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Through the Dark Matter: Exploring Donbas Identity in Times of Peace and War

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Abstract

This article explores the socio-political landscape of Donbas through a lens of post-colonial studies, revealing the Russian colonial past and neo-colonial ambition. By uncovering the interplay of cultural, political, and economic challenges the author identifies the key elements of the region's identity and draws on historical analysis and personal reflections on the Russo-Ukrainian war. The article explores how Russia managed to dominate the discourse in Donbas, as well as the reasons why a significant part of the Donbas people accepted Russian dominance over the region and the creation of self-proclaimed states without great resistance. The study underscores the necessity to work on the decolonization of Donbas' identity as the pivotal point for fostering reconciliation processes in the long-term occupied territories of Ukraine.

Keywords: Donbas; post-soviet; identity; post-colonial; Ukraine; Russia; war

Introduction

I was scrolling through TikTok one evening, when I stumbled upon something that struck a chord. I saw a young woman from Donbas. She was from my hometown. She was dancing and singing with great passion – "I'm Russian" (*Ya russkiy*)[1] – an unofficial anthem of the so-called Russian "Special Military Operation", a pop hit of modern ruscism[2] that had gained popularity within Russia and war-supporting communities around the globe.

It left me with a sense of sadness, but also made me think about the way people in Donbas perceive and define their identity. The message is clear, this woman, same as many others who stayed in occupied Donbas, seems not to embrace her Ukrainian identity, and does not associate herself with Ukraine at all. I could not help but draw parallels with my own experiences growing up in Donbas.

When I think of how Ukraine-minded this place was, I remember singing the national anthem at school, and learning Ukrainian there, since both of my parents spoke only Russian to me. I remember St. Nicolas Day and *Koliada*[3] over the Christmas Holiday, I also remember being depressed about the hardship of Ukrainian peasants in the Russian Empire and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

However, I recalled something more about a particular day in my primary school when we had a costumed photography session. This was a widespread practice in post-Soviet countries during the '90s, to get school kids dressed as flight attendants, princesses, kings, etc. Surprisingly, this time I was offered to choose who I would like to be for this photo shoot: a gorgeous Tsarina, complete with *sarafan* dress and the traditional Russian *kokoshnik*; or a simple Ukrainian farmgirl and wear a

Ukrainian flower hairpiece (*vinochok*). I posed as both, just because my parents paid for two pictures, but my face in these photos showed a stark contrast. In the Tsarina picture, I was beaming with a radiant smile, while in the other, which I didn't particularly wish to have been taken, I appeared as a gloomy Ukrainian kid. The memories are vivid, and the question lingers: why haven't I been particularly keen on being pictured as Ukrainian? After all, I was just a regular post-Soviet child, born and raised in independent Ukraine. I had never set foot in Russia, let alone any royal experience. It left me wondering whether I was unknowingly caught in some form of collective trauma. Was this explicit disassociation from being seen as Ukrainian in my mind something I perceived as *normal*?

This TikTok woman and I have nothing in common, yet my story illustrates that we were raised of the same kind, and wished to be part of the "great" culture. These introspective meditations led me to a broader realization that would form the foundation of this article.

Russia's war against Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region, is far more than a modern geopolitical struggle. Russia, as the central figure in this conflict, has played a leading role in this narrative and highly benefited from it.

This war is deeply rooted in the historical complexity of colonization and the enduring consequences of imperial domination where Russia, as the colonial power, imposes its culture, language, and values creating a persistent sense of superiority (McLeud. 17-18). The Russian influence in Donbas, even after Ukraine's independence, is a prominent example, as the region's continued association with Russian identity reflects an incomplete process of mental decolonization[4].

This article is set on a profound exploration of Donbas' historical and contemporary identity which goes far beyond the basic understanding of national (rooted in common history, symbols, and culture) and local identities (a geographical community) (Laitin 1995), as it is marked with nuances and contradictions, shaped by an enduring colonial legacy.

While the fall of the Soviet Union ended the de-facto colonization of Ukraine, this research delves into the argument that mental decolonization, especially in the East of Ukraine, has never occurred. The lasting echo of the past continues to sculpt the present of Donbas as it keeps up with the paradigm of Russian superiority, providing fertile ground for aggressive Russian propaganda. The enduring consequences of colonization are evident in the way many individuals in Donbas perceive and define their identity, often favouring a connection to Russian culture over their Ukrainian roots (Pancuk, 2013, 15-17). The resistance to Ukrainian identity and the outbreak of war is, also, based on this unaddressed colonial mindset. Understanding the conflict from a post-colonial perspective reveals layers of historical, cultural, and political intricacies that have moulded the region.

Unveiling of Russian Colonial Past in Ukraine

Until recently, discussing Russia within the context of post-colonial studies was a rare occurrence, due to the prevailing narrative that Soviet dominance was rather *occupation* than *colonization.* The term "occupation" was used, e.g., by The Baltic States and former Eastern Bloc countries, to mitigate concerns of being labelled as colonized, which might negatively impact their European identity. This, however, created a major roadblock on the way to revealing the colonial past of Eastern European countries, and Ukraine in particular. Furthermore, it was considered rather unconventional to acknowledge Russian colonization of neighbouring countries (Chernetsky 2003, 32), particularly those that could be referred to as "white colonies" (Spivak et al. 2006, 830) and shared common Slavic heritage.

The cooperation between the Soviet Union and global decolonization movements throughout Russia's colonial history makes it even more challenging to address. (Moore 2001, 112). Nevertheless, the governance style of Russia reveals a striking parallel with the Western colonial powers, as it continuously tried to implement a broad spectrum of power structures, like cultural hegemony,

appropriation, assimilation, and marginalization of occupied territories throughout the history of the Russian Empire, Soviet Union and today.

While the global phenomenon of decolonization was advancing, the Soviet Union and later Russia exhibited limited signs of decolonization. Moreover, akin to colonial practices, Russia utilized energy dependency, military presence, the Russian language, and identity as a tool in the reinforcement of control and influence over neighbouring countries, including former Soviet territories, reminiscent of former colonies (Feinburg et al. 2024, 17; Kushnir 2022). Only after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine did Russia's image in the West begin to deteriorate bringing attention to Russia's imperialist tendencies and its use of power projection in neighbouring states.

This was brought to light by Vitaly Chernetsky (Chernetsky 2003), who in his article *"Post-colonialism, Russia and Ukraine"* discusses the depressing evidence that Russian scholars are advocating their colonial past and perceiving the legacy of Russian colonization as a positive and enlightening (1-2). Chernetsky also highlights how Russia ignores and ideologically underpins the experiences of the colonized which distorts the past and reinforces power imbalance in the present, legitimizing Russian dominance over Ukraine.

Moreover, since Putin resumed the presidency after the short shift, he notably embraced a colonial trajectory. In 2012, he explicitly articulated his imperial ambitions by employing the term "civilisation state" (Tsygankov 2016) to portray Russia as an entity inherently absorbing smaller cultures, including Ukraine's, and thus justifying territorial expansion and cultural assimilation. Linda Kinstler highlights that Putin enforces objectification of Ukraine as he prefers to think of Ukraine as a southern province of Russia, his rightful possession, a territory that was mistakenly "gifted" by his short-sighted predecessors (Kinstler 2022).

In the subsequent years, he proclaimed a "spiritual unity" between Russians and Ukrainians (Putin 2021) and in an essay published in July 2021, Putin expounded on the concept of "historical unity", contending that Ukraine and Russia were inexorably tied, constituting a single nation with a shared origin. Vladimir Putin's rhetoric perpetuates a vision of unity between Russia and Ukraine, masking his colonial ambitions under the guise of common heritage. This "unity between two brother nations" in his article means the annihilation of Ukraine. It doesn't take much to illustrate the harmful consequences of the belief in "brotherhood" and "unity", as the state politics of the Russian Federation, right before our eyes, is targeting people, who made it only halfway towards their independence after the Soviets' collapse in 1991 and stayed as so-called federal "national republics". Over the time of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia utilised minority groups, especially those that are believed to have a higher rate of protest potential (like Tatars and Chechens). The ethnic minority troops, according to Vorobyov, experienced higher casualty rates compared to their Slavic counterparts (Al Jazeera 2022). Soldiers with roots in economically disadvantaged regions like Buryatia, Chuvashia and Dagestan are targeted for recruitment to the Russian army and suffer disproportionately higher casualties in Ukraine (Zagrebeliy and Bekker 2023). The exploitation of minority groups helps Russia to perpetuate power imbalances and reinforces the narrative of dominance regardless of the threat of extinction of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities and their unique heritage.

The Russian elite and ordinary citizens seem to have a consensus regarding the country's neo-imperial intentions (Kushnir 2022) as the expansionist war on Ukraine heavily relies on a revanchist narrative. It is rooted in the colonial belief of Russia's civilizing mission that gives the right to expand its cultural and territorial space (Feinberg et al. 2024, 28).

The Russian colonization of Ukraine is in many ways based on the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony (Ali 2015; Gramsci 2011), as Russia manifested its cultural dominance through the imposition of the Russian language, culture, and political structures, limiting freedom of movement on Ukrainian territory, suppressing the Ukrainian language, and marginalizing national identity of Ukrainians. Russia, in its "White" and "Red" avatars extended control beyond physical domination to the realm of cultural production and representation, where Ukrainian achievements were

subsumed under the umbrella of Russian or Soviet identity, erasing their distinct cultural heritage (Rus' – Russia, Kyiv – Russian city). Russia marginalized everything that would contradict the image of "provincial", "rustic" (Riabchuk 2014, 19), or even *oriental* (Said 1988) Ukraine.

Badior (2022) highlights that Ukrainian cultural and scientific achievements – the same as Estonian, Azerbaijani, or Yakut – were seen as those that belonged to the Empire and, later, to the Soviet Union; and this line continued even after 1991, when Russia "inherited the rights" to label the most important physical and symbolic Soviet heritage as its own.

For sure, Ukraine's colonial experience could be argued from the racial point of view, if it is understood in the sense of drastic differences in skin colour or other aspects of physical appearance with the titular nation. Even though throughout history the population of Ukraine was predominantly white, we could also see some similarities in attitudes towards ethnic Ukrainians and other colonized people. Riabchuk (2022, 49) refers to Frantz Fanon's famous book "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) when describing the inferior position of Ukrainians in empires. He emphasizes that the Ukrainian language was Ukrainian's "black skin" and was used as a marker of subjugation and belonging to a disadvantaged group.

In the Russian Empire, the use of "wrong language" (i.e., "the Ukrainian language") was setting people within the subordinate framework of a rural class of serfs (kripaks). Later, in the Soviet Union, it was embodied in a sense of inferiority of what Riabchuk (2022, 49) calls the "*kolhoz slaves*" or collective farm labourers. Stalin's regime's suspicion of Ukrainian villagers' disloyalty led to the stigmatization, exploitation, and imprisonment of people in rural areas. Same as in Western colonies, most of the Ukrainians in the Soviet Union received meagre compensation, if any, and lacked identification documents or freedom of movement. The opportunities for escape were limited to the *propiska* system e.g., internal visa, which needed to be acquired when leaving the rural area, long after the Soviet population had been granted internal passports.

However, a crucial distinction from Western-type colonization existed in Ukraine's case. Any Ukrainian who successfully transitioned from the underprivileged rural regions i.e., internal colonies, to the more advanced urban centres had the opportunity to shed their stigmatised language and became *"white"* at least in the second generation (Riabchuk 2022, 49).

The process of "passing for white," i.e., assimilation into the dominant Russian culture included the rejection of the native language and language-connected identity, cultivation of contempt for their own Ukrainian past, which often included the change of the name or surname to look and sound more "urban", hence Russian. These processes were accomplished by the constant psychological trauma of their inferiority of being a "*former black*", i.e., a "*former Ukrainophone*" trying to keep up by being "almost the same as being Russian" (Moore 2001, 114), but at the same time being ashamed of their own rural and "uncultured" relatives.

The escape from the fixed social status during the Russian Empire and the chance to "pass for white" during the Soviet time was the very core idea of the place that is now known as Donbas. Both empires were inclusive enough to engage the most active Ukrainians in the imperial project. Disappearing in the "melting pot" of the massive Soviet industrial construction sites quickly emerged as the foot-worn path for those seeking to "wash away" their unprivileged languages and cultures in the limbo of hard labour and russification. For sure, such "dress code" can be often heard as the beginning of a family story of every second modern citizen of the Donbas region. These conditions were often seen as passable and were perceived as an opportunity and a form of relative freedom.

The following chapter delves into the historical and cultural development of the Donbas' unique identity features shaped by complex socio-political dynamics and enduring colonization.

The Ukrainian? The Border? The Imperial? The Local? – Explosive identity Fusion in Donbas

The Wild Fields[5], which covered the territory of modern Donbas, were sparsely populated, yet multicultural lands served as buffer between the Western and Eastern worlds (Shcherbak 2004).

They accommodated various ethnic groups, including Krymchaks, Nogais, Crimean Tatars, and Ukrainians (Yakubova 2015, 174). The harsh environment of the steppe became the place of freedom for thousands of Ukrainian peasants escaping the corvee in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Yakubova 2015, 174; Yakovenko 1997; Kuromiya 2003, 30).

These spontaneous settlements were especially active after the establishment of the Cossack state – *Sich*, making Wild Fields an intersection of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures (Plokhy 2015). Emerging in a complex fusion of ethnicities, religions, and traditions, a *borderland factor* (Sukhomlinov 2008, 2) became the first key element that shaped the identity of people originating from Eastern Ukraine, and the lands of Donbas-to-be. Intertwined with the cult of freedom, attachment to the land, and the brutal nature of Cossackdom, this identity offered compliance to changes in administrative borders and economic landscapes, often resisting the influence of dominant ideologies while fostering the formation of hybrid and alternative identity models (Kryvytska 2017, 294).

The ominous Treaty of Pereiaslav[6] (Magosci 2010, 230-236) marked the end of this freedom as the Cossack state merged into the Russian Empire. Under Catherine II, the Russian Empire transformed the region into "Novorossiya", erasing indigenous memory and imposing imperial control. The renaming of settlements and the arrival of new colonists (like Greeks, Germans, Serbs, and Hungarians) further reshaped the cultural landscape (Bohulenko et al. 2010). The Ukrainians continued to arrive in mass as they were seeking unoccupied land because, in traditional Ukrainian inhabited territories, it was becoming scarce (Pashina 1997). This struggle was employed by the Russian Empire as a strategy for consolidation, which later became the core of the Russian-Ukrainian ethnic conglomerate guided by the principles of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality". However, the Russian colonial dominance marginalized Ukrainians and restricted their influence in the socio-economic and socio-political trajectory of the region's development. The local elite was almost non-existent (Yakubova 2015, 10), confining Ukrainians to rural communities and limiting their impact on the lands' future despite numerical prevalence (Pashina 1997).

Rapid industrialization and urban development in Donbas equally attracted workers from bordering communities and from far away seeking better living conditions or profit (Hayko and Biletskiy 2022).

The enforcement of the Russian language in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coupled with the decline of agricultural activities due to the exploration of salt and coal mining, played a central role in fixing subordinate positions and the gradual russification of all non-Russian populations. None of the other languages used in Donbas could compete with it, as Russian has become the language of educational institutions, science, the press, and the "mainstream culture" (Prybitkova 2011). Despite being limited to work or service contexts at first, the Russian language (and hence Russian speakers) acquired an even more prevalent status. The languages of the remaining ethnic communities were slowly pushed to the periphery of everyday use (Yakubova 2015, 178) and their cultures got a strong stigma of inferiority. Under such circumstances, the Ukrainian cultural and lingual identity could only continue its development in Donbas spontaneously and intuitively, while the Russian identity was predominantly reinforced through the political structures (Kuzio 2015).

The emerging conditions forced the local population into a mode of mimicry while keeping the element of their traditions in private, as accepting the Russian language and cultural superiority became a matter of survival on the one hand and reaching ambitions on the other. Such mimicry has become a basis for the second key feature of Donbas' identity – its *malleability*.

Emerging as autonomous units numerous workers' settlements of Donbas were almost entirely governed by associated enterprises and their residents showed little interest in the world around them. The physical burden, high rate of migration and living conditions prevailed over social and political intentions coming from Moscow and Kyiv, during the Russian Revolution, the rise and fall of Ukraine's independence within Ukraine People's Republic (1918-1922) and the establishment of the Soviet Union (Kuromiya 2003, 58).

The Soviet policy of *nativization/ukrainization (korenizatsiya)* aimed to attract and engage the essence of the newly formed Soviet Republics such as the peasantry and the nationally oriented elite, to involve them in the construction of the Soviet project. Predominantly Russian-speaking cities of Donbas revived their Ukrainian footprint and national consciousness through literature and theatre (Mace 1983, 11-12). The booming cultural renaissance caught the Soviet leadership by surprise and was quickly suppressed by making nationalism a punishable offence (Martin 1998). The Holodomor, terror, and deportations altered the demographic composition, eliminating Ukrainian culture and other ethnic identities (Kotihorenko 2008; Pohl 2001; Nikolskiy et al. 2005).

In the interwar and post-World War II period, Donbas became a testing ground for the "Theory of the struggle between two cultures", portraying Ukrainian culture as primitive and hindering modernization, while Russian culture was deemed progressive, aligning with the proletariat and urbanization (Parakhina 2012). As in other cases of colonization, the proclamation of the significance of the Russian culture was nothing more in its essence but an attempt at assimilation (Bojcun 2021).

Despite the severe russification and anti-national trajectory of Donbas' development, the region was a birthplace for numerous notable Ukrainian writers and activists. Key Ukrainian figures, such as Vasil Stus, Volodymyr Sosura, Ivan Svitlichniy, and others emerged as prominent advocates for the rights of Ukrainian identity, language, culture, and self-determination, particularly during the late 50s and 60s[7]. They protested the teaching of Ukrainian as a foreign or facultative language course in schools, as well as the prohibition of its use in professional institutions and universities (Kuromiya 2003, 466). Unfortunately, the average resident of Donbas was securely shielded from the *"nationally obsessed"*. The term of popular Russian chauvinistic discourse alluded to the quasi-medical formula "sexually obsessed" (*seksualno ozabochennyi*) and was used to label the Ukrainian activists in the official press at the time (Ryabchuk 2010, 9).

The village, once the core of ethnic culture, was pushed aside, while cities in Donbas became migration hubs, overshadowing the once-vital villages (Yakubova 2015, 22; Kuromiya 2003, 367; 447). The proletarian internationalism in the late Soviet Union was almost a reality in Donbas, and its dynamic and diverse population embraced the Soviet myth of a supranational community (Soviet Census 1989; Geller 1988). By internalizing the oppression of the Soviet government (Freire 2005), the people of Donbas seem to become the showcase of the triumph of Soviet colonisation.

Despite the Soviet leadership's attempt to create a homogeneous "Homo Sovieticus," such experiments had unexpected side effects on the population. Locals valued the people who originated from the region and viewed this fact as more important than being Russian, Ukrainian, or any other (Lieven 1999). In Donbas, identity has broken up its traditional ties to ethnicity and connection to a particular state and evolved into local and economic factors. These factors are derived from complex networks where people's sense of self and belonging is shaped by their economic roles and identification with professional communities. This laid the foundation for the third element of Donbas' identity *"being native"* to the land and the working community. "Being native" also served the myth of superiority and *exceptional self-sacrifice* of the Donbas people for the prosperity of the USSR which became another key marker of Donbas' identity (Zimmer 2007).

The collapse of heavy industry in the late 1980s, coupled with the Soviet Union's fall and crises in independent Ukraine, created an unfavourable socio-cultural landscape in Modern Donbas. The region where most of its population consisted of second and third-generation migrants (Momryk 2011) disconnected from their cultural roots, continued its drift within the imperial discourse.

A short spike of interest in Ukrainian state-building and cooperation with the People's Movement of Ukraine during the miners' strikes in 1989-90 was soon over. The main reason for this disenchantment was that the primary demand of these strikes was to preserve and improve the quality of life, salaries, and working conditions of miners, rather than advocating for the independence of Ukraine (Kapiani 2011).

From the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty to the outbreak of the war in 2014 and until now Donbas remains in an epicentre of heated discussions within Ukrainian historical and political

communities (Tolz 1998; Bevz 2015; Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020). Over the last two decades, Ukraine has tried to formulate a comprehensive unified strategy for national identity, which would overbridge local cultural and historical differences, and simultaneously address its colonial past in the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Soviet Empires. After centuries of oppression and division, the need for a common national identity to foster a sense of belonging and unity within the territory of modern Ukraine (Williams and Smith 1983, 504-505) was crucial for securing the future of the country. Nevertheless, this has proven to be a considerable challenge in the East of Ukraine, and especially in Donbas.

In the state of crisis, when the Soviet symbols collapsed and the identity vacuum appeared with the lack of a unifying ideology (Armstrong 1963), the key elements that once formed the identity of Donbas also contributed to its marginalization, creating a strong opposition between "us" (people of Donbas) versus "them" (Ukraine, Ukrainian government, and the new order). This became a major roadblock on the way to building a new pro-Ukrainian identity in the region (Matveeva 2017). In a short time, such a "marginal effect" of Donbas (Vermenych 2018, 32) contributed to their identity being rebuilt around a nostalgic memory of Soviet times (Kuzio 2017). A highly russified population trapped in the past glory of the region's industrial achievement (Zimmer 2007, 112), became less engaged with the evolving state and more perceptive towards Russian propaganda that leveraged the concepts of "eternal brotherhood" and "one people" (Kolstø 2023, 2).

The subsequent chapter delves into the mechanisms through which Russia reasserted its political and ideological dominance over Donbas.

Home Alone, or How the Lack of a Unifying Strategy in Ukraine Paved the Way to the Re-establishment of Russian Colonial Rule in Donbas

The first decades of independence, with their limited financial and skilled resources to navigate the state's economy, corruption, oligarchs, and lack of the consequent governmental tradition have led to political and economic instability in Ukraine. The declaration of Ukraine's independence in 1991 led to the decline of colonial rule and marked a significant shift from Soviet myth (Magosci 2010) to nation-oriented self-discovering narratives in Ukrainian public discourse and everyday life. The historical figures that were either appropriated or banned during the Soviet times have become the new pillars of national identity (Kuzio 2019, 302). Concurrently, the dynamic interplay between the revived Ukrainian and instilled Russian identities remained a shaping element of the country's development trajectory. The census of 2001 showed that Ukrainian ethnicity and identity sustained statistical superiority despite the numerous russification attempts in the past two centuries (Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 571). The majority of Ukrainians explicitly identified themselves with an independent pro-European state (Kotihorenko 2008). In this context, the continuous decline of Donbas and its historical orientation towards Moscow held profound significance for Russia. The situation in the Donbas region, both in terms of reviving its Ukrainian identity and the question of state sovereignty, remained one of the most sensitive, as the issue of mixed identity with the strong regional attachment among residents became even stronger in times of turbulence. Its fluidity and looseness, derived from the terror and oppression of the past, became a serious challenge for all nationally oriented programs over the years of Ukraine's independence. The introduction of the Ukrainian language and the gradual process of decommunization as a step towards Ukrainization in schools and official institutions were perceived partly as controversial, and partly indifferent, as the Russian language continued to be the main language of communication in Donbas' habitus (Ukrainian Census 2001).

While Ukraine was seeking (not always successfully) a way to reconnect with its national past and leaned towards the European future (Ilnytzkyj 2003), Russia, already a former colonial power, grappled with a series of ideological crises. Russians struggled to build a new cohesive identity that was previously defined through opposition to the Ukrainian and Western ones (Tolz 1998; Kolstø 2023, 10). The revival of Russian nationalist discourse, inspired by the works of Ilyin and Dugin,

rebirthed the imperative of dominance and the need for revanche and re-establishing *the sphere of Russian interest* stretched all over the post-soviet space, but foremost over Ukraine (Shekhovtsov 2018). Donbas, with its Soviet-colonial identity, stood as a potential starting point for the reabsorption of this former colony.

People in Donbas were distant from the Ukrainian nation-building and continued to perceive themselves, in their hearts and minds, as ordinary Soviet citizens (Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 537) originating from a territory crucial for the empire. The new political, economic, and cultural freedoms had little practical value and felt unfamiliar and demeaning to people who used to sell them for their prosperity and respect (Abibok 2022). The harsh economic state of Ukraine cannot guarantee a sharp vision of the future that the metropolis used to give by default (Sanborn 2014, 229-231).

Many cities in Donbas are characterized by a single dominant industry, and its decline inevitably led to a deterioration of the social and demographic situation, as numerous enterprises faced bankruptcy and closure, initiating the delayed process of deindustrialization in the region (Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 523). A significant outflow of the population from the cities of Donbas during the first two decades of Ukraine's independence resulted in profound challenges in both: the industrial and socio-humanitarian spheres, which would later become one of the central arguments for the war in the East of Ukraine in 2014 (Prybitkova 2011, 107). *Multi-vector policy*[8] during Leonid Kuchma's presidency in relations with Europe and Russia did not contribute to economic stability and the construction of a unified nation (Vitriak 2019).

A considerable number of Donbas residents ended up looking for a job in Russian cities, especially in Saint-Petersburg and Moscow. In these circumstances, the perception of Russia was primarily shaped through the lens of these two cities, which embodied wealth, prosperity, advancement, and opportunities (Zabolotskiy 2000). The choice to go to Russia seemed to be predefined and natural, as Russia continuously invested in maintaining the status of a metropolis in the eyes of the former Soviet citizens.

Estranged from their own people and the state, residents of Donbas continued to navigate the ideological framework of the colony. Rarely did individuals from Donbas seek employment in other regions of Ukraine, influenced by the internalized negative stereotypes and biases about fellow Ukrainians perpetuated by the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, in return, the negative stereotypes about *Donbasovtsi* (people from Donbas) have begun to form in the other parts of Ukraine.

The introduction of satellite television brought Russian music and TV channels to almost every family in Donbas making *"older brother*[9]*"* even closer. Captivating laid-back Russian-speaking television had all sorts of programs and shows tailored for post-Soviet citizens, featuring its chauvinistic and easily accessible humour, which became an absolute favourite compared to Ukrainian bi-lingual television (Kralyk 2016). Aside from football, any other cultural pastime in Donbas played a secondary role for the residents and state. Despite the numerous theatres and operas, museums and music halls; music, and cultural life continued to be imported from Russia and were perceived as more valuable and interesting, but also as something more common. Ukrainian music and arts were certainly present but existed in parallel and lacked equal value compared to Russian.

The economic factor continued to be the essence of Donbas and one of the main aspects of understanding the dynamics of the war in the East (Saradzhyan 2022). The export-oriented extracting economy has also been a key element, transitioned by default from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union and continued, since Ukraine's independence, imprinting a colonial economy, a trend, inherited from the region's past (Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 523).

The industrial landscape of Donbas was originally structured to export products and raw materials within the former Soviet Union, particularly to Russia. This economic arrangement led to a significant portion of foreign investments flowing exclusively from Russian capital (Kotihorenko 2008). Despite the gradual decline of Donbas's industries and the reduced need for such extensive operations, Ukraine struggled to maintain the sector and effectively communicate

the economic realities to the local population. Furthermore, the region's economic security remained closely tied to Russia, as many key industries, such as machine-building and coal mining, were heavily reliant on Russian trade. This dependency played a crucial role in fostering a "pro-Russian" orientation in the region, as residents viewed maintaining these economic ties as essential to their livelihoods (Zhukov 2015, 4-5). Thus, the working class in Donbas continued to picture itself as the "breadwinner" and fostered the attitude that Ukraine did not appreciate their contributions and efforts. In such circumstances, Russia could easily secure the region within "the sphere of its national interests".

The economic significance of Donbas (real and imagined) evolved as a decisive political force shaping the country's political power landscape. The local electorate represented a significant portion of the nationwide electoral landscape and soon became the stronghold of the Party of Regions[10], pushing forward the so-called issue of protecting the rights of Russians and Russian speakers.

The "Orange Revolution" of 2003-2004 became the first major trigger for Russian propaganda in Donbas (Kolstø 2023, 2) which saw a national awakening in Ukraine as a threat to its own nationalist and imperial intentions (Kuzio 2019, 303). The rise of the Ukrainian nation and idea would cripple the Russian nationalistic ideas of dominancy embodied in a formula of "two branches of a single people" (Kholmogorov 2006) and would eventually raise the question of other nations, which are waiting for the chance, within the large body of modern Russia. Instead, in Russia's view as presented by notorious Russian propagandist Yegor Kholmogorov, the people of Ukraine should accept that the Ukrainian self was artificially constructed to diminish Russia and they should assist in reviving and protecting the "Great Russia" (2006, 12).

Viktor Yanukovych, a leader of the Russia-backed "Party of Regions", a former criminal, and oligarch who originated from Donbas intended to become the president of Ukraine in 2003. Through a manipulated election his presidency was supposed to speed up reconnection with Russia. The concept of "two Ukraines"[11]– a political "know-how" of the Party of Region led by Yanukovych, was aggressively propagated among Donbas voters and garnered substantial support from the regional community (Riabchuk 2001; Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 547). This concept was framed in a way suggesting that it was not Donbas in need of integration into the broader Ukrainian project; instead, it pointed out the significance of Donbas, and that it should rather integrate the whole of Ukraine into itself (Yakubova 2015, 24-25).

The conflict between "Two Ukraines" was nothing other than the contested duality of Donbas' identity skilfully manipulated against the rest of Ukraine. The election campaign strategically focused on the electorate of Eastern Ukraine leveraging nostalgic sentiments toward the Soviet Union, reviving fears of Bandera (leader of the organization of Ukrainian nationalists) and a ban on the Russian language (Matveeva 2017, 414; Giuliano 2018; Malko 2019).

Numerous falsifications were disseminated through regional and Russian mass media, including a map of Ukraine, which categorized Ukrainians into three types and depicted Ukrainians from the East as racially inferior (Semenova 2023). Viktor Yushchenko, Yanukovych's main opponent, and the leader of the pro-European vector of Ukraine's development was portrayed as the leader of the "orange plague", "orange russophobe", "American spy", "radical nationalist" and "colonist" (We are Ukraine 2023). It was physically dangerous to go out with any orange element of the outfit in Donbas at that time since the degree of tension and aggression in society was so high.

Despite the triumph of the Orange Revolution, Ukraine became polarized within the East/West dichotomy (Shevel 2018), so the "pro-Russian" potential of the East of Ukraine, especially Donbas, was revealed (Sich 2021). The inherent ethnocultural differences in various regions were transformed into weapons of political power and the political discourse adopted the narratives of disengagement. All sorts of political activities have become civilizational (Kulchitskiy and Yakubova 2020, 585). The provoked conflict between "Two Ukraines" became not only the battle of highly politicized national visions (Ukrainian and Russian) but also a conflict between two

identities: one focused on the Ukrainian nation and its place in a globalized world; and the other colonial in its essence.

The period between Maidans[12] (2004-2013) highlighted the absence of national discourse in shaping the identity of Donbas residents, which was worsened by the lack of historical figures and monuments that were not tied to the Soviet past in the minds of the region's population (Yakubova 2015). Reluctance to seek a Ukrainian and pro-European orientation of the development, and finally suspicion towards the Ukrainian language, especially among the older generation, has given rise to revanchist sentiments in the region.

The use of the Ukrainian language, or in fact the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine, continued to be another source of tension. The protection of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine was the alleged reason for the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 (Matveeva 2017; TASS 2021), but this narrative was first employed for the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas (The Washington Post 2014; Kuzio 2019). The Russian-speaking younger population had no issue with using the Ukrainian language in social and administrative contexts, and as well didn't feel they would be discriminated against for speaking Russian (Razumkov Centre 2019, 203). However, Russian propaganda did a lot to make it viable and even absurd stating that the Ukrainian government wanted to prevent people from even *thinking* in Russian (Kabanen 2021, 27). Special nationalist battalions from the West of Ukraine were alleged to be sent to eliminate Russian speakers so there was a severe fear among the older generation relying on the Russian language as the core of identity (Kuzio 2015, 439; Giuliano 2018, 12)

The threat that was supposedly coming from the Ukrainian state was all time amplified in Russian media widely broadcasted in Donbas. To anchor the region within the imperial sphere of influence, Russia employed a central marker of Donbas identity portraying the region as *"the breadwinner"* and *"the only working population of the country"* (Giuliano 2018) while the rest of Ukraine, for the money sent from "America" protests on Maidan (Yermolayeva and Churanova 2023).

Recognizing that Soviet colonization replaced the core of self-identification of Donbas residents with a surrogate working-class identity rooted in exceptionalism and anti-elite sentiments, Russia exploited it to re-subjugate Donbas and re-establish its own colonial rule over the region. It did not take much, because, in contrast, development within the paradigm of the Ukrainian state would mean a sequence of challenging reforms and the necessity to acknowledge the defeat of this exceptionalism as a self-definition of the region. The prolonged life of this exceptionalism sustained on the affirmations of the revival of past prosperity united under the *watchful eye* and the *strong hand* (Hrabovskiy 2013). In contrast, Ukraine was labelled in Russian media as an "artificially constructed", "Puppet of the West" or "failed state" that has no future (Matveeva 2017; Kuzio 2019).

Russia spotted and seeded, in the minds of many Donbas residents, with the help of media and politicians, the idea that Ukraine failed to appreciate the economic contributions of Donbas (Giuliano 2018, 16), ignoring the reality that most mines and industrial enterprises have been heavily subsidised (Starychenko and Fokina 2014). In the next chapter, we will explore how Russia benefited from establishing its neo-colonial rule over Donbas and examine its impact on the identity of the people residing in the occupied territories.

The Grey Zone's Identity: Living in Donbas Under Occupation

The political consequences of the Revolution of Dignity[13] in 2013-2014, Yanukovych's escape, and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea dramatically increased social friction in Ukraine. In March 2014, the anti-Maidan movement which supported the pro-Russian trajectory in Ukraine's development, sparked an anti-government uprising throughout the East of Ukraine, with an epicentre in the Donbas region (Grytsenko 2014).

Backed by Russian "curators" like Igor Girkin[14], separatists seized municipal government buildings in various cities including administrative centres and proclaimed so-called "independent

states" of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in April 2014. The establishment of the "republics" marked a critical phase in Russia's comprehensive strategy of political, economic, cultural, and military control, reflecting its broader neo-colonial ambitions. Operating under the guise of local autonomy these quasi-states are fully controlled by Moscow, ensuring that Russian interests prevail. This control strengthens Russia's political dominance and effectively constitutes a de facto occupation. As a result, many Donbas residents with pro-Ukrainian, or even pro-local positions faced unprecedented levels of violence from Russia's controlled separatists (UN 2020; Freedom House 2017).

In the years following 2014, numerous ceasefires and the signing of the Minsk Accords the frontline eventually stabilized making the protracted conflict in the Donbas even more complex. The "status quo", passportisation, and Russia's control over the "republics" created a self-reinforcing cycle of polarization. Donbas residents legitimized separatist rule due to perceived threats from Ukraine, setting a dangerous precedent that questioned Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty (Lennon and Adams 2019, 661).

By establishing its neo-colonial rule over Donbas Russia highly benefited from this stance. Unlike other colonial powers worldwide, it extracted not just raw materials, but the ideological source of power, to support its imperial agenda (Feinburg et al. 2024, 5) both domestically and internationally.

Despite the anticipated "independence" the occupied territories of Donbas faced a drastic economic crisis, which led to the closure of most of the coal mines and the demolition of heavy industry (Skhidna pravozakhysna hrupa 2022). The obvious self-inconsistency of the occupied territories increased the levels of frustration, which was effectively exploited by Russia. Mirroring classic colonial exploitation patterns, Russia supplies Donbas with essential goods, financial aid, and logistical support, creating an economic dependency that binds the local economies to the Kremlin. This dependency limits the monetary sovereignty of Donbas and integrates it more closely with the Russian economy, ensuring that any economic activity benefits Russia first and foremost. Locals' disillusionment with reality was exploited to foster an extreme identity centred around blaming Ukraine for the inefficiencies of the republics.

Under the pretext of an "endangered fatherland", Ukrainian media sources were banned in "the republics" and strict censorship was enforced to control information and foster hostility among the local population. In contrast, the broadcasting of Russian and separatist-owned media was heavily promoted to impose Russian culture, language, and identity (Trebor 2014). These cultural policies were designed to assimilate the local population into Russian cultural norms, weakening the Ukrainian national identity and making the idea of reintegration with Ukraine less appealing. The severe fire of propaganda paved the way for poorly fabricated news, including viral fakes like the "crucified boy of Sloviansk" and the "Ukrainian government promised a piece of land and two slaves to every Ukrainian soldier fighting in Donbas" (StopFake 2014). The simple lie spread by Russian puppet regimes may appear ridiculous to believe; however, the emotional appeal embedded within these narratives, combined with constant pressure, and lack of critical thinking has successfully seeded a deep mistrust, support for separatist regimes and negative attitude towards Ukraine.

Over the past 10 years, Russia through its local representatives in the "republics" invested heavily in misinformation among pensioners and the working-age population, and more importantly, they sought to raise a new generation of loyal citizens (Abibok 2018, 5). Through educational indoctrination built around the historical ties with Russia and the anti-Ukrainian and anti-West sentiments, "republics" aimed to cultivate a distinct identity of Donbas (Lennon and Adams 2019; Gerstein 2020) that would internally separate a new generation from the rest of Ukraine, and eternally bind them to the "Russkii mir" (*Russian world*) (Barbieri 2023, 5-6). Various paramilitary clubs and local branches of Yunarmia (*Young army*) are actively training children and teenagers, not only to secure the division between Donbas and Ukraine in the minds of the

youngsters raised in the "republics", but also to secure preparedness to sacrifice their lives defending "DPR" and "LPR", but more importantly Russia.

Just a couple of days before launching a full-scale invasion into Ukraine, Russia formally recognized the independence of the self-proclaimed republics, and the separatist governments began mobilization of the entire military-age population of men without any exceptions. Soon, the mobilisation in the occupied territories turned into the kidnapping of men on the streets (Skhidna pravozakhysna hrupa 2023) who were later sent to the frontline without any food, ammunition, and training as "cannon fodder". Those who were captured alive on the battlefield by the Ukrainian Armed Forces often were not able to explain what they were fighting for and got nostalgic about the times when "we peacefully lived in Ukraine" (Zolkin 2022, 9:34). Meanwhile, the others are stacked in trenches and forced to fight against their countrymen by Russian anti-retreat units until the end.

Conclusion

The colonial legacy haunted Donbas for a long time, shaping its social, economic, and political landscape for generations. This legacy based on extraction and exploitation left deep trauma of dependency on the collective identity in the region. Since the re-establishment of the Ukrainian state, the Donbas was torn between the colonial "dream" of being the strategic asset of an empire and the reality of being part of an independent Ukraine and going through the painful "awakening" from this illusion.

Unwillingness to admit the high price paid by people for trading their own identities for living the Soviet dream in a "melting pot" of nations had a profound impact and ultimately paved the way to war, turning Donbas into a stepping stone for Russia's ambition to conquer all of Ukraine. Russia exploited this dilemma to revive a deeply ingrained anti-Ukrainian mentality imposed by Russian colonial structures in the minds of the people of Donbas.

I remember in May 2014, my grandmother called me to say that she was afraid that once the Ukrainian Armed Forces were back, they would build a barbed wire wall around the Donbas, and everybody would lose the freedom of choice and movement – a narrative she had heard over the separatist-controlled radio. She believed that once *"our boys"* (i.e., separatists) solidified in the region, life would return to "normal" and Donbas would prosper and become important once again, as it was when she was young, when it was part of the USSR.

The imagined wall and limitations she was talking about became a reality in many senses. Even now, when this wall got a crack, I can see that my compatriots from Donbas have undergone a profound transformation and evolved into something very different.

Over the time of separation, the rest of Ukraine made what is now perceived by the Ukrainian establishment and media as a "civilizational escape" into the Western World (UI Future 2022), while occupied territories fastened in its colonial past of being a testing ground for the ideas of the "Russian world".

The war in Donbas is proof that old problems stick around and fixing them is not easy. Ironically, once again in its history, Donbas became a melting pot not only for Ukrainians from all over the country but also for international volunteer fighters driven to defend the future of Europe in these bloodlands.

Once shaped by the merciless forces of colonization, the disfigured identity of the Donbas people must cease to be constructed through the coal mines and factories, "labour heroes" and "miners' pride". The identity, shrunk to one's home address and profession, must break free from the grip of historical traumas. There should not be a place for "two Ukraines", "Russian-speaking Donbas" and "a struggle between two cultures". Despite all the social negativity and sometimes the natural reaction of disbelief and rejection, Donbas needs to find a place in the common identity of the Ukrainian nation.

We need to acknowledge that those with colonized minds are at the forefront of the colonial war, and it's crucial to develop a nuanced and empathetic approach to address it. Once the war is over,

Ukraine would need to focus on the decolonization of the minds of Donbas residents to deprive Russia of this valuable political asset and enhance future reconciliation processes. Governmental agencies and NGOs would need to step up to overcome the fear inspired by Russia and focus on debunking the propaganda. The biased attitudes towards Ukraine in Donbas should be addressed by establishing two-way communication focusing on the essential needs of locals, the promise of transitional justice and amnesty.

Many times, back home, I was passing by Rosa Luxembourg Street and saw the famous banner proclaiming: "The Sun of Ukraine rises from the Donbas" a heart-warming remembrance for every former Donetsk resident. Is it not the essence of Donbas' identity encapsulated in this flashback where the "Sun of Ukraine" is placed on the street named after one of the most prominent communists?

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Notes

1 Russian contemporary patriotic song was written by singer Yaroslav Dronov - stage name" Shaman". In his own words, the song was dedicated to Russian war heroes of the Great Patriotic War, however, since it was released after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it became associated with "Special military operation".

2 "Ruscism"- derived from the words "Russian" and "fascism" a term used by various scholars, politicians, and publicists to define the political ideology and societal behaviours of the Russian state during Vladimir Putin's leadership.

3 Traditional Ukrainian carnival-type pre-Christmas celebration of pagan origin.

4 "*Mental decolonization*" refers to the process of freeing one's thoughts, perceptions, and identity from the lingering effects of colonization. Colonization not only involves the occupation of land and resources but also imposes cultural, psychological, and ideological dominance over the colonized. This concept was first extensively discussed by Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth (1963), where he emphasized that true liberation from colonial rule requires both a physical and mental break from the colonizer's control. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o further elaborates on the role of language and culture in this process in Decolonising the Mind (1986), where he stresses that the colonizer's language and cultural dominance can undermine the colonized people's identity. He advocates for a return to native languages and cultural practices as a key step toward reclaiming mental freedom.

5 "Dyke Pole" in Ukrainian, is the historical name that first appeared in Polish-Lithuanian documents and was used to demarcate and sparsely populated Black Sea steppes and the Siverskyi Donets River, which covers the territory of modern-day Donbas region of Ukraine.

6 The Treaty of Pereyaslav, signed in 1654 initially seemed to offer Ukraine protection and autonomy under the suzerainty of the Russian tsar, but the treaty's terms led to a gradual erosion of Ukrainian sovereignty and autonomy, and Russia eventually took control over Ukrainian territories.

7 The Sixtiers *(Shistdesiatnyky)* - "People of the 60s" were a new generation of the Soviet Intelligentsia with a liberal and anti-totalitarian worldview, especially active in the USSR's political life during the late 1950s and 1960s.

8 A policy, implemented during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994 to 2005), aimed at maintaining a balance in Ukraine's foreign relations. Its primary focus was on navigating the

relationships with the United States, the European Union, and Russia to ensure the neutral status of Ukraine in relationships with the Western world and Russia.

9 Popular Russian narrative, highlighting the unity of three "brotherhood" nations: "Russian", "Ukrainian" and "Belorussian". Russian brother is considered to be the eldest, hence dominant.

10 Party of the Regions – a pro-Russian political party in Ukraine, that was the leading party in Ukraine's parliament from 2006 to 2014 (until its former leader, Viktor Yanukovych, fled the country to Russia).

11 A political construct used by Russian propaganda, picturing an imaginal divide of Ukraine between "normal" Russian-speaking Ukraine that's in an orbit of Russian interests and "artificial" Western Ukraine "constructed" by Western influences on culture and language to foster anti-Russia sentiments.

12 The period between 2004's "Orange Revolution" to the "Revolution of Dignity" in 2013, both arising in opposition to Yanukovych and his anti-democratic course for the country's development.

13 The Revolution of Dignity was a large-scale uprising by Ukrainians against a corrupt government leaning towards Russia, which led to the overthrow of the president, the return of democracy, and the onset of 2014.

14 Igor Strelov-Girkin - former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer who played a key role in the annexation of Crimea, and then in the Donbas War. He is responsible for numerous war crimes, the siege of Sloviansk and the downing of the MH-17 civil plane.

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