

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279179153>

Eastern Ukraine Has Been a Mafia State for Years. Can Kiev Break the Cycle of Violence?

Article *in* New republic (New York, N.Y.) · June 2014

CITATION

1

READS

51

1 author:



[Piotr H Kosicki](#)

University of Maryland, College Park

45 PUBLICATIONS 71 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

NEW REPUBLIC



JUNE 5, 2014

Eastern Ukraine Has Been a Mafia State for Years. Can Kiev Break the Cycle of Violence?

By Piotr H. Kosicki and Oksana Nesterenko

Photo: VIKTOR DRACHEV/AFP/Getty Images

Separatists? Fascists? Disguised Russian special forces? Theories have multiplied to explain who exactly the armed men who have [wrested control](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/world/europe/rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-capture-government-posts.html) [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/world/europe/rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-capture-government-posts.html] of parts of Donetsk, Luhansk (Lugansk in Russian), and other areas of eastern Ukraine from the Ukrainian state, cutting its residents off also from participation in the recent presidential elections. Very likely, martial law will follow in the region upon completion of the transfer of presidential powers to Ukraine's newly elected leader, Petro Poroshenko. The separatist forces have clearly exposed the limits of Kiev's capacity to govern, and in so doing they have acted in accordance with Russian state interests and swelled the waves of anti-state violence presently engulfing eastern and southern Ukraine.

But these facts alone do not mean that those armed men are simply Russian agents, or even Russian-trained militias. Instead, alongside Russia, the forces of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Lugansk People's Republic" serve first and foremost what we call a mafia state.

The idea itself is not new. It gained currency particularly in reference to Russia in the

wake of WikiLeaks, which disclosed the details of a January 2010 briefing by Spanish prosecutor José Grinda González—one of Europe’s top experts on organized crime—analyzing Russia as a “virtual mafia state.” One year later, British journalist Luke Harding published *Mafia State*, a memoir detailing the intimidation and Cold War spy-game-like scare tactics that he faced at the hands of Russian secret services while he was *The Guardian*’s bureau chief in Moscow, an assignment that ended when Russia denied him re-entry in 2011. In recent months, commentators have increasingly—and rightly—pointed out the need to think about Ukraine not just as a state, but also as the sum of its regions. Here the “mafia state” idea can help us to understand the events of recent months, especially the perverse phenomenon of the separatist militia-driven “people’s republics” of the Donbas. Even allowing for the distinctiveness of Soviet legal culture, “rule of law” as such was a myth in the Donbas even before the Soviet collapse. Combine might-trumps-right with the long-standing culture of anomie and graft classically described by Aleksandr Zinoviev as *Homo Sovieticus* [<http://www.amazon.com/Homo-Sovieticus-Alexander-Zinoviev/dp/0871130807>], and you can see that the mafias and “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk have been decades in the making.

Inside the 11-Story Building That's Calling Itself the People's Republic of Donetsk

Writing for *The New Republic* more than a decade ago, Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin provocatively dubbed much of the post-Soviet space “[Trashcanistan](http://scholar.princeton.edu/kotkin/files/trashkanistan.pdf)” —“a dreadful checkerboard of parasitic states and statelets, government-led extortion rackets and gangs in power, mass refugee camps, and shadow economies.” Instead of Communist Party *nomenklatura* calling the shots, a parallel power structure developed in the 1980s and 1990s in the form of a client system of black-market privateers and underworld bosses operating on a dramatic scale.

Welcome to the Donbas. The violence, political parasitism, and mafia life undergirding the region’s present chaos have been present since even before the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1991. This is how the Donbas and its neighboring Dnieper region have produced many of Ukraine’s wealthiest magnates and top national politicians, with the former group feeding the latter courtesy of post-Soviet Ukraine’s wealthiest citizen, Rinat

Akhmetov; its former presidents Viktor Yanukovych and Leonid Kuchma; and even its Orange Revolution prime minister and—until recently—Yanukovych’s political prisoner, Yulia Tymoshenko.

At a time when the disintegrating Soviet Union made overnight oligarchs out of former *nomenklatura* in a process [described](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674836808) [http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674836808] by political scientist Steven L. Solnick as “stealing the state,” the Donbas’s magnates—some criminals already under Soviet law—prevented the rule of law from emerging in the Donbas and severely limited the formation of a civil society.

If you visit today’s Donetsk, Luhansk, or Slovyansk, you can find parks, playgrounds, and cultural life. Sometimes, it is entirely possible to forget the violence that has become endemic to the region. Yet, for many in the Donbas, life is—and for decades has been—nasty, brutish, and short. Yanukovych’s electoral triumph in 2010 on the heels of the implosion of the Orange Revolution coalition papered over this state of affairs. Years before the Soviet Union collapsed, the Donbas was already a case study in failed governance, controlled by neither Kiev nor Moscow—in other words, part of Trashcanistan.

In the first decade of Ukrainian independence, the Donbas had the highest level of criminal activity in all of Ukraine. Between 1990 and 1993, total crime in the Donetsk region increased by 50 percent. In 1991 alone, the Donetsk police department fingered 2,186 criminal groups, which at that time had committed over 4,000 alleged crimes, including 33 murders, 212 robberies, 173 cases of extortion, and so on. Since 1991, the number of organized criminal groups identified by law enforcement agencies has increased steadily.

For those who grew up in post-Soviet Ukraine, Donbas was always whispered to be the place where anyone could fall victim to street shootings, where entrepreneurs refusing kickbacks to one or more local criminal groups could turn up dead. Fear in the 1990s was so widespread there that, even when official statistics reported a drop in criminal activity, harrowing anecdotes from the Donbas continued to preoccupy the whole of Ukraine.

In 2004, Oksana, one of the authors of this essay, interned for the prosecutor’s office in Kharkiv, about 180 miles from Donetsk. When she met a law student from Donetsk and

found out that his parents ran a small grocery, she asked if it was safe to run a small business there. His answer: “No—but better than in the ’90s. Today, if you refuse to pay local mafias, sure, they threaten you, your family, your property; a year ago, our car was blown up when we turned a crime boss away. But seven years ago my whole family would have been killed off one by one.”

This past winter, a Fulbright Scholar from Donetsk, during a chat over coffee with Oksana, gave an example of the violence of everyday life in Donetsk. One day, she had interrupted her lecture at the local university in mid-sentence to order her students to lie flat on the floor. She had heard shooting just outside and was afraid that stray AK-47 bullets would come flying into the class. Apparently, this was no isolated occurrence.

Any Ukrainian who has either lived in the Donbas or had relatives or friends there can offer similar examples. More than anecdotes, they attest to how organized crime dominates the cultural and social life of the region. Since its founding, the city of Donetsk—chartered in 1869 by the New Russia Company of Welsh entrepreneur John Hughes—has historically been a site of transient industrial and mining labor. The Soviet Union added penal colonies into the mix. Between 1945 and 1955 alone, about 3.5 million people arrived from all over the Soviet Union in the Donetsk region to work in the mines and factories, many as prisoners. Despite Nikita Khrushchev’s celebrated Gulag amnesties in the mid-1950s, prisoner numbers for the Donbas actually grew when he was in power in Moscow.

Recently released convicts remaining in the area as workers became fodder for an emerging criminal industry based in late-night entertainment, gambling, and trafficking. The breakthrough 2006 exposé *The Donetsk Mafia* [<http://dony07.narod.ru>] quoted Sergey Prymachuk, the chief of police between 1994 and 1998 in the Donbas city of Slovyansk, as follows: “Criminals took advantage of the fact that recently released prisoners were not in a hurry to leave the Donetsk region as long as people had money. Thus, illegal night clubs and casinos were created, while that was prohibited in the rest of the USSR. Those casinos and night clubs belonged to criminal gangs that cultivated their own territory.”

Even today, there are still 20 prisons in Donetsk and 16 in Luhansk—more than in any another region of Ukraine. As a local saying goes, “every third man in the Donetsk region is in prison, has been in prison, or will be in prison.”

Migrant populations and recently released prisoners cemented into the urban culture of Soviet Donetsk certain norms, customs, and rituals practiced in prisons and labor colonies, from an acceptance of territoriality and racket to more subtle distinguishing traits, such as tattoos, nicknames, and slang. Ukrainian criminological research shows that these norms shaped not only social and economic life, but also Donbas civic and legal cultures. Indeed, in many sectors of Donbas life, legal nihilism became prevalent.

By the 1980s, criminal practices blended in the Donbas with the social psychology of the *Homo Sovieticus*. Soviet legal practices on the periphery of the USSR had replaced rule of law with a culture of perfunctory obedience, private disdain, and social anomie. Then, Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* opened the floodgates.

At the same time, the Donbas cities grew more densely populated, and the region as a whole became more urban. Since most towns and cities were built around or near mines and quarries, already by 1966, 87 percent of the Donetsk region's population was living in urban areas, with a figure of 83 percent for the Luhansk region. One year later, Ukraine accounted for 59 percent of Soviet iron and steel production, 56 percent in coal, and 65 percent in heavy machinery and metallurgy. By 1990, miners amounted to 47 percent of the total urban Donbas population. At the same time, alcoholism and drug abuse proliferated.

The result: "Trashcanistan," which, in the post-Soviet Donbas, manifested as a mafia state. Already under Gorbachev, carceral norms began to penetrate everyday life in the Donetsk region. Prison gangs took on a visible presence in the public life of the community, in parallel with the moribund Soviet state. Towns in the Donbas acquired gangs of "watchers"—staples of Soviet labor camps, prisoners accumulating power by developing reputations for keeping order.

In this environment, neither rule of law nor civil society developed in the Donbas. As a result, the *Homo Sovieticus* never disappeared. Indeed, the rise of the mafia state perverted the *Homo Sovieticus* into a cornerstone of a society more broken than even [The Gulag Archipelago](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0061253804/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0061253804&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20&linkId=BERJS63R4NSQ4VUL) [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0061253804

/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0061253804&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20&linkId=BERJS63R4NSQ4VUL]. Firearms, strongmen, and public displays of power through violent conflict made crime not only an accepted norm, but the surest means of survival, and even status-building. The Donbas completed its

evolution from Ukraine's industrial center to its center of bloodshed.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, an incomplete and co-opted version of the free market came to a Donbas region already rife with criminal activity. The resource-rich industrial region proved understandably attractive to new generations of mafia leadership looking to cement their social and economic positions by assuming formal control over the worlds of politics and law. As a culture of might-trumps-right shaped successive generations of youth, so the Donbas coal industry hit a rough patch that led to waves of layoffs. Despite ups and downs, the overall trends have persisted: In 2013 alone, 30,000 people in the Donetsk region [joined](http://orbita.dn.ua/v-donetskoj-oblasti-vy-ros-uroven-bezrobotitsy.html) [http://orbita.dn.ua/v-donetskoj-oblasti-vy-ros-uroven-bezrobotitsy.html] the ranks of the unemployed.

Years before Viktor Yanukovich became president of independent Ukraine, he and his family were already exercising control over the Donetsk region. Ukraine under its successive post-Soviet leaders—Kravchuk, Kuchma, Yushchenko—was a failed state in the Donbas, where mafia connections pointed the surest way to survival, let alone success, in this post-Soviet rust belt territory. In response to a 1994 survey asking Ukrainians what social groups they thought played “a considerable role in state-building in Ukraine,” residents of both eastern and southern Ukraine listed the mafia “underworld” well above any other group (35.9 percent and 38.4 percent, respectively).

Many of Ukraine's most influential political and economic players have come from this region: not just the two presidents touched most directly by revolutions in Kiev's Maidan—Kuchma and Yanukovich—but also Rinat Akhmetov, Oleksandr Yefremov, Borys Kolesnikov, and the infamous “Alik Grek” (assassinated in 1995). (An exception to this tendency is Ukraine's newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, who was born outside Odessa and grew up in central Ukraine.)

Are these men responsible for the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics? And, if so, why? The billions of dollars, euros, and *hryvnie* tied up in these men's assets link them both to Russia and to Yanukovich's Party of Regions, displaced by the Maidan revolution. Memory of the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution has played a crucial role in determining the Donbas oligarchs' reactions to the events of the past six months. As they remember it, the Orange Revolution threatened their world, until the governing Orange coalition's political incompetence opened the door to Yanukovich's election to the presidency.

Political scientist Keith Darden rightly [argued](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141182/keith-darden/how-to-save-ukraine) [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141182/keith-darden/how-to-save-ukraine] in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the Maidan revolution seems threatening in the Donbas because the “relevant fact for Ukrainian politics is that power shifted in an extreme fashion from one regional base to another.” This is certainly not the first such shift since 1991, but this shift seems particularly threatening to the stakeholders of the Donbas mafia state. Yanukovych was close to the murdered underworld boss “Alik Grek,” whose successors have aligned themselves publicly with Yanukovych’s Party of Regions.

This is the heart of the Donbas mafia state. Its leaders may not speak publicly on behalf of the muddled and tragicomical people’s republics, but by and large they do not oppose these movements. They may well be providing financial support, but it is too early to say for sure who, how much, and within what constraints.

None of this can erase the fact that non-trivial numbers of Donbas residents are in the streets declaring support for Russia, the separatists, or both, while decrying the Maidan government as *banderovtsy* (World War II-era Ukrainian nationalists—a term today roughly synonymous with “fascists”). Rust-belt infrastructure, dysfunctional public works—paradoxically, these symbols of the limits of Kiev’s long-term power in the Donbas generate social support for separatism. Add to this both Russian and local propaganda, and the conditions of possibility for the “people’s republics” become clear.

Whatever the extent to which Russia is directly involved, the Donbas has been a powder keg just waiting to explode in the face of the Ukrainian state. With whom is Kiev to negotiate now? The mafia state? The “people’s republicans,” with their AK-47s? Or the retirees and Donbas mining town residents going on record on YouTube as supporting the separatists because they’re tired of only having hot water for a few hours each day?

Moscow can offer no solutions, but a solution from Kiev seems equally elusive at this point. Before eastern and southern Ukraine can accept the consequences of this year’s Maidan revolution, Kiev must break the decades-long cycle of sacrificing rule of law in those regions in a desperate attempt to maintain social peace—with the mafia state as the only real beneficiary. Martial law may help to rein in separatist violence, but it alone cannot ensure either a functioning “rule of law” or a lessening of the mafia’s grip on the residents of the Donbas.

Despite the gloom of this essay, we would like to think that Kiev can still manage to integrate the Donbas into a Ukrainian state and society that accepts the Maidan revolution. A massive influx of capital into local and regional infrastructure might be a start—as long as it bypasses the well-worn channels of mafia-controlled contractors and middlemen. No matter what, Kiev must be prepared for a long, obstacle-filled path of serious, constructive action—beyond martial law and anti-terrorism—that can break the cycle of violence in the Donbas. Otherwise, everyone loses, except for the mafia state and, possibly, Moscow.

Piotr H. Kosicki is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Maryland. Oksana Nesterenko is Associate Professor in the Yaroslav the Wise National Law Academy of Ukraine in Kharkiv.