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. The most successful of these movements, the Orange Revolution, and the Euromaidan, may have led to a change of political leadership, but they did not significantly shake the position of the clans, let alone the clan system as such. Ultimately, they became a means of bringing another faction of the domestic business class to power.

The lumpen-capitalist competition, in which one or the other faction gained control of the state (and thus preferential access to loans, subsidies and contracts), explains, at least in part, why the state has failed to impose a long-term, viable development plan on the country. On the other hand, this unstable environment also left some room for the development of a resistant civil society, including independent trade unions, activist organizations, and the radical left.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A peculiar phenomenon of political life in Ukraine was the emergence of a series of fake left-wing groups founded around 2000 by the same circle of people. These pseudo-organizations established contacts with foreign “internationals”, mainly of the Trotskyist variety, and lured material aid or money from them. It was enough to write that they identified with their political program and wanted to become a Ukrainian or Russian section. Despite personal meetings, it took three or four years for the foreign donors – delighted by the unexpected growth of the workers’ movement in the former

Russia maintained an influence over Ukraine through those sections of the local capitalist class that were materially interested in maintaining close relations – for example, in the interests of their own sales, favorable prices for inputs (especially, but not exclusively, energy inputs), or gas transfer fees. The capital base of this faction was mainly concentrated in the Donbas, the former **industrial heartland** of the Soviet Union, home to a large Russian-speaking population and the birthplace of **the Stakhanovite “movement”**. In the 1990s it was the scene of the bloodiest conflicts within the capitalist class, a center of organized crime – but also the epicenter of the tragedy of the “old” working class, especially the miners. Their **mass strikes** in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped destroy the Soviet regime and win Ukraine’s independence,<sup>9</sup> but after a wave of privatizations, asset stripping and bankruptcies, many found themselves with no jobs or prospects. Between 1992 and 2013, the population of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts **fell** by 1.7 million, declining at twice the rate of the rest of the country.<sup>10</sup>

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Eastern Bloc – to **discover** that their “partners” were in fact political hucksters. The scandal had seriously damaged the international reputation of the Ukrainian left, though one may also pause at the credulity of Western leftists.

<sup>9</sup> On earlier strikes by Donbas miners for economic demands and democratization, see the documentary *Perestroika from Below* (1989). Later strikes had more explicit political demands, including national independence. See the **interviews** with strike leaders in Donetsk, as well as a brief **documentary** (with English subtitles). The history of miners’ protest from perestroika to 2000 is summarized in an **essay** by Vlad Mykhnenko subtitled “Ukrainian miners and their defeat”. See also the recollections of the Dnipro working-class militant, Oleg Dubrovsky, in a 1996 **interview** (in English), as well as his **analysis** of the process of privatization of the mining industry (in Russian).

<sup>10</sup> One of the consequences of the disintegration of the mining industry in the Donbas has been the growth of illegal mining in the so-called *kopaniki*. A **section** of the 2005 documentary, *Workingman’s Death*, focuses on the phenomenon. The post-apocalyptic landscape of the Donetsk Oblast is depicted in the short documentary, *Life After the Mine* (2013).

## A short boom

On the wave of the global post-2000 boom, **Ukraine's real GDP** also began to grow. This period of rapid development (in 2004, the economy grew by over 12% year-on-year) lasted until the onset of the crisis in 2008. Growth of exports played an especially important role. The international demand for metal and chemical products grew, and so did prices. Ukrainian companies benefited from favorable conditions for the purchase of Russian gas and oil. The growing gap between world commodity prices and input prices was the source of **superprofits** appropriated by the local oligarchy. Cheap labor power and tax advantages (including in special economic zones) also attracted foreign investment. Already in 2003, a Leoni factory was **established** in Stryi (Lviv Oblast), which today employs about 7,000 people and produces cable harnesses for Volkswagen and Stellantis.<sup>11</sup> In the west of Ukraine, a whole **cluster** of similar suppliers gradually formed, focusing on automotive wiring. In 2005, the courts annulled the dubious privatization of the Kryvorizhstal steelworks. In a new tender (televised **live** so as to dispel any doubts), ArcelorMittal acquired the plant for just under five billion dollars. It was the largest transaction of its kind. The new owner **reduced** the number of employees by more than a half, but maintained the scale of production and **invested** almost as much in increasing productivity as in buying the company.

This period, however, has not allowed Ukraine to **catch up** with the other former Eastern bloc countries, whose position was strengthened by their accession to the EU in 2004.<sup>12</sup> The old industrial base in eastern Ukraine was mainly oriented towards mining and metallurgy. It was highly ver-

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<sup>11</sup> The German company also has four smaller plants in Slovakia.

<sup>12</sup> For details on foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ukraine, see the **analysis** by the Kyiv-based Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting. Firms that have been targets of FDI are significantly more productive and pay higher wages than firms with domestic capital. On the other hand, the sectors of the Ukrainian economy that have received the largest share of investment are trade and finance. Complicating the analysis of country impact is that most investment comes from shell firms in tax havens, particularly Cyprus. A significant proportion of these may be investments that

tically integrated and dependent on suppliers and customers in other parts of the Soviet Union. After its collapse, these chains withered away. A decade of stagnation in the 1990s transformed much of Ukraine's fixed capital (buildings, machinery, infrastructure) into a **burden** that lost the ability to compete. The lack of investment, domestic or foreign, to increase productivity or enable conversion of production has only exacerbated the problem. As a result, Ukraine was integrated into the world market mainly as a source of semi-finished or raw materials for further processing: in 2008, iron and steel (35%), mineral fuels and mineral oils (6%) and cereals (6%) **accounted** for the largest share of exports of goods. The boom after 2000 was fueled by **domestic** and foreign loans. The financial crisis that erupted in 2008 made it difficult for Ukrainian businesses and banks to access funding and threatened their solvency. When it spread to global industry in late 2008, it **wiped out** foreign demand for Ukrainian raw materials. Production cutbacks and lay-offs, in turn, undermined the sources of domestic demand. To top it off, in 2009 Russia stopped supplying Ukraine with gas at preferential prices.<sup>13</sup>

With the crisis, the brief period of growth came to a sudden end. Ukraine's economy shrank by fifteen percent and was plunged into long-term stagnation. As recently as 2019 (i.e., before the pandemic), real GDP was only 85% of its pre-crisis peak in 2008.<sup>14</sup> The automotive industry, which had been showing promising growth, was one of the victims of the crisis.

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are Ukrainian (e.g., to obtain more favorable tax treatment) or Russian. It is **estimated** that the real volume of Russian investment is (or was) up to four times larger as a result.

<sup>13</sup> This was part of a **more complex history** of trade conflict that we will not deal with here. In 2010, Ukraine did negotiate a slightly more favorable gas price (in exchange for extending the lease of the Black Sea military base in Sevastopol until 2042), but the new price was still higher than it had been before the 2008 crisis.

<sup>14</sup> The comparison with 1991 is even more shocking: almost thirty years on, Ukraine's real GDP is at seventy percent of the level from which it had started. Of course, given the role played by the informal economy in Ukraine, GDP figures may be distorted. For estimates of the size of the informal economy in the 1990s, see **Ulrich Thiessen's paper**. But the contrast with neighboring countries, as well as many countries of the former Soviet Union, is nevertheless abysmal. See also the **fall in the share of manufacturing value added in GDP** after 2008.

While in 2000, only 30,000 vehicles were produced in Ukraine, on the eve of the crisis it was already over 400,000. However, more than ten years after the crisis, Ukrainian car factories are still largely idle. In 2019, they produced only 7,000 vehicles.<sup>15</sup>

The crisis deepened Ukraine's dependence on international financial institutions from which it had only begun to emerge. In 2008, the country **needed** an emergency loan from the World Bank (\$800 million) just to cover the state budget deficit. Through a **stand-by arrangement** with the IMF, it received another more than 16 billion, mostly to service other obligations. The program had to be **interrupted** when in 2009 – and contrary to the Fund's recommendations – the “pro-Western” President Yushchenko signed an increase in the **minimum wage** and pensions, from which inflation had taken a significant bite during the crisis. Although the new (“pro-Russian”) President Yanukovich resumed negotiations and tried to settle things, the same problem **reappeared** in 2011 when the country, still under his leadership, refused to abolish subsidies for household gas prices.

## European integration: hopes and reality

The capitalist class of Ukraine had accumulated considerable wealth but had no interest or capacity to push through a program of modernization and capitalist development. Its mode of accumulation was based on plundering the resources it had inherited from the *ancien régime* and which it had at its disposal thanks to political control over the state, including its regional structures. Although it was divided into factions, some of which promoted an orientation towards Russia and the post-Soviet space, while others advocated integration into European structures, as a whole

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<sup>15</sup> For the data, see **OICA**. By comparison, Slovakia produced about 575,000 cars in 2008 and almost double that in 2019. The disintegration of the Ukrainian automotive industry was related to **several factors**: the loss of markets in the East, the reduction of tariffs on car imports in accordance with WTO rules, as well as the lack of investment and the inability to compete with foreign manufacturers.

it remained in a servile position towards foreign creditors. Indeed, the survival of the whole model of “political accumulation” depended on their goodwill. The consequences of financial discipline have always been borne by the Ukrainian working class, mainly in the form of poverty and cuts in public spending. But at the same time, the recommendations of the creditors were applied selectively so as not to jeopardize the interests of the national capitalist class or its ruling faction. So it happens that, after thirty years of transformation, Ukraine has more than 3,000 **state enterprises**, 1,300 of which are still in operation.<sup>16</sup> The same self-preservation instinct of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie kicked in when IMF prescriptions could threaten social peace – such as with the minimum wage increase above.

Ukrainian workers have been extremely mobile since 1991. In the tens of thousands, they left for work in Russia, Poland, or the Czech Republic, but also further west. In addition to money (remittances **accounted** for about 5% of GDP already before the crisis), Ukrainian workers were able to gain experience with different conditions. Thus, they could compare what it was like to work and live in different countries. The markedly higher earnings in EU countries were especially attractive to people from the agrarian west of Ukraine. Perhaps influenced by this experience, a part of the population preferred European integration to building closer relations with post-Soviet countries. In a September 2012 **survey**, the ratio between these positions was 32% to 42%. A year later, when the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was imminent, it had turned to 42% to 37%.

What could Ukrainian workers have expected from the integration process? The Association Agreement included a “**Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement**” (DCFTA), which was supposed to allow easier access to the European market for Ukrainian companies (and vice versa), thus helping exports and attracting investment. It would also have made it easier for Ukrainian citizens to travel to EU countries, although – for

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<sup>16</sup> As recently as 2020, 1,600 of them were operating and **accounted** for 10% of the Ukrainian economy.

the time being – they would still need temporary permits to access jobs. The signing of the agreement would also begin a period of approximating Ukrainian laws and the various standards (including industrial ones) to those of the EU, with a view to strengthening the rule of law and making the Ukrainian business environment more compatible with the European one.

Signing the agreement would mean a gradual loss of the possibility of protecting the domestic market from European competition by tariffs. While the EU did not make the agreement conditional on Ukraine following all IMF recommendations (e.g., elimination of gas subsidies, more flexible monetary policy, balanced budget, cuts in public spending), it **viewed** them as instrumental to reforming and modernizing the country. All in all, the agreement was not a charitable endeavor. It would impose costs on Ukraine, which would in turn be borne mainly by workers or pensioners.

The Western Left sometimes portrays the situation of Ukraine in 2013 in very simple terms: it is said to have had a choice between two equally bad options, the EU's "neoliberal project" and the continuation of Russia's dominance. From the point of view of Ukrainian workers, however, it could have looked different. They had the experience of more than twenty years of transformation with not much to show for it. Yes, the Polish shock therapy of the early 1990s was brutal, but the changes that the Donbas, for example, went through in the same period were at least as brutal. And while Poland later saw unquestionable improvements in terms of income or life expectancy, Ukraine stagnated or declined. It is also true that, e.g., Italian, or Spanish workers experienced a freeze or fall in real wages in the post-2008 period, and that the post-crisis austerity measures, pushed through by the IMF and the EU, decimated their public services. But viewed from Ukraine – especially from the less developed regions – their living standards remained very attractive. Even, perhaps, at a price that would have to be paid in the form of a complicated restructuring of the Ukrainian economy.

On the other hand, the Association Agreement was not an agreement to join the EU, nor did it create any entitlement to that.<sup>17</sup> Chile signed a similar agreement in 1995, but no one expects it to become a member state. In the case of Ukraine, there was supposed to be a *rapprochement* – but with no clear prospect of whether or when it would actually follow the Polish path. Moreover, Poland and other former Eastern bloc countries joined the EU in a fundamentally different situation: from a different starting line and with a different EU. Firstly, they had already completed the transition process, which Ukraine never quite finished, and their economies were well above 1989 productivity levels. Secondly, the EU was still living under the illusion that structural differences between member states do not matter. Before the **debt crisis** and against the backdrop of the economic boom that only ended in 2008, it seemed that such imbalances pose no threat to the cohesion of the whole project. Ukraine’s possible membership, even if it were on the agenda in 2013, would have been approached with more caution than that of the candidates that had joined earlier – for example, in 2007 (Bulgaria, Romania).

But the Western countries had their reasons to sign the agreement, to keep alive at least a vague promise of future membership and to draw Ukraine into the wider European sphere. They would have gained easier access to a reservoir of skilled labor power and a sizable internal market, more favorable input prices for European industry and easier conditions for investing in Ukraine. They also knew that this move would irritate Russia because it would weaken its position in the region. Such an outcome was also politically **convenient** for the United States.

As long as Ukraine remained in the old sphere of influence, outright irredentism was a matter of Russian fringe politics. However, the Association Agreement – and the prospect, though dim, of future EU membership – posed a real threat of the “Little Russian” satellite leaving its orbit. On the eve of the signing of the Association Agreement, the Russian pres-

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<sup>17</sup> Even the agreement Ukraine signed later (after Euromaidan; see below) does **not** mention EU membership. It was only granted candidate status in June 2022, in the midst of war.



ident's adviser on regional economic integration, Sergei Glazyev, said that Russia could not guarantee Ukraine's "status as a state" if the agreement was signed, and that it might intervene in favor of "pro-Russian regions". Shortly before that, Russia had already started a trade war that was causing significant damage to the Ukrainian economy. In the fall of 2013, President Yanukovich backed out of the agreement at the last minute. Instead, he took Russia's offer that included the gradual purchase of fifteen billion dollars' worth of Ukrainian bonds and a reduction in the price of gas by a third.

This alternative provided an opportunity to cover the most urgent debts and improve the state of Ukrainian industry. It did not include any conditions, unlike the IMF program (austerity measures) and the Association Agreement itself (gradual opening of the Ukrainian economy, approximation of legislation, etc.). There was talk of Ukraine joining the Customs Union with Russia and other post-Soviet states, which would soon become the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The latter is supposed to serve as a kind of alternative to the EU, with the free movement of people, capital, and goods between member states. However, its results so far have been modest, to say the least, apart from the fact that Russia has benefitted from the influx of cheaper labor power from the former Soviet republics. All in all, Russia's offer to Ukraine meant maintaining the status quo: averting state bankruptcy, restoring favorable gas prices and maintaining the positions of the capitalist faction that had benefitted the most from contacts with Russia (and of which Yanukovich was the representative). It included no real program of capitalist development.

To some, this was unacceptable. The president's move, which came after repeated assurances that Yanukovich accepts Ukraine's pro-European orientation, sparked an escalation of protests on Kiev's Independence Square. Change to the electoral system, the intensification of repression and the general consolidation of power by Yanukovich's Party of Regions have also contributed to these protests. They quickly escalated into mass unrest and ultimately led to the fall of his regime. Ukraine spun out of control. Glazyev's prediction would soon be confirmed.

## The national question

In the aftermath of Euromaidan and the war in the Donbas, national tensions in Ukraine have taken center stage. However, they have a longer history.<sup>18</sup> As early as 1992, the Crimean local parliament **declared independence** and, in the negotiations that this provoked, won greater autonomy and a special economic status for the entire region. In the following years, demonstrations and protests were held, attracting a few thousand people, and demanding further concessions, independence, or annexation to the Russian Federation. There have also been proposals to declare Russian the official language of the peninsula. As regards the Donbas, already the striking miners of 1989 were rather skeptical about the nationalism of their colleagues from the Lviv Oblast; instead, they em-

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, it goes much deeper than we suggest here. However, we cannot deal here with the Zaporizhian Cossacks, Taras Shevchenko, or Tsar Alexander II's decree that effectively banned the use of the Ukrainian language in writing and education. In the following, we will only deal with the period since Ukraine's independence in 1991. However, a couple of notes regarding that longer history: after the October Revolution, Ukraine experienced – besides a bloody and complicated civil war – a brief period of intense development of local culture and language, as well as a rapid modernization. This development reached its peak in 1927–1929. The turn towards Russification came with forced collectivization (and the famine it caused), as well as with the definitive elimination of the independent left and any opposition to Stalinism. Stalin's terror discredited Marxism in Soviet Ukraine and undermined the popularity of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine, which operated on what was then Polish territory. This strengthened the position of right-wing nationalists, who later led armed resistance against the Soviet regime and collaborated with Hitler's Germany. This provided the basis for further repression and Russification. This continued, in weaker and stronger waves, until the collapse of the USSR. Under the banner of suppressing “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism”, it involved the displacement of people of Ukrainian (or other non-Russian) nationality, the settlement of ethnic Russians or other Russian-speaking populations, as well as the suppression of instruction and publishing in the Ukrainian language. On this, see Serhiy Plokhyy's book, *Lost Kingdom: A History of Russian Nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin*. In several respects, the position of Ukraine (as well as other non-Russian republics) in the Soviet Union resembled that of the colonies in Western empires or “internal colonies” in Tsarist Russia. On the other hand, the Soviet epoch was also characterized by intensive industrial development.

phasized economic demands.<sup>19</sup> In 1994, a non-binding “referendum” was held in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts on the federalization of Ukraine, the status of the Russian language or integration with the Commonwealth of Independent States. Ten years later, the Luhansk city council voted to hold a referendum on the creation of a “South-Eastern Autonomous Ukrainian Republic”. There was also a 70,000-strong demonstration in Donetsk that rejected the Orange Revolution as a coup. Should the latter have been completed, it called for the creation of an independent republic inside Ukraine, like Crimea. However, these efforts did not find a wider response and never turned into mass movements.

Like many other entities that emerged from the ruins of the Eastern bloc, Ukraine was searching for a national identity that could be the basis for the process of building a new nation-state. And, as in other countries, the sources of such an identity were found in the historical anti-communist, conservative or far-right movements. In Slovakia, after November 1989, the heirs of the *Ludáks*, strengthened by the return of the emigrants, embarked on the rehabilitation of Slovak clerical fascism and its ideological predecessors. The Croatian Right began to work on whitewashing the memory of the *Ustaše*. In turn, Ukrainian nationalists turned to local anti-Soviet movements and their armed forces, whose members had for a time collaborated with Nazi Germany and had participated in the Holocaust as willing helpers.<sup>20</sup> The first memorials and streets named after members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) began to appear as early as the 1990s, along with revisionist “historical” literature that relativized the role of the

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<sup>19</sup> On this, see Stephen Crowley’s, “Between Class and Nation: Worker Politics in New Ukraine” (1995).

<sup>20</sup> This was not the only possible historical source of Ukrainian identity and nationalist politics. The very beginnings of Ukrainian nationalism in the 19th century were left-wing (Ivan Franko, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Lesya Ukrainka). The first Ukrainian state, which abolished large-scale land ownership, was founded by social democrats and SRs. The rise of the artistic avant-garde in the second half of the 1920s was, in part, a product of Ukrainian Bolshevism. Finally, the Ukrainian anti-Stalinist emigration also had its left wing, whose organ was the magazine *Vperiod*. The political content of these traditions, however, was discredited too much by Stalinism.

OUN and the UPA in the **Lviv pogroms of 1941** or the **ethnic cleansing of Volhynia in 1943**. At the fringes of the political spectrum, organizations emerged that had personal continuity with the OUN and the UPA.<sup>21</sup>

The competitive struggle of the capitalist factions which we have already described was also taking place on the terrain of the national question. The political projects of the Donbas clan tied to Russia – in terms of raw materials or otherwise – generally promoted close economic ties with the eastern neighbor. They were skeptical of NATO membership and emphasized the importance of Russian (or Russian speaking) minority rights. In contrast, their counterparts supported by clans based outside the Donbas and Crimea, preferred integration into “Euro-Atlantic structures” and emphasized Ukrainian national identity. After Yushchenko’s election as president (2005), memorials or streets commemorating interwar nationalist movements began to proliferate. It was during his mandate that **Roman Shukhevych** (2007) and Stepan Bandera (2010) were declared national heroes of Ukraine.

Clan-aligned political parties used the national question to mobilize support in the regions they relied on. In doing so, they also entered alliances with the more radical parties, which, however, always played second fiddle. Yushchenko’s “Our Ukraine - People’s Self-Defense Bloc” in the 2002 parliamentary elections included the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists. In the local elections in Crimea (2006), the coalition “For Yanukovich!” was composed of the dominant Party of Regions and the **Russian Bloc** – a party that sought a single state of all Eastern Slavs.<sup>22</sup> However, neither open separatism nor the extreme variants of Ukrainian nationalism

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<sup>21</sup> Yurii Shukhevych, the son of one of the UPA commanders, was elected in 1990 to head the far-right **Ukrainian National Assembly** (later known as UNA-UNSO). One of the founders of the **Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists** (1993) was Yaroslava Stetsko, a former member of the radical wing of the OUN. After the war, she was active in the **Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations**, which united, among others, the Slovak *Ludák*, Croatian *Ustaše* and Ukrainian Banderaites emigration. Among Slovaks, **Ferdinand Ďurčanský**, for example, was involved in this grouping.

<sup>22</sup> A similar organization called the **Donetsk Republic** had operated in the Donbas since 2005.

were part of the political mainstream, as evidenced by the poor results of these radical parties when they ran independently. On taking office, Yushchenko **emphasized** Ukraine's unity, regardless of differences in language, religion or political opinion, as well as respect and friendliness towards its neighbors to the West *and* East. His successor from the opposite camp also **spoke** of the need to "unite Ukraine" and make it a reliable partner for the EU, while maintaining overall neutrality and good relations with Russia. Neither group resorted to extremes in practical politics, as support across regions was important in the struggle to gain control of the state apparatus to the benefit of one clan or another. The 2004 presidential elections ended with a ratio of votes of **52 to 44**; in the next election, the margin was less than **four** percentage points.<sup>23</sup>

All the pandering to the Russian minority and reviving nostalgia for Soviet times, in which the Russian language and culture were dominant, or, on the contrary, emphasizing Ukrainian national identity and making concessions to the rehabilitation of Bandera's "**integral nationalism**", would be useless if they were not based on some objective basis. This was the uneven development of Ukraine's regions and their different national and linguistic composition, as well as the historical experience with being a colony of the Russian Empire and with Russification in the USSR. The industrial East of the country – including the Donbas – has historically been the engine of modernization. As a result of various circumstances, state policies and spontaneous economic development, a significant part of the local population was made up of people of Russian nationality.<sup>24</sup> Living standards and wages for workers have traditionally

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<sup>23</sup> Also, the division of the political scene into "pro-Russian" and "pro-Western" parts cannot be simply identified with the left-right spectrum. We have already mentioned that both camps accepted, willy-nilly, the IMF's dictates and sought to maneuver their way through negotiations. It was also the Yanukovich-appointed government that approved the unpopular **pension reform** or cut benefits for **Chernobyl veterans**. Under its education minister Tabachnyk, well known for his "anti-Ukrainian" statements, there were protests by **left-wing student organizations** against the commercialization of universities.

<sup>24</sup> The most recent data is from the 2001 census. According to them, Russians **accounted** for about 17% of the population of Ukraine, but 39% and 38% in the Donetsk and

been higher here than in the agrarian West, where ethnic Ukrainians were in the majority.<sup>25</sup> The transformation of the Ukrainian economy has been a breeding ground for tensions based on the perceived or actual neglect of particular sectors and regions. The political independence that Ukraine gained was associated for many with the end of Russification and the untying from the “Russian world”. Regional clans used such sentiments to mobilize the public.

When thinking about the national question, it is easy to slip into an understanding of certain categories as immutable and discrete. However, nationality, language, geographic origin, class, or political preferences overlap in various ways in Ukraine. Being Russian speaking, of Russian nationality or born east of the Dnieper is no guarantee of attitudes that are labeled as “pro-Russian” in the Ukrainian media, and which can themselves range from reservations about post-2013 developments, to sympathy for Ukraine’s decentralization, to separatism or a desire to join the Russian Federation. Similarly, Ukrainian nationality or the fact that one is from Galicia (a Western region) does not automatically imply a “nationalist orientation”, whether in the form of a vague belief in the existence of a specific Ukrainian national interest or openly ultra-right-wing attitudes. However, there are statistical trends that can be inferred from surveys. In the West of the country, Ukrainian identity is more deeply rooted and cuts across classes and educational groups. Elsewhere, along with support for nationalist politics, it is more a matter for the better educated and wealthier sections of the population. Here, it is paradoxically combined with pro-European and pro-Western attitudes. More elitist in character,

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Luhansk Oblasts, respectively (Crimea: 58%). Meanwhile, much of the Russian settlement in the Donbas is relatively new, dating back to the post-World War II period. It should be added that data on nationality should not be confused with data on first language. According to the 2001 census, the population whose first language was Russian accounted for about 30% of the population; in the Donetsk Oblast it was 75%. A significant part of this population claimed Ukrainian nationality.

<sup>25</sup> For example, in 2001 the average monthly wage in Ukraine was 311 UAH, in the Donetsk Oblast 383 UAH and in the Transcarpathia Oblast (in the West) only 238 UAH. These disparities persisted, more or less, until the start of the war in 2014.

this nationalism is not a matter of the “popular classes”. The post-2014 war, in which (among others) Russian-speaking soldiers stood on both sides, as well as the current escalation, would have further destabilized any straightforward correlations between nationality or language and political attitudes.<sup>26</sup>

It is in the interests of the working class that the national question is **settled** peacefully and as democratically as possible – so that national or linguistic minorities enjoy the widest possible freedoms and potential for conflict is blunted as much as possible. In this respect, the Ukrainian governments language policies deserve criticism.<sup>27</sup> However, the national question in Ukraine did not in itself have explosive potential. It never gave rise to truly mass movements, and it would hardly have led to war without outside intervention.

## From the Euromaidan...

In the aftermath of the global economic crisis, there has been a global “shift to the right”: the rise of far-right, nationalist and conservative forces, and the skewing of the entire political spectrum towards traditionalism, authoritarianism, and obscurantism. In some places, this took the form of a strengthening of existing organizations, in others it involved the regrouping or transformation of formerly fascist groups into a more

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the case of the **mayor of Odessa, Trukhanov**, who was known for his “pro-Russian” attitudes, but sided with Ukraine after the invasion in February 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Disputes over Ukrainian language policy escalated in 2010. A law initiated by Yanukovich’s Party of Regions (2010, 2012) was an attempt to push Ukrainian as an official language out of regions with at least 10% of Russian-speakers. The more recent law dates from President Poroshenko’s term (2019) and follows a similar pattern in relation to Russian (but not other minority languages). For example, it requires Russian-language publications to be published simultaneously in Ukrainian. **Both laws have been criticized** by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. However, the claims of Russian propaganda that the use of Russian in public is now being persecuted have no real basis. According to long-term **surveys**, only a tiny portion of the population views the status of the Russian language as a significant issue.

“attractive” form. Naturally, Russia and Ukraine were not left out of this trend, but here, as everywhere, the latter has taken specific forms. In Russia, the initially quite **successful** attempts by fascists and nationalists to organize independently ran into **severe repression** in 2012. At the same time, however, the Putin regime has integrated several elements of their rhetoric. As early as 2009, the United Russia party **declared** “Russian conservatism” its official ideology; a little later, V. V. Putin himself **confessed** to conservative beliefs. After the **repression** of 2012, which targeted both the political opposition and civil society, state repression of gays and lesbians **intensified**, xenophobic sentiments in the population **reached** a peak, and the position of the Orthodoxy in society was **strengthened**.<sup>28</sup> The annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas in 2014 were, in turn, a clear signal that Russia intended to return to the international scene as an imperial actor, as confirmed by its interventions in Syria and Mali.

The aftermath of the crisis brought success to the far-right **All-Ukrainian Association “Svoboda”**, which emerged from the openly fascist Social-National Party (1995). After toning down its rhetoric somewhat, it managed to gain ground in local elections in 2009, especially in the Western regions. This support continued to grow and in the parliamentary elections in 2012, Svoboda received over 10% of the vote. For a time, it also had a paramilitary wing, called **Patriot of Ukraine**, which split from it in 2007. As in other Central and Eastern European countries, the far right in Ukraine since the 1990s has mainly been a street force, attacking “alternative youth”, people of color or left-wing activists. In some places, it fused with organized crime or the security apparatus. And, as in other countries, the post-crisis period brought a breakthrough in the form of parliamentary success. However, the decisive moment for further developments was the Euromaidan and the events that followed it.

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<sup>28</sup> The label of “foreign agents”, which began to be used to persecute NGOs after 2012, was also **applied** to the independent MPRA union in the Kaluga Volkswagen plant. In this case, the mysterious foreign funders are the German left-wing foundations (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung) and the trade union federation IndustriALL.



The immediate impetus for the demonstrations on the Independence Square was Yanukovych's hesitation in signing the Association Agreement. The protests began on 21 November 2013 and initially attracted a few thousand students, NGO activists and opposition voters demanding the resignation of the government. The number of participants gradually grew, and the demonstration turned into a permanent occupation of the square, similarly to the Orange Revolution. Parallel actions gradually sprung up in other cities. The news that Ukraine's representatives at the **Vilnius summit** had not signed the Association Agreement, and especially the first attempts by the police to disperse the crowd, sparked riots and attracted hundreds of thousands of people.

The occupation in central Kiev continued, extending to nearby state and city buildings, and resisting attacks by police. These latter have shown that non-violent tactics are not sustainable and will not lead to demands being met. Around mid-January 2014, groups of armed demonstrators began to organize to protect others from police violence. The best prepared force was that of the far-right organizations – Svoboda and, in particular, the **Right Sector**, which emerged on the Maidan as a coalition of several far-right groups (including Patriot of Ukraine). By this time, they were already **acting** as an effective, noisy, and recognizable collective force in the protest, despite forming only a small part of the total number of protesters. Another source of demonstrators who were not afraid of confronting the police and paid thugs were football hooligans, whose base overlapped in part with the far-right scene. These groups managed to essentially **monopolize** violent tactics. Their courage – which has cost them dozens of deaths and hundreds of injured – has won them not only new supporters but also the respect of peaceful protesters.

The more massive the protest actions were, the smaller became the share of the original participants from the ranks of students and activists. According to **surveys**, the average Euromaidan participant was a middle-aged, employed, educated and “middle-class” man who was more interested in domestic political problems (oligarchic rule, corruption, repression, the government's inability to respond to the needs of the people)

than in EU accession. Although broader social and economic demands also appeared on the Maidan, they played a much smaller role than the main slogans of the opposition, i.e., early elections and a change of the constitution. Attempts by leftist and feminist groups to **intervene** were unsuccessful.<sup>29</sup> They encountered the hegemony of the opposition parties (Tymoshenko's Batkivshchyna, Klitschko's UDAR), which set the priorities from the beginning, but also violence from the far right, which the left was not prepared to reciprocate. The Euromaidan mass movement, characterized by a high degree of self-organization and self-help, remained trapped in the scenario of "street protests – acceptance of demands – change of government". Therefore, it did not seek other means of escalation than those imposed on it by the police, i.e., violence. Euromaidan was not accompanied by any strikes, except for purely symbolic ones. However, the escalation was enough to frighten the government so much that, in late February, it fled.

The immediate result of the protests was a new government. For a brief period between February and November 2014, a coalition of Batkivshchyna, UDAR and Svoboda ruled, with the latter gaining the positions of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Environment and, for less than a month, Minister of Defense. However, the winners of the early elections in October 2014 were the **Popular Front** and **Petro Poroshenko's Bloc**, with 40% of the vote split between them. The Opposition Bloc, the successor to Yanukovych's Party of Regions, gained over 9%, presumably also due to the very low turnout in the Southeast. Svoboda won just under five per cent of the vote (six seats in a 450-seat parliament) and the Right Sector, transformed into a political party, less than two per cent (a single seat). Thus, the far right has not been able to repeat the result of 2012. If we would measure its success just in terms of formal political influence, it would appear its militants at the Euromaidan served as a battering ram for the "mainstream" oligarchic political parties, only to quickly lose public favor.

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<sup>29</sup> The documentary *Voices of Protest* offers a left-wing and trade union activist perspective on the Euromaidan and the events after it.

After the Euromaidan, the positions of some oligarchs were weakened (Akhmetov), others remained intact (Viktor Pinchuk, the son-in-law of former President Kuchma mentioned above).<sup>30</sup> At the same time, **new faces** have come to the fore, such as the “chocolate king” Petro Poroshenko or Ihor Kolomoiskyi, a later supporter of Volodymyr Zelensky. Hence, if the aim of the movement was to get rid of the oligarchs, it can **hardly** be described as successful. Given that it had been dominated all along by established political forces, which from the beginning saw the goal of the protests as a change of leadership, a different outcome was unlikely.

However, it is inaccurate to describe Euromaidan as a coup. Rather, it was another instance of the kind of movements that have become typical after the last crisis. They have a broad base that represents a cross-section of almost the whole of society. In terms of social composition, these movements cannot be described as proletarian – but neither can they be characterized as purely middle-class, petty-bourgeois or student. They are, in the true sense of the word, “civic” and their participants see themselves as “citizens”. Mobilizations of this kind sometimes fill the social void created by the absence of an independent workers’ movement – be it because of repression, past defeats, or the inability of struggles to cross the boundaries between workplaces or sectors and grow into a broader movement. However, involvement in this type of protest is authentic and not just a result of manipulation or some kind of “power games”, as imagined by leftist conspiracy theorists. In situations of demoralization and an overall feeling that “nothing can be changed”, these movements offer at least some hope that something can be done – and they provide the opportunity of doing something practical and joining a culture of solidarity and collective resistance. On the other hand, it is precisely their heterogeneity and “civicness”, manifested in abstract slogans (for “dignity”, “change”, “decency”, against “corruption”, etc.), that makes them vulnerable to co-optation by established bourgeois political forces, leading quickly to disillusionment. These movements are mostly present

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<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the situation of the clans after the election of the Poroshenko government, see the 2015 BBC “**map of oligarchs**”.

in the streets, with little or no spillover into workplaces. Their tactic is the occupation and blockading of urban space. Such aspects link the Euromaidan to a very diverse sample that includes *Occupy Wall Street*, the “Arab Spring” or the Hong Kong movement in 2019–2020.

The Euromaidan marked not only the growth of the far right, but also the emergence of its peculiar coalition with the liberal-nationalist right. In addition to political parties, the latter also includes various civic initiatives, NGOs, and broad layers of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. The basis of this alliance is a certain project of a nation-state and identity that distances itself from the Soviet past, including its more locally based elements. It sees Russia simply as a source of oppression, underdevelopment, and threat, while understanding Ukrainian history as a series of attempts to break free from Russia’s influence. The *mova*, the Ukrainian language, is viewed as a central feature of national identity, as well as a means of self-preservation, which must be protected. A lack of loyalty to elements of this project is considered suspect. Conversely, an unequivocal identification with it offers a way of purifying oneself and neutralizing one’s other “shortcomings,” such as a different ethnicity or a queer identity.

It is true that from the outset, there were differences of opinion on the future perspectives of this national project. While the far right is skeptical or outright opposed to European integration, for liberal nationalists it is the only possible way forward. However, neither the key role of the far right in the fall of Yanukovich nor its allegiance to the national project can be credibly questioned. Hence, mainstream civic nationalism has learned to tolerate its extreme cousin, overlook its excesses, and underestimate its dangers.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Serhiy Sternenko, a well-known Odessa blogger and Right Sector activist, was **convicted** in 2021 of illegal possession of arms, robbery and illegal restraint. This was the case of Sternenko’s attack on a local MP of the pro-Russian Rodina (“Fatherland”) party, which took place back in 2015. Not only supporters of the far right, but also the wider civil society **took to the streets** in defense of the convicted far-right militant.

Of course, neither the project nor the demands of the Euromaidan had universal support. In a **poll** conducted in March 2014, a third of respondents described the events on Independence Square and the subsequent political developments as either a coup or a conflict within the Ukrainian elite. Such an assessment was most common in the East of the country. About 40% of the Ukrainian population expected partial or significant improvement from the changes, and almost the same proportion partial or significant deterioration. Already in November 2013, demonstrations known as “Anti-Maidan” were taking place. Initially, these were protests organized from above in support of the Party of Regions, which bussed participants – often public sector employees – from the regions. The so-called Communist Party of Ukraine,<sup>32</sup> in cooperation with the Russian Bloc, organized smaller events against the signing of the Association Agreement (claiming, among other things, that it would mean legalizing gay marriage) and in favor of joining the Customs Union with Russia.

In the Donbas, Anti-Maidan’s rhetoric resonated in relation to the future of local industry, particularly coal mining, which could be threatened by European competition or environmental standards. Equally important was the notion that the Donbas had been feeding the rest of the country with its productivity for decades and should therefore have a greater say – and certainly not let itself be bossed around by Kiev.<sup>33</sup> To some, the Russian model of capitalism, with relatively higher incomes and pensions financed by oil and gas rents, may have seemed attractive after twenty years of failed attempts to develop Ukraine. But here, the experience of a relative decline probably played a more important role than the absolute level of living standards. While in 1995, **average wages** in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts were 133% and 112% of the national average, respectively, by 2013 their position had deteriorated to 114% and 102% of the

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<sup>32</sup> It says a lot about the nature of this party that one of its female MPs was the **richest** woman in parliament in 2012–2014.

<sup>33</sup> Similar motives were behind the separatist **mobilization in Catalonia** in 2017. As far as the Donbas was concerned, it **had actually been receiving** more from the state budget in the form of subsidies and other forms of funding than it had been handing in.

national average.<sup>34</sup> In the aftermath of the regime's collapse in February 2014, Anti-Maidan became radicalized and more confrontational, particularly in the East and Southeast. Self-defense groups emerged, ostensibly to "maintain public order", which **attacked** protests held by the opposing camp.<sup>35</sup> Left-leaning rhetoric, directed, e.g., against the oligarchic continuity of the new regime, also appeared, but calls for the federalization of Ukraine and, in some places, separatist demands, gradually prevailed. Anti-Maidan was rapidly transforming into the "Russian Spring".

### ...to war

The Crimean Peninsula is of strategic importance, as it is home to the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet and an important ice-free port. According to the original agreements, the Russian lease of the peninsula was due to expire in 2017. However, in 2010, Yanukovich **signed** an extension of the lease for another 25 years, in exchange for more favorable gas prices. Forces in the new government were known not to have agreed to the extension. Hence, after Yanukovich's escape, events in the Crimea took a swift turn. As early as 27 February, unmarked Russian troops appeared, occupied important buildings, and overlooked the election of a new Crimean Prime Minister.<sup>36</sup> The local parliament approved the holding of a referendum on independence. It took place in a few weeks'

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<sup>34</sup> Some regions in the West of Ukraine have seen the opposite movement over the same period - Transcarpathia was at the bottom of the rankings in 1995 with 68% of the average wage, but by 2013 had narrowed the gap to 78%. These changes were related to the new conditions after the collapse of the USSR. In Soviet times, the Far West was a rural periphery that was marginalized, while the Donbas was a key industrial center. After the emergence of an independent Ukraine, by contrast, the Western regions benefited from their proximity to European markets, with, for example, factories of automotive suppliers being set up there. It should be noted that, given the phenomenon of mass non-payment of wages, salary data should be treated with caution.

<sup>35</sup> One of the activities of these groups was to stand guard at the ubiquitous Lenin monuments, which became a target of attacks after the fall of Yanukovich.

<sup>36</sup> He was a representative of the **Russian Unity** party, which had not won a single seat in the 2012 elections.

time, under the supervision of **observers** from European far-right parties. However, Crimea existed as an independent state for only a few days. Already on 21 March, the Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol became part of the Russian Federation. The referendum was rigged, but a later independent **poll** suggests that the majority of the remaining population of Crimea accepted annexation and preferred it to the alternative, i.e., the *status quo ante*. These results must also be seen in the light of the instability and military escalation that began in spring 2014. As recently as February 2014, only 41% of Crimeans **were** in favor of joining Russia, compared with just under 36% in an earlier poll in 2013. In the East and Southeast of Ukraine, regional networks that linked state structures to business interests quickly disintegrated after the fall of the Yanukovich government.<sup>37</sup> In the new situation, local elites could not be sure of their position. Some sections defected to the side of the new government, with which they were able to negotiate acceptable terms of cooperation. Consequently, they helped pacify separatist aspirations in their regions, or at least divert them towards a moderate federalism. For example, attempts to stir up ethnic conflict in **Odessa** and Kharkiv were unsuccessful.<sup>38</sup> In the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, however, events took a different turn. A section of the local capitalists and apparatchiks placed their bets on separatism.<sup>39</sup> In March 2014, demonstrations of several thousand people took place in both regions, seeking to occupy official buildings. Over the next month, the conflict gradually became militarized. In Luhansk, over a thousand demonstrators **occupied** the secret service building and looted the armory. A group of gunmen, led by a Russian **veteran** of the Balkan and Chechen wars, arrived in Sloviansk from Crimea and played a key role in the first battles with the Ukrainian

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<sup>37</sup> For a detailed case study of this process in Kharkiv and Donetsk as examples, see Daria Platonova's *The Donbas Conflict in Ukraine: Elites, Protest, and Partition* (2021).

<sup>38</sup> On the so-called tragedy in Odessa on 2 May 2014, which was in fact a conflict between two camps of armed demonstrators, see the documentary *Odessa Without Myths*.

<sup>39</sup> Initially, these probably **included** Rinat Akhmetov, who may have wanted to hedge his position just in case. Later he openly opposed separatism.

armed forces. An important source of funding for the activities of these groups was the Russian investment banker **Konstantin Malofeev**.

A functioning capitalist state would hardly allow some “militia” or a quasi-state formation **proclaimed** by a handful of people in an occupied local authority building to challenge its monopoly on violence. But the position of the new government in Kiev was shaky: the insecurity that set in after the fall of Yanukovich spread throughout the entire state apparatus, including the army and the police. The “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO) against the separatists, although launched already in April, did not bring any significant results in the first weeks. In several cases, the soldiers simply surrendered. Fears of intervention by the Russian army, which had amassed some 40,000 men on the border, may also have made the Ukrainian state cautious. The opening thus created was large enough for the self-proclaimed authorities in both regions to prepare the rigged “independence referendums” that took place on 11 May 2014. In the meantime, the armed forces of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and the “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR) were reinforced by additional troops from across the Russian border, composed of veterans or members of various fascist and nationalist groups. This was necessary because – as the Russian commander Girkin/Strelkov **complained** at a press conference in May 2014 – there were simply not enough local volunteers.

At the same time, paramilitary volunteer units began to form on the Ukrainian side. Some emerged from the Euromaidan self-defense units (**Aydar Battalion**), from the ultra-right Svoboda party (**Sich Battalion**), the fascist Patriot of Ukraine (**Azov Battalion**), the newly founded Right Sector party (**Ukrainian Volunteer Corps “Right Sector”**), while others had no direct links to political organizations, or recruited from among football hooligans or employees of private security services owned by the oligarchs. A number of volunteer units also emerged in the form of “**Territorial Defense Battalions**”, a system of detachments made up of armed forces reservists.<sup>40</sup> Shortly after the fall of Yanukovich, the

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<sup>40</sup> Shortly before the 2022 invasion, these units were transformed into the **Territorial Defense Forces** (TDF).



so-called National Guard, a militarized police force under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), was also re-established. After a few months, the Donbas battalion was subsumed under the same Ministry, along with Azov, which was enlarged and turned into a regiment. Other volunteer units (e.g., Sich) were similarly integrated under the MIA as special police units (“**Special Tasks Patrol Police Service**”). Aydar was later, in 2015, converted into a regular battalion of the Army’s ground forces.<sup>41</sup> Initially, however, funding for these units **came** mainly from **oligarchs** and public collections. The fact that the Ukrainian state readily accepted the help of privately funded volunteers in waging the war is another illustration of its initial weakness.

## Frozen conflict

In May 2014, the conflict with the “republics” escalated into a conventional war with tanks, artillery, and air power. After some initial difficulties, Ukrainian forces – including volunteer formations – scored a number of successes in the summer months, despite the **assistance** provided to the DPR and LPR by Russian or Chechen fighters. In August 2014, the Ukrainian army was close to **ripping** the two republics apart and encircling them. By the end of the month, however, the Russian Federation **sent** thousands of troops and significant amounts of equipment to the Donbas, supported by artillery and rocket fire from Russian territory. In the key **battle for Ilovaisk**, Ukrainian troops suffered a heavy defeat, which contributed to the signing of the first **Minsk Agreement** (Septem-

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<sup>41</sup> By October 2014, a total of 44 territorial defense battalions, 32 battalions subordinated to the police, three voluntary battalions of the National Guard and at least three battalions outside state structures had been **established**. According to one **estimate**, they may have totaled 15,000 people, most of them men. As regards national and linguistic borders, note that the far-right battalions were *not* based in the “more nationalist” West of Ukraine. The Azov Battalion was made up of the Metalist football club fans based in the predominantly Russian-speaking Kharkiv, which was also the hometown of the founder of the battalion, Andriy Biletskyi. The leader of the Right Sector in 2013–2015, Dmytro Yarosh, grew up in a Russian-speaking family in Dniprodzerzhynsk.

ber 2014). However, both sides violated the ceasefire from the start and the “republics” scored further **victories**. The deteriorating situation eventually led to the signing of the second version of the agreement (February 2015). Since then, the intensity of the conflict has been decreasing and the war has turned into a trench war. The last major escalation before the 2022 invasion **took place** in 2017.

Eight years of war have left over 14,000 people dead<sup>42</sup> and displaced millions of people from their homes. Some fled to Russia, while others sought refuge in the safe parts of Ukraine or in the West. Human rights organizations have documented numerous war crimes – by both sides – including extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, abduction, illegal detention and the use of banned munitions.<sup>43</sup> The war caused enormous damage to the region’s infrastructure and **environment**. A **2020 study** estimated the total cost of reconstruction of the Donbas (before the current invasion, of course) at over USD 21 billion, or about 13% of Ukraine’s GDP at the time. **The Minsk Agreements** managed to freeze the conflict, but not to end it. According to the roadmap initially agreed to by all sides,<sup>44</sup> the entire

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<sup>42</sup> The vast majority of **deaths** were soldiers and other combatants (about 4,500 on the Ukrainian side and about 7,000 on the side of the “republics” and Russia). Most **civilian deaths** occurred in the first two years of the conflict (about 3,000 in total). In 2021, on the territories of the DPR and the LPR, a total of eight civilians died as a result of the fighting – according to the **data published** by the “republics” themselves. So much for “eight years of genocide in the Donbas”.

<sup>43</sup> The degree of responsibility of each of the parties is difficult to assess accurately. As far as the Ukrainian state is concerned, reports by **Amnesty International** and **Human Rights Watch** point to the use of cluster munitions, the unlawful detention of journalists and several cases of kidnapping or executions by volunteer battalions. The latter have also been involved in the **blockade** of humanitarian aid to areas under the control of the ‘republics’. In a well-publicized case, the **Tornado Company** was disbanded as a criminal organization and its members were sentenced to long-term imprisonment. On the other hand, the lists of crimes committed by pro-Russian or Russian forces are considerably longer; no trials of this kind are known to have taken place.

<sup>44</sup> The signatories were representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the two “republics”, as well as a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts was to be reintegrated into Ukraine, but with a greater degree of autonomy. Local elections under Ukrainian legislation, supervised by the OSCE, were to be a step towards this. The Ukrainian state refused to allow them to take place before Russian troops and equipment had been withdrawn from the Donbas. However, the agreements provided for no such thing – on the contrary, the restoration of Ukrainian control over the state borders was not to begin until the day after the elections. Russia, for its part, insisted that Ukraine negotiate the details directly with the representatives of the self-proclaimed states, over which it allegedly had no control. It also repeatedly refused to support the extension of the OSCE's mandate, which under the agreements was supposed to monitor the security situation on the border, and in 2019 began issuing Russian passports to the residents of the Donbass. Representatives of the DPR and LPR **repeatedly stated** that the “republics” would soon **join** the Russian Federation – though this would be incompatible with the agreements. Elections were held in 2015 and 2018 **against** protests by the OSCE (and Ukraine) and in violation of the agreements.

Each of the actors had something to lose if the agreements were implemented. The leadership of the DPR and the LPR could not be sure of its position after free elections. Therefore, it did not want to risk that they would be held without the presence of Russia's military. For Russia, the “republics” were useful as an instrument of control over Ukraine – at first mainly in the military sense, in the future, perhaps, politically. But the agreements did not contain a clear guarantee that Russia's influence could be maintained after the conflict was over and the two statelets were dissolved. As far as Ukraine was concerned, the population of the Donbas posed a threat particularly to the political parties that were in power until 2019. It could be assumed that the people of the Donbas would not support the forces that had been directing military operations at their doorsteps for several years. The integration of the territory of the “republics” into either Ukraine or Russia would also entail significant costs for any of them to rebuild the destroyed infrastructure.

## The far right after the Euromaidan

The main opponent of the implementation of the Minsk Agreements in Ukraine was the ultra-right. In August 2015, when the parliament was voting on the law on the special status of the two regions (as stipulated by the Agreements), riots broke out, during which a combatant of the Sich battalion **killed** three members of the National Guard with a grenade and injured more than a hundred. The fascist and nationalist organizations categorically refused any compromise with the separatists and stressed (correctly) that the Minsk Agreements were unfavorable and signed under threat of imminent defeat.<sup>45</sup> Thus, mainstream political parties also had to consider the possible reactions by this section of the opposition in case they made too many concessions.

This is a good illustration of the influence that the far right managed to build after the Euromaidan. It is true that its positions in parliament and local governments have weakened with each election. However, this says little about its influence in “civil society”. Before 2013, Svoboda was already the **most active** political party in terms of street protest. The victories in skirmishes on Independence Square were great PR for fascists and nationalists, as were the role and sacrifices of the volunteer battalions in the armed conflict whose key battles became part of the national **iconography**. The situation was best exploited by Azov.<sup>46</sup> After its integration into the National Guard, the original commanders were replaced by professional soldiers. However, the former leadership gradually transformed the affiliated civil organization, the **Civilian Corps “Azov”**, into a political party, the **National Corps**. Although its electoral results are not worth mentioning, its membership is estimated at ten to fifteen thousand. It

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<sup>45</sup> In 2019, the **Movement of Resistance Against Capitulation** was formed, in which a number of nationalist parties and organizations are **involved**. The movement was a reaction to President Zelensky’s new course, which the right-wing forces considered too compromising.

<sup>46</sup> Probably the most detailed study to date on the rise of the “Azov movement” is *From the Fires of War* by the Bellingcat journalist and researcher, Michael Colborne. It was only published in March 2022.

has its own **cultural centers**, publishes books in its own **publishing house** and discusses them in its **literary club**, mobilizes public support through charity campaigns, sports events and a **summer festival**, indoctrinates and trains youth in the **Youth Corps**, but is also somewhat **interested** in workplace struggles.<sup>47</sup> It is much more active in “civic life” than many mainstream parties and also the paramilitary **National Druzhina** (later renamed “Centuria”). In short, Patriot of Ukraine, originally a minor far-right organization, has managed – thanks to the escalation of violence on the Euromaidan and the subsequent militarization of the conflict – to do what the far right in many European countries has failed to do. It built a social movement that can reach out to different groups of people on many different fronts.<sup>48</sup>

The Azov Regiment has been formally depoliticized by being integrated under the MIA, but there is still cooperation and various personal links between it and the civilian version of Azov. The “Azov phenomenon” is often mischaracterized. Its ideology is not neo-Nazism, but rather a modern variant of fascism that draws on the local traditions of integral nationalism.<sup>49</sup> It is also not entirely true that Ukraine has become a sort of global hub of the far right. Although Ukrainian fascists maintain contacts

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<sup>47</sup> Svoboda even established its own trade union, “**Freedom of Labor**”, but it is not very active.

<sup>48</sup> In the case of Slovakia, just think of the boys playing at war in “Resistance Kysuce” and the “Slovak Recruits”, the attempts to unite the “**People’s Youth**” or to create a nationalist community-family organization (“**Heads Up**”), etc.

<sup>49</sup> The main ideological source is the OUN theoretician **Mykola Stsiborskyi**, who developed the concept of “**Natiocracy**” (1935). In this authoritarian state system, the “nation” itself would govern through “state syndicates”, a kind of analogue to the Italian Fascist corporations. The Azov movement openly **subscribes** to this legacy, considering it a “**critique of fascism from the right**” and calling its updated version “**Natiocracy 2.0**”. In this system, civil rights would be granted to citizens on individual bases, in varying degrees and based on merit. Stsiborskyi’s views are also popular with other parts of the Ukrainian far-right spectrum; his seminal work was republished not just by Orientir (National Corps) but also by Kryla (Right Sector). Other variants of fascism, different from Nazism, are also an important inspiration (**Ernst Jünger**, **Julius Evola**). See, for example, the **list of books** collected by the Civilian Corps “Azov” in 2016 for the frontline soldiers of the regiment.

with some allied organizations abroad, the most notorious fascist forces in Europe have **sided** with Russia in the conflict.<sup>50</sup> This was one of the reasons why Svoboda **left** the Alliance of European National Movements in 2014, where it had observer status. Azov and other far-right forces also do not have any real control over the Ukrainian state. They have political connections that they have been able to exploit,<sup>51</sup> but otherwise they see themselves as being in opposition and view the ruling parties as their enemies.

Still, it would be a mistake to underestimate the Ukrainian far-right scene. After 2013, it has managed to gain combat experience and access to weapons. Since then, it has focused on building parallel structures that will be even better prepared to take advantage of an opportunity of the kind that came with the Euromaidan. At the same time, fascist and nationalist militants already pose a real danger to the Ukrainian left, the feminist movement, the Roma, and queer people.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> At one time, there was an ideological conflict between the “People’s Party – Our Slovakia” and the **Slovak Community**, as the latter sympathized with Azov. In 2016, Azov’s internet radio aired an **interview** with **Patrik Kubička**, a “right-wing activist from Slovakia” from the *Reconquista* pseudo-intellectual rag.

<sup>51</sup> In the case of Azov, the former Minister of Internal Affairs **Arsen Avakov** was particularly important. Already as the governor of Kharkiv Oblast (2005–2010) he maintained contacts with the Patriot of Ukraine. Later, as a minister, he appointed **one of the officers of the Azov regiment** as the head of the Kiev police, who then became the vice-president of the national police force. However, shortly after Avakov resigned (in part due to pressure from anti-corruption NGOs), the officer in question lost all his positions. This story illustrates the relationship between Azov and the Ukrainian state: personal connections allow for infiltration but not permanent control, at least for now.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., reports by foreign observers on **hate crimes** in 2020. The far right has specifically targeted public events by **feminists** and the **LGBTI community**. Attacks on feminist activists have also **occurred** since the start of the invasion in 2022. For details on the activities of various far-right organizations, see Denys Gorbachev’s 2018 **article**. For comparison, see the 2015 **report** by the Memorial Anti-Discrimination Center on the status of the Roma in the territories of the self-proclaimed republics.

## Anti-Peoples' Republics

After the Euromaidan, the Donbas capitalists were suddenly left without their previous influence in the state. The Association Agreement with the EU threatened their economic interests, tied to favorable trade terms with the post-Soviet space and low gas prices. In the Spring of 2014, the Anti-Maidan could therefore appear to them as a convenient tool to put pressure on Kiev, resulting in a new compromise within the capitalist class, a new division of spheres of influence. This compromise could have taken a range of forms, but the most extreme options would have been federalization. The complete independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, or their annexation to the Russian Federation, was not in the interests of big business in the Donbas. Both options posed a greater danger to their interests than the post-Euromaidan baseline. Independence would have created weak states, probably without international recognition, with no or complicated access to the world market and with broken ties to the rest of Ukraine. After integration into Russia, the oligarchs would have to forget about having political influence. Even if a place was found for them in Putin's consolidated "power vertical", being part of it entails giving up on any independence. Annexation was not an attractive prospect from the economic point of view, either, as the Donbas enterprises would be exposed to much more intense competition on the Russian market.

Hence, the bet of the Donbas elite that we mentioned in a previous section, did not work out. Instead of creating an acceptable compromise with Kiev's power, the Anti-Maidan spiraled out of control and, because of the Russian intervention, led to the emergence of new statelets. Their leadership consisted of little-known people. They were second- to third-tier capitalists (the owner of a soap factory, the former director of a meat processing plant, the owner of a fuel and oil business, a coal trader), various lackeys (a political marketer with a neo-Nazi past, the former manager of Akhmetov's football team, an assistant to an MP), fraudsters by trade, and a number of members of the security apparatus (Ukrainian or Russian).

For the former rulers of the Donbas, such as Akhmetov, the new situation was a disaster.

The local mining and manufacturing sectors were suddenly out of the reach of their masters and in serious trouble. Many plants were damaged by the fighting, others lost suppliers or customers. Infrastructure suffered as well. The “republics” also lost a lot of labor-power and local entrepreneurs as a result of emigration.<sup>53</sup> They were cut off from state subsidies and investment. The decrease in production reduced the tax base and customs revenues. As a result, what was once the core of the Donbas economy unraveled and the statelets were left unable to rebuild what the war had destroyed – let alone jumpstart any further development.

The regimes in the DPR and the LPR have been militarily, politically, and economically subordinated to Russia and dependent on its assistance practically from the beginning. However, the assistance was limited to what was necessary in terms of Russian interests. In the eight years of the existence of the “republics”, there has been no significant capital investment to modernize the old industrial base of the region.<sup>54</sup> The aid mainly took the form of humanitarian rations, supplying shops with Russian foodstuffs, electricity, and gas supplies, or giving the population the opportunity to travel to Russia for work. The economy of the occupied territories did switch from the hryvnia to the ruble, but without any real integration into the global or at least Russian financial system. Most everyday transactions are in **cash**, ATMs are few and their use is associated with **high fees**.

In 2017, the DPR announced the nationalization of **43 companies**. This was also in response to the **blockade** of freight transport by Ukraine, which began in 2016 as a spontaneous action by veterans and nationalists

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<sup>53</sup> More detailed data does not seem to exist, but in 2013 the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts had a combined **population** of about 6.6 million. According to a 2019 **study**, 3.2 million people lived on the territories of the “republics”. Mainly the younger generations have left.

<sup>54</sup> The only major **project** was an investment of 500m rubles (about EUR 7m) in the **DonFrost** factory, which produces refrigerators in Donetsk.



to secure the release of prisoners of war. It was later made official by the Ukrainian state. The blockade made it impossible to get raw materials from the west to the Donbas, while at the same time preventing the export of finished goods. The purpose of nationalization was to sever all old ties and start the process of reorientation.

The part of the productive economy of the DPR and LPR that had links to customers in Russian strategic industries (e.g., metallurgy for the arms industry) came under the control of **Vneshtorgservis** (VTS, “Foreign Trade Service”) after nationalization. This company is registered in South Ossetia and is **linked** to Yanukovich’s former treasurer Serhiy Kurchenko, prosecuted in Ukraine for billions of dollars in gas export fraud. VTS played a specific role in the occupied territories. Until this year’s invasion, Russia did not formally recognize the existence of the two “republics”. It did, however, recognize the independence of South Ossetia, which in turn recognized both the DPR and the LPR. The company was thus able to issue valid export documents for moving goods from the occupied territories to Russia. Its business model was based on three principles: politically mediated contacts with customers in Russia, extreme exploitation of the workforce, and a purely parasitic relation to the outdated technical base of the Donbas.

VTS also reportedly provided outlets for another important part of the Donbas industry – coal mining. However, according to estimates by the Ukrainian trade unionist Mykola Volynko, in 2020, only less than a third of the seventy mines on the occupied territories were still **operational**. This was mainly anthracite mining for coke production, which was the **most profitable** and had a guaranteed market. Some of the coal was also illegally reimported back into Ukraine under the cover of VTS. Other mines were destroyed by the war, or their production was not sustainable without subsidies (which, of course, the Ukrainian state refused to continue to provide) and had to be closed. Many are flooded which has grave

consequences for the residents' potable water wells. Toxic substances are leaking from the mines, threatening an ecological disaster.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, the economic difficulties had an immediate effect on living standards. The wages of miners are among the highest in the “republics” and at the end of 2019 they **amounted** to about 16–17,000 rubles per month (about €250 at the time). In the rest of Ukraine, the average wage for miners **was** around 15,000 UAH (ca. €470). In other sectors in the DPR and the LPR, the income situation is even **worse**: the average wage is around 8–10,000 rubles (up to €150), earnings above 12,000 rubles are considered very good.<sup>56</sup> In mining and manufacturing, stoppages and non-payment of wages are a chronic problem, which has a long tradition in the Donbas. An alternative career for physically fit men, which is associated with a regular income, is provided by the army.<sup>57</sup>

After the conflict had become frozen, shops in the “republics” did not suffer any acute shortages of goods. According to **residents**, the bigger problem is the prices, which they say are close to those in the Russian borderlands. Data on the number of migrants from the DPR and LPR who work in Russia are not available, but local **job search websites** are full of offers promising significantly higher earnings, for example, in **Rostov-on-**

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<sup>55</sup> On the environmental consequences of the mining industry's decline in the Donbas, see this 2019 **article**. The dangerous working conditions in Ukraine's mines have been notorious since Soviet times. The **A. F. Zasiadko mine** in the Donetsk Oblast is perhaps the worst of all – in a 2007 mining accident, over a hundred miners were killed here. During the war, the mine came under the control of the DPR. In 2015, a gas **explosion** killed 33 people.

<sup>56</sup> In February 2022, the Russian *Kommersant* **wrote** about an average salary of 15,000 rubles in the DPR and 18,000 rubles in the LPR. We have not come across any testimony confirming this figure. Still, it would only be about 60% of the current average wage in Ukraine.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., an **interview** with a member of the LPR armed forces in Ukrainian captivity. Until the beginning of the war in the Donbas, he had worked as a miner. Thanks to the hryvnia exchange rate, which was more favorable at the time, he earned about \$1200 a month. After the establishment of the “republic” and the closure of the mine, he enlisted as a soldier, earning \$200–300 per month (with free food). Several **other interviews** with POWs from the LPR contain interesting details about daily life in the “republic”.

**Don.** The breakdown of local industry, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, have created the conditions for remote work, in the gig economy or in call centers serving clients in Russia.<sup>58</sup>

The worsening situation led to several protests. Already in 2016, workers at several mines in Makeyevka (DPR) **went on strike** demanding higher wages. They were branded as traitors and saboteurs and investigated by the security services. Another, bigger wave of **discontent** came in 2020. An internal list of mines to be closed was leaked to the public. Consequently, fifty miners from the Nykanor-Nova mine (Zorynsk, LPR) refused to walk out in early May. They remained underground for six days while their wives demonstrated on the surface. The reason for the protest was not just the planned closure, but also wages arrears accumulated over the past twenty months. The strike achieved partial repayment of the wages owed, but the management's plans could not be changed. The protest subsequently spread to four other mines, where people had also been working for free for several months. However, only about a hundred miners from the **Komsomolskaya** mine near Antracyt (LPR) managed to get underground before the authorities could react. Their protest led to immediate payment of a part of the debt. When the company failed to meet the next payment deadline, the miners decided to continue their struggle. However, the authorities were prepared: they cut the miners' electricity, blocked mobile networks and the internet on the surface, and sealed off the entire town to prevent solidarity actions. The MGB (the local equivalent of the KGB) started an investigation of the strike organizers and their families. Over twenty people were **detained**. In June, a protest of about two hundred colleagues and relatives took place in front of the local authorities, demanding their release, guaranteed impunity, and the

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<sup>58</sup> **Advego**, a job exchange for *freelancers*, is very popular among Donetsk workers. There have also been some **experiments** with cryptocurrencies (and the associated **fraudulent schemes**). This penchant for “financial innovation” is not surprising, as the DPR administration is headed by Denis Pushilin, who had once been involved in the immensely popular “**MMM**” Ponzi scheme.

payment of two months' wages. The protest was successful, but again only partially.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that the striking miners are of interest to the Ministry of State Security is illustrative of the political nature of the DPR and the LPR. The regimes have largely dealt with any opposition at the outset: in 2014–2016, hundreds of journalists, pro-Ukrainian activists and other perceived enemies were subjected to illegal detention in concentration camps and *podvals* (basements), where they were subjected to torture, mock executions or sexual violence. Since then, independent trade unions and other workers' organizations have been non-existent or immediately persecuted, as in the case of the miners. In the spirit of Soviet tradition, the official trade unions' functions are limited to recreation and repression. The dependence of both states on Russia is also manifested in political and military terms. After 2014, the Russian army did not simply intervene as an auxiliary force, alongside the separatists. The so-called DPR and LPR people's militias are in fact *subordinated* to the command of the Southern Military District of RF's Armed Forces. The ranks of local commanders, as well as those of the civilian administration, have been decimated by a series of purges that have removed those who were too independent-minded.<sup>60</sup>

If real Stalinism was a tragedy, the “republics” in eastern Ukraine repeat it as a farce: with terror, propaganda, “*people's courts*”, rigged “elections”, social control and *slave labor*, but without the feverish modernization, the rising living standards and the mass mobilization. The complete lack of

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<sup>59</sup> For further strikes and manifestations of worker discontent in the DPR and LPR in 2020, see, for example, this *Novosti Donbassa* report or this *article* with a detailed chronology of the strike at the Alchevsk metallurgical plant (LPR).

<sup>60</sup> Among them was *Aleksey Mozgovoy*, commander of the Prizrak Brigade and, in his own words, a “monarchist”. The brigade was formed from the self-defense units of the Anti-Maidan in the Luhansk Oblast. Mozgovoy's populist rhetoric attracted a number of foreign “interbrigadists” and also deluded *some Slovak leftists*. His unit initially resisted integration into the official structures of the LPR, but after he was assassinated, the resistance was quickly overcome. For a more detailed account of the Prizrak Brigade, see Volodymyr Ishchenko's *study* (pp. 79 ff.).

prospects, eight years of curfew and complications in travel (for example, in search of education, as diplomas from local universities are not recognized anywhere) are particularly irritating for the youth.<sup>61</sup> Ukrainian journalists recently asked a 25-year-old, forcibly mobilized POW from the DPR to compare Donetsk, Kharkiv and Slovakia's Bratislava, where he had worked for a time in 2020.<sup>62</sup> His answer will surely make Slovak readers smirk: "Donetsk – gray hopelessness. Kharkiv – great, pro-European, beautiful city. Bratislava – well, that's Europe!" He said he would be happiest if things went back to the way they were before 2014. However, an independent survey from 2019 showed the full range of attitudes of people in the DPR and LPR. Almost a third wanted autonomy within Ukraine and over 23% wanted annexation to Ukraine without autonomy, but over 18% were in favor of annexation to the Russian Federation and over 27% in favor of autonomy within the Russian Federation.

The 2020 struggles of miners and other workers in occupied Ukraine did not go unanswered. Vneshtorgservis was unable to pay off the huge wage arrears, and so in June 2021, the leadership of the DPR and LPR announced that a "new investor" was coming to the Donbas. The enterprises that had been under the control of VTS were taken over by the YuGMK company ("Southern Mining and Metallurgical Complex"), owned by a relatively little-known businessman, Yevgeny Yurchenko. He has a business history with Konstantin Malofeev, a supporter of the Anti-Maidan and the "Russian Spring". Some other plants are now controlled by Herkules, a company owned by Ihor Andreev. This Donetsk businessman in the

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the views of respondents in the video by the Russian vlogger Varlamov, available with English subtitles.

<sup>62</sup> Travel from the "republics" was complicated but not impossible. People with passports enabling foreign travel (as opposed to "internal passports", i.e., national ID cards) could get to Europe via Russia. Crossing to and from Ukrainian territory had been difficult from the start. It involved waiting in queues and passing through lengthy security checks. Pensioners regularly had to endure these hardships to receive their pensions, as the Ukrainian side only paid them in person. However, students from the DPR and the LPR were able to enter Ukrainian universities. In 2020, travel to Ukraine was restricted under the pretext of the pandemic, although checkpoints to Russia remained open.

food industry and metallurgy **ranked** 148th on a 2012 list of the richest Ukrainians. After the creation of the “republics”, he was also involved in exporting scrap metal from the crumbling factories.

The plans of these new captains of the Donbas industry envisage a significant increase in production. So far, it seems they have at least been able to pay off some debts: if official press releases are to be believed, the total amount of wage arrears in the DPR has **fallen** from 2.5 to “just” 1.9 billion rubles (about €29m). At the Alchevsk Metallurgical Plant (LPR), Yurchenko is said to have **settled** all debts owed to employees. At about the same time, it was announced that a new **decree** by V. V. Putin would allow local companies to compete for Russian public procurement contracts. Export and import quotas for goods from the Donbas would also be lifted. Three months later, the invasion began.

## Capitalist development under conditions of war

Especially in the early years, the conflict had a major impact on the development of the Ukrainian economy and politics. The disruption of supply chains, the destruction or loss of productive capacities due to the occupation, as well as the flight of hundreds of thousands of people, meant that the country was unable to benefit from the roughly six-year global boom that began a year after the Euromaidan. Instead, Ukraine fell into a deep recession in 2014–2015, from which it did not fully **recover** afterwards. The share of capital investment in the total economy **fell** to historic lows. The fall in the value of the hryvnia shook the local financial sector, with **dozens of banks** going bankrupt or losing their licenses.<sup>63</sup> Average real

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<sup>63</sup> PrivatBank, which belonged to Ihor Kolomoiskyi and Gennadiy Bogolyubov, also got into serious trouble. One of the first commercial banks established after Ukraine’s independence, it controlled the largest share of the domestic market. It used consumer deposits to lend heavily to its shareholders’ companies. The 2014–2015 crisis caught it undercapitalized and it had to be nationalized in 2016. Investigations into its shady practices are still ongoing. The Ukrainian branch of the global auditing giant PwC, which approved its financial statements, later **lost** its license to conduct bank audits.

wages **fell** by 25% in the two years of the hot war, and **non-payment of wages** became a mass phenomenon once again. The proportion of people with an income below the real subsistence level **rose** from less than 17% to more than half of the population between 2014 and 2015. Although it has declined in subsequent years,<sup>64</sup> it has not yet reached its original levels. This economic and social catastrophe is comparable to the fate of Greece after 2008. In this case, however, it was also accompanied by militarization.<sup>65</sup>

Ukraine received \$3 billion from the Russian loan negotiated by Yanukovich. However, due to the war, it refused to repay it. Instead, it turned again to the IMF, which **approved** a new loan package as early as April 2014. Its volume gradually increased to \$17.5 billion. The country also signed the EU Association Agreement in June 2014, but it took almost three years for all member states to **ratify** it. The agreement **eliminated** most tariffs, but also introduced protection periods, especially for imports of certain types of goods from the Union, such as cars and some agricultural products. As a result, Ukrainian exports to the EU **increased** by 87% between 2016 and 2021. The agreement has also facilitated the movement of labor power: since June 2017, citizens with a biometric passport can travel to member states (for 90 days) without a visa. Around this time, the share of the Ukrainian workforce in the **Slovak labor market** started to grow, quickly overtaking that of workers from other countries. The expansion of labor migration can also be seen in the **ratio of remittances to Ukrainian GDP**.

The IMF program included all the familiar conditions: slashing energy subsidies for households, privatization, fiscal responsibility and strengthening the rule of law. One of the objectives was to improve the business environment and attract foreign investment. However, Ukraine's progress in those areas was very uneven. As regards privatization, the state was

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<sup>64</sup> The changes are also related to the fact that after 2015, Ukrainian statistics do not include the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.

<sup>65</sup> While in 2013 Ukraine **spent** about 1.6% of GDP on arms, in 2015 the share increased to more than 3.2%.

able to sell some minority stakes in regional energy companies and to implement several small projects. However, privatization of larger enterprises has faced problems. The **Odessa portside plant** was once the largest producer of ammonia and urea for fertilizer production in the Soviet Union. **Three attempts** to sell it off have failed, as the factory is weighed down by debts from gas purchases and disputes over the outcome of previous rounds of privatization. In the meantime, the factory's equipment is becoming obsolete, and the asking price is falling. Currently, there are 25 upcoming "large" projects (including the Odessa plant), one successfully completed project and one ongoing project **listed** on the online privatization portal launched in 2020. Among the public, the transfer of state-owned enterprises into private hands remains **unpopular**, as does the sale of agricultural land. According to a **survey** from late 2021, only 11% of people view the implementation of the Western institutions' programs as the appropriate way of accelerating Ukraine's development.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, privatization plans did not provoke significant protests or strikes in recent years.<sup>67</sup>

This is not the case on another front. A family of three with an average income and living in a two-bedroom Kiev apartment **spent** about 6% of their income on utility bills in 2013. By 2020, it was more than 16%. The rising prices were not just a consequence of state policy, but are linked to it, as reforms included the deregulation of the consumer gas market or the abolition of "preferential tariffs" for electricity. These steps were met with protest. In 2016, trade unions organized a 50,000-strong **demonstration** in Kiev, probably the largest since the Euromaidan. In addition to raising the minimum wage, it demanded a halt to rising energy prices. In a more modest form, it was **repeated** two years later, and smaller protests were

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<sup>66</sup> This option is most popular (almost 15%) in the west of Ukraine, and least popular in the East (4.3%); in the Donbas, it is 7%. Similarly, only 8.5% of Ukrainians think that the role of the state in the economy should be reduced.

<sup>67</sup> However, in 2020, a **demonstration** helped **prevent** the planned privatization of the Artemsil plant in Soledar (Donetsk Oblast), one of the largest salt works in Europe. After the invasion in 2022, it had to stop production.



also held in the other regions – most recently **last year**. However, they have failed to stop the rise in the costs of living.

Although energy prices rose, workers in coal mining did not see their wages increase. Reducing the state deficit in the name of fiscal responsibility also meant cutting subsidies to the mining sector. There have been numerous protests against the non-payment of wages or the planned closure of mines, with slogans such as “**The hungry miner – Ukraine’s shame**”. Miners from the unoccupied part of Luhansk Oblast **stayed** underground for seven days, fighting for the payment of wages arrears accumulated over the past months to years. The deteriorating situation in the sector also led to some desperate acts. In 2016, the head of the independent miners’ union from the Donetsk Oblast attempted to **set himself on fire** in the building of the Ministry of Energy. Several hunger **strikes** also took place. The miners’ actions were not limited to the Donbas, either. **On several occasions**, miners in the west of Ukraine **blocked** the highway to Poland or went on strike. In 2020, their colleagues from Kryvyi Rih **refused** to surface. The mines owned by Akhmetov and Kolo-moiskyi **extract** iron ore for the local steel industry as well as for the U. S. Steel plant in Košice (Slovakia). Workers demanded a change in the wage system as well as investment in the outdated equipment that caused several accidents.

In addition to miners, as typical representatives of the “old” working class facing the long-term decline of their sector,<sup>68</sup> other sectors mobilized in recent years, albeit to a lesser extent. On the railways, workers struggled against the new, more “managerial” approach of the employer, and repeatedly declared an “**Italian strike**”, i.e., a slowdown.<sup>69</sup> During

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<sup>68</sup> For a detailed account of the miners’ situation, see the English translation of Vitaly Atanasov’s 2016 **article**.

<sup>69</sup> This tactic has a specific rationale in Ukraine. Transport strikes that could interfere with passenger transport or threaten enterprises that operate 24/7 are prohibited by **Article 18 of the Law “On Transport”**. The strike in question was called by the smaller and more militant Free Trade Union of Railway Workers (VZPU), while the large Trade Union of Railway Workers and Transport Construction Workers **distanced itself** from the action.

the pandemic, **health care unions** were **active**, especially with regard to the non-payment of wages and covid bonuses.<sup>70</sup> Various struggles and attempts at organizing continued until the war. For example, teachers from twenty Transcarpathian schools **went on strike** in the autumn of 2021, demanding payment of wages owed (over €600,000 total). Around the same time, a limited **strike** of Kiev Bolt couriers began, demanding guaranteed minimum daily earnings.<sup>71</sup>

The ArcelorMittal plant in Kryvyi Rih was also the scene of intense struggles. In 2018, workers **complained** about slow wage growth and harassment of trade unionists. More than 12,000 signed a petition demanding compliance with the collective agreement, wage increases, thorough safety inspection of all buildings, as well as the resignation of the HR manager known for her confrontational approach. Employees of the factory's railway department, which handles the transport of raw materials and finished products, **entered** an "Italian strike" coordinated with Ukrainian Railway workers. At the time, the latter **were on strike** for higher wages, safer conditions and the renewal of the obsolete rolling stock. As the Kryvyi Rih steel plant could not produce without the railway department, the strike quickly paralyzed it. The management threatened the strikers with police and court action, as there was a risk of serious damage to the gas pipeline due to a drop in pressure. However, the workers did not back down and won a 25% wage **increase**. The hated HR manager eventually resigned, but disputes over compliance with the collective agreement **continued** through 2021, as did the **fight** for safer working conditions.

The arrival of ArcelorMittal was a symbol of the booming Ukrainian economy after 2000. Pro-Western governments wanted to continue this story after the Euromaidan, but the war significantly reduced Ukraine's attractiveness in the eyes of global capital. In 2015, the ratio of net FDI inflows to GDP **fell** below zero for the first time in history. After the conflict was stabilized, investor activity revived, but it did not reach pre-crisis lev-

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<sup>70</sup> For a detailed account of the situation in Ukrainian hospitals through the eyes of the nurse Nina Kozlovskaya, see the 2020 **article**.

<sup>71</sup> See also the **article** on struggles by Glovo couriers.

els. There were only a **few projects** that created more than 500 new jobs between 2014 and 2019: Fujikura (production of wiring harnesses for cars), Jabil (circuit boards, set-top boxes), Flex (circuit boards, custom-made widgets and appliances), Head (sports equipment), Leoni (wiring harnesses) and Sumitomo Electric (wiring harnesses). Except for two cases, all of these were investors that had been active in Ukraine before. Similarly, capital investments exceeding \$100 million were all made by well-known companies: in addition to ArcelorMittal, they were Bunge (cereals, grains, oils) and Cargill (cereals).

Thus, in his speech at the beginning of 2020, President Zelensky could **declare** that Ukraine had yet to become “the investment mecca of Eastern and Central Europe”. However, by then it was already clear that the economic cycle had entered its downward phase. With the advent of the pandemic, the Ukrainian economy fell back into a recession. Four years of growth whose speed was comparable to that of Slovakia had come to an end. However, as indicated in the World Bank’s 2019 **brief note**, at this rate of development, Ukraine would need another fifty years to catch up with Poland. The invasion, meanwhile, has further widened that gap.

## **Nationalist fatigue**

After 2013, the far right did not gain any significant formal influence in the parliament or government. However, the Euromaidan and the war in Donbas shifted the entire political spectrum to the right, so that even unlikely candidates suddenly became nationalist hawks. Petro Poroshenko, who was president of Ukraine from 2014–2019, once **co-founded** Yanukovich’s Party of Regions, later defected to Yushchenko’s camp, but then briefly served as minister of trade in Azarov’s government (during Yanukovich’s presidency). This flexible politician quickly turned into a hardliner in 2014. Already as a presidential candidate, he promised to **accelerate and strengthen** the operation in the Donbas, which he said would “**harden the Ukrainian nation**”. In 2015, he signed laws on decommunization that made it impossible for the so-called communist parties to operate. The

law “On the legal status and honoring of the memory of fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the 20th century” granted special status to dozens of organizations (and their members), including the OUN, the UPA and the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. Poroshenko also pushed for changes in language and cultural policy aimed at strengthening Ukrainian identity.

During his presidency, he gradually returned to the model of a “strong president” surrounded exclusively by those loyal to him. During his reign, observers both domestic and foreign warned about the growth of authoritarianism, manifested, e.g., in the pressure on journalists and anti-corruption activists. An atmosphere of looking for an internal enemy (i.e., supporters of Anti-Maidan, *separ*s, the “fifth column”) was created, which also affected workers’ organizations. Protesting miners, for example, repeatedly faced accusations that they were being used as pawns against Kiev by Akhmetov, eager to protect his monopoly. The secret service also took an interest in the case, but the suspicions were not confirmed and, thanks to international solidarity, the harassment of workers was stopped. During the 2020 protests in Kryvyi Rih, SBU agents even went underground to summon the miners for questioning. They also harassed their relatives and tried to make it difficult to organize street protests in other cities by putting pressure on commercial bus operators. The company sought to declare the workers’ action illegal and pursued the case all the way to court.<sup>72</sup>

Initially, Poroshenko had been critical of the blockade of the DPR and LPR, launched by veterans’ and far-right organizations in 2016. Over time, he adopted the idea and later – when he was no longer president – considered suggestions that it be abolished as tantamount to betrayal. During Poroshenko’s term, the policy of the Ukrainian state towards the occupied territories and their population was harsh. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people from the “republics” found themselves without effective assistance with finding new housing and livelihoods. They had to depend on the help of charitable organizations such as Vostok SOS

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<sup>72</sup> After an appeal, the miners are winning – for now.

(“SOS East”). The Supreme Court declared the harassment associated with the paying of pensions and social benefits to people who, for whatever reason, remained on the occupied territory, **illegal**. Still, it continued. Trade union activists who spoke out against the blockade and sought to build bridges between people on both sides of the “contact line” **faced** threats from far-right volunteers who had become accustomed to the police’s hands-off approach. In the campaign leading up to the 2019 presidential election, Poroshenko’s rhetoric became even **harsher**. His central slogan was “Army! Language! Faith!”.

A sociological **survey** before the election examined public opinion on the situation in the Donbas. More than half of the people described the residents of the DPR and LPR as “victims of circumstance” or “hostages of illegal armed groups”. Only a third of those surveyed were in favor of a military path to peace or a halt to all financial flows, including old-age pensions. A large majority, on the contrary, preferred the strategy of building a “normal life” in unoccupied territory. In other words, the overwhelming share of the population felt that the focus should be on creating an attractive alternative to the regimes in the Donbas and thus undermining them.

These answers foreshadowed the **results** of the 2019 presidential election, but also further developments in public opinion. Poroshenko received only 25% of the vote in the second round (about 15% of all eligible voters), only winning a majority in the Lviv Oblast. Everywhere else, the winner was Zelensky – a candidate from a Jewish Russian-speaking family from Kryvyi Rih who had a program of ending the war through negotiations. In the **parliamentary election** held a few months later, just under 50% of the electorate voted, the lowest turnout since Ukraine’s independence. More than two-thirds of the seats were divided between parties whose attitude to building a Ukrainian national identity has been rather lukewarm (“Servant of the People”, Zelensky’s party) or outright hostile (“Opposition

Platform – Pro-Life”).<sup>73</sup> People were clearly tired of war and nationalism. In a **poll** in February 2020, less than a year after the elections, only a fifth of the population was in favor of a military solution to the Donbas dispute and more than half rejected it.

Zelensky and his party won thanks to modern political marketing techniques and an anti-Poroshenko agenda: for a sensible solution to the conflict in the Donbas, against “ultra-Ukrainian” excesses in cultural policy, for limiting the power of the oligarchs, against corruption. Before the election, for example, Zelensky **promised** that confiscated assets of the oligarchs would be used to raise the salaries of teachers to \$4000 (i.e., a more than tenfold increase). But the bubble quickly burst. The revelations of the *Pandora Papers* undermined the image of a fighter against the elite, which **could not be saved** even by the gradual distancing from Kolomoiskyi. On the Eastern front, there was no substantial progress and any compromise proposals **faced** protests from the far right. A new draft of the law regulating the SBU emerged that would have greatly **expanded** the surveillance powers of the secret service run by **the president’s childhood friend**. Moreover, the increases in energy tariffs and the land reform, which created a market in agricultural land, showed that Zelensky’s centrism did not mean a move away from unpopular reforms. The latter have also taken the form of attempts to **curtail** trade union rights or the introduction of **innovations** such as “zero-hours” contracts. On the other hand, even the IMF **was not satisfied** with the implementation of the program. There was general disappointment: by the middle of his term, Zelensky’s rating was **sinking**. The trend was only reversed after the president made his first **statement** by video – from the besieged Kiev.

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<sup>73</sup> Svoboda ran as part of a broad coalition with the National Corps, Right Sector, and other, smaller far-right parties. They won a mere 2.15% of the vote which translated into one seat.

## In the whirlwind of catastrophes

In this article, we have followed the events of the past thirty years. In hindsight – with all the benefits of this perspective – these events from a continuous tragedy of the Ukrainian working class. In February 2022, it simply entered the next act.

During the strikes at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, one of the demands of the Donbas miners was privatization. It appeared to guarantee independence: they did not want their fate to be in the hands of the old rulers in Moscow nor the new ones in Kiev. In this way, they symbolically summoned a calamity that later befell all of Ukraine. It brought the gradual disintegration of an entire way of life, the depopulation of regions, the disintegration of communities. Violence and destruction invaded the lives of workers, in its immediate manifestation of crime as well as the structural forms of rising **rates of suicide** and a fall in life expectancy. The resistance of workers could never be completely broken, but the conditions of their struggle were increasingly desperate. As Oleg Dubrovsky recalls, in a situation of mass non-payment of wages, workers had to fight for the right to be wage laborers at all – instead of being slaves.

This experience, together with the legacy of disorganization and depoliticization left by the Soviet regime, set the stage for the domination of local masters who promised protection of workers' sectoral and regional interests in the brutal struggles of competition. At the same time, the new capitalist class and its political representatives were not able (or willing) to create the conditions for standard capitalist development, not even to the degree that it became common in most other countries of the former Eastern bloc. Instead, a struggle was unleashed for positions that were prerequisites for "political accumulation". The agents of this conflict instrumentalized the national question, which was immediately infused with socio-economic content. A pro-Russian orientation was associated with nostalgia for the Soviet times, the paternalistic care, and the privileged position of mining and heavy industry. On the other hand,

a pro-European focus on “joining Europe” was linked to expectations of European wages and living conditions.

After the crisis of 2008, social contradictions escalated all over the world. The rise of nationalist, far-right forces accelerated. In the Ukrainian context, the miserable results of the previous two decades, during which the country did not extricate itself from the Russian sphere of influence, also played a role in these processes. For a part of the population, leaving this sphere became the only guarantee of progress. In 2013, the accumulated **discontent** exploded in a way that the regime could not contain. Yanukovich’s authoritarian turn was not quick and decisive enough, but the hundreds of corpses on Independence Square were enough to make the protests unstoppable.

A spiral was set in motion, and many wanted to harness its energy. Regime change brought to power the representatives of a faction of the capitalist class which had previously been sidelined. In the street battles with the police, the influence of the far right was strengthened. The Donbas capitalists hoped that the Anti-Maidan would allow them to maintain their position in the new conditions, while preserving the integrity of Ukraine. A section of workers in the Donbass feared that after the Euromaidan, they would be left without representation. At that moment, Russia intervened decisively in the situation. Eight years later, the details of Russian decision-making are still shrouded in mystery. It seems that, initially, only Crimea was the target, mainly because of its military importance. The unrest in the East and Southeast – fueled by television propaganda, professional provocateurs from across the border, and the remnants of loyal structures of the Party of Regions – served to distract attention from the annexation of Crimea and weaken the incoming Kiev regime, which was unable to respond adequately.

It is not clear to what extent the likes of Girkin/Strelkov were able to act on their own in this period. It may be conceded that the creation of permanent “republics” was not part of Russia’s original plan. In any case, as events gathered momentum, it became clear that the DPR and the LPR, if combined with Russian military support, could be useful in



generating long-term pressure. The conventional war and the subsequent frozen conflict acted as a brake on economic development and integration into the Western structures. In particular, Ukraine's entry into NATO was unthinkable with persistent territorial disputes in the East. In the Minsk process and in the so-called **Normandy format** negotiations, Russia, which pretended to act as a mere mediator while also being the prime mover behind the two puppet states, could dictate the terms of further coexistence. Ukraine thus remained permanently halfway out of the Russian sphere of influence. In relation to it, the "republics" played the same role as Transnistria in the case of Moldova or Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the case of Georgia. The return of occupied territories to Kiev's control, if it ever came to that, would not have been possible without concessions that would have ossified Ukraine's precarious position and left open the possibility of its return to the "Russian world". This constellation was only changed by the events of February 2022, again as a result of unilateral initiative by Russia. Up until then, it had clearly been the master of the situation.

Even after the Association Agreement had been signed in 2016, there was no economic miracle in Ukraine. Living standards undoubtedly rose, but significant regional disparities persist, and, on average, the country is still far from its closest western neighbors.<sup>74</sup> Slogans notwithstanding, the Euromaidan failed to fundamentally change the clan structure of the economy. It only affected the balance of power between different factions of the capitalist class. The nationalist sentiments whipped up by the war and the political elite led by Poroshenko narrowed the space for emancipatory politics and shifted the focus from material problems to questions of national identity and the search for internal enemies. On the other hand, in the territory under Kiev's control – especially after the hot phase of the war was over – normal conditions of bourgeois

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<sup>74</sup> In 2019, the average Ukrainian household **spent** almost half of its income on food and non-alcoholic beverages. It spent less than 2% on recreation and culture or on hotels and restaurants. In contrast, the equivalent **figures** for Slovakia are about 17%, 5% and over 4%, respectively. We need not remind our Western readers that Slovakia is no paradise.

democracy and legality were maintained. Workers there could enjoy the basic freedoms of expression, assembly and so on. This is not the case in the DPR and the LPR, where the arbitrary rule of gangs completely subordinated to the Russian state has reigned supreme. They can hardly be described as anything other than a colonial administration.

One of the big draws of the Anti-Maidan was the salvation of the mining industry in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts from the indifference of the Kiev governments and the threats of the EU diktat. Propagandists worked hard to create the impression that the miners spontaneously took up arms to defend their livelihoods. Eight years on, it is clear there was no such thing. A significant part of the mines was abandoned or destroyed. Neither the bet on privatization in the early 1990s, nor the hopes of some sort of return to earlier times under the banner of Orthodox-Christian Stalinism brought anything good to Donbas workers.

Economic transformations throughout the former Eastern bloc meant the decline of large parts of the “old” industry, factory closures, the rotting away of machine systems, the collapse of mines. But the United States, too, has its **Rust Belt**. The processes of deindustrialization varied in duration, but they were accompanied everywhere by misery, mass suffering of whole segments of the working class, and the explosion of pathologies ranging from domestic violence to drug addiction. In post-2014 Ukraine, however, the endless process of economic transition reached its most brutal stage: the destruction of old fixed capital, unprofitable when used in the new conditions, by means of artillery shells and ballistic missiles.

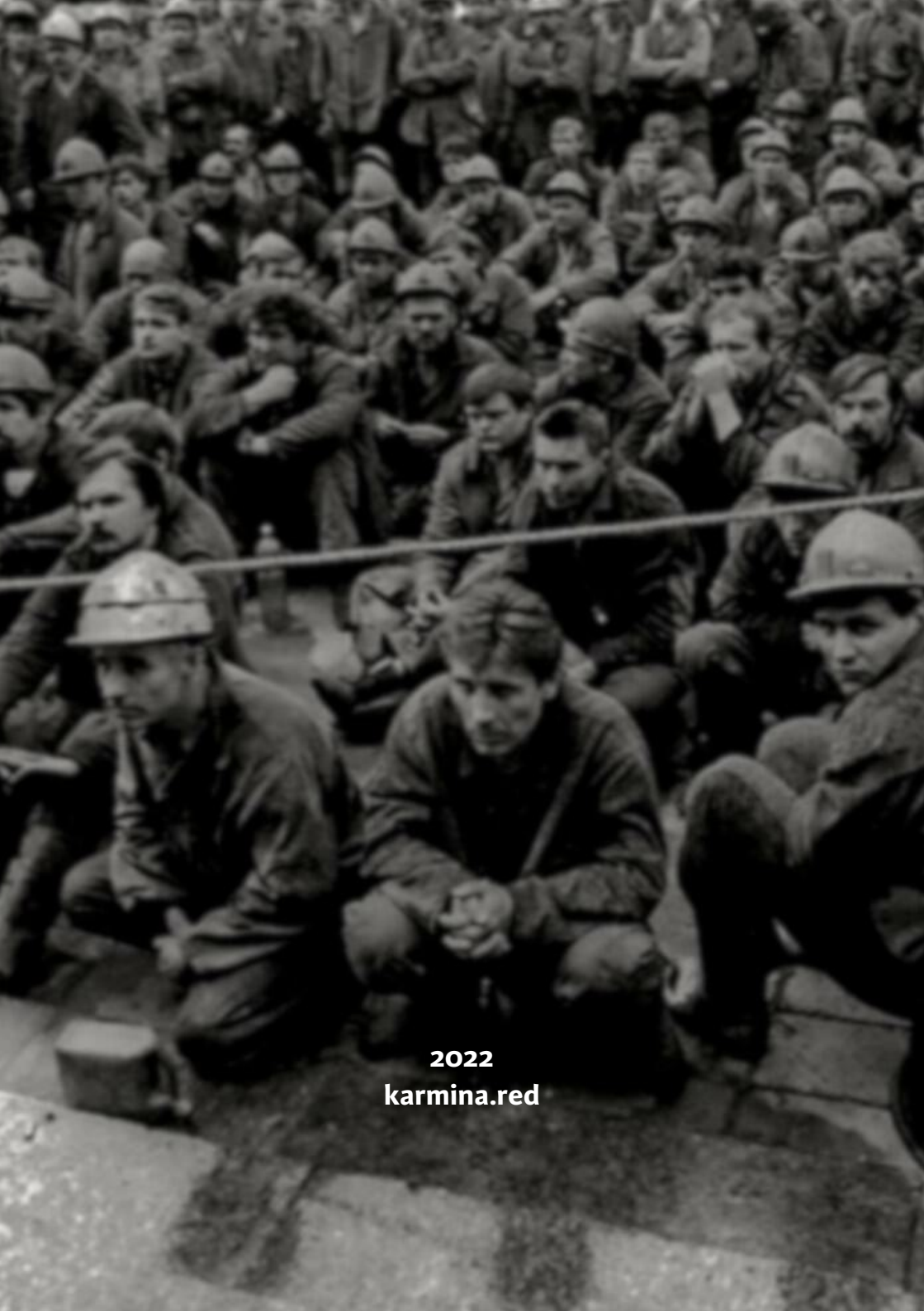
## **Karmína**

Karmína is a blog that looks at the world from the perspective of workers, their living conditions, needs and everyday struggles. In these, it seeks the germs of a future global movement that could shake the world. Karmína criticizes all artificial divisions – those of gender, race or nation – that partition the working class, and seeks ways of breaking through them practically.

Karmína is run by a small editorial collective that subscribes to the tradition of collective authorship and independent organizing without the help of well-meaning politicians, all-knowing experts, and proponents of social peace.

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