Ukraine's Unnamed War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has its roots in the events of 2013–2014. Russia cynically termed the seditionist conflict in Crimea and Eastern Donbas a "civil war" in order to claim non-involvement. This flies in the face of evidence, but the authors argue that the social science literature on civil wars can be used help understand why no political solution was found between 2015 and 2022. The book explains how Russia, after seizing Crimea, was reacting to events it could not control and sent troops only to areas of Ukraine where it knew it would face little resistance (Eastern Donbas). Kremlin decisionmakers misunderstood the attachment of the Russian-speaking population to the Ukrainian state and also failed to anticipate that their intervention would transform Ukraine into a more cohesively "Ukrainian" polity. Drawing on Ukrainian documentary sources, this concise book explains these important developments to a non-specialist readership.

DOMINIQUE AREL is Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa. His publications include *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine* (co-edited with Blair A. Ruble, 2006). He organizes the Annual Danyliw Research Seminar on Ukraine and is Director of the Annual ASN World Convention at Columbia University.

JESSE DRISCOLL is an associate professor of political science at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California San Diego. His publications include *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge, 2015) and *Doing Global Fieldwork* (2021).

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Before the Russian Invasion of 2022

DOMINIQUE AREL
University of Ottawa

JESSE DRISCOLL
University of California San Diego

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1 A War Within the "Russian World"

For nearly twenty-five years after becoming an independent state in 1991, political order in Ukraine was based on a predictable East–West regional rotation of power.[1] Although there were moments of tension, periodic warnings that the state would "split in two" were at odds with Ukrainian political practice. The probability of political violence seemed remote. The Maidan protests, which occurred between November 2013 and February 2014, changed everything. Maidan introduced the use of politically driven violence by both state agents (the police) and protesters. A spike in lethal violence in February 2014 brought down a president, Viktor Yanukovych, with an electoral base in the East. Power shifted to an alliance of parties based in the West. For the first time, the East–West alternation of power took place outside the regular election cycle. Russia sent its military to annex Crimea. An armed conflict followed in the Donbas eastern region. The war had already claimed around 13,000 lives when Vladimir Putin made his historic decision, sometime in late 2021 or early 2022, to launch a full-scale military invasion to try to break Ukraine. This book is the story of Ukrainian politics during the 2013–2021 period, a period of adaptation to various "hybrid" Russian military interventions.

Summary of the Argument

The book considers the causes and consequences of the Donbas war of 2014–2021. In these pages, we provide empirical evidence supporting three analytical arguments. The first deals with how the war started. The

[1] In public and academic discourse, Ukraine's twenty-five *oblasts* (provinces) are generally divided into four broad regions: East, South, Center, and West. For simplicity's sake, and unless otherwise indicated, we will refer to East (East and South) and West (Center and West). The regional rotation had occurred three times in presidential elections since independence – with the election of Leonid Kuchma in 1994 (Eastern electoral base), Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 (Western electoral base), and Viktor Yanukovych in 2010 (Eastern electoral base). After 2014, both presidents (Poroshenko and Zelensky) obtained a nationwide mandate.

second relates to how the war has been fought. The third concerns why the war was so difficult to end. We argue that the dynamics of the armed conflict in Donbas were initially consistent with those of a civil war in the social science meaning of the term – not in how Russia used the term in its state propaganda – and that considering the Eastern Donbas conflict as a civil war had analytical utility in the pre-2022 war period.

Our first argument involves the proximate causes of Ukraine's war in Donbas. Our theoretical contribution is an explanation of what happens to individuals and a society in the months just before a war breaks out. The empirical contribution methodically traces the origins of the war from the violent protests on Maidan to an insurgency in Donbas that was galvanized by the Russian intervention in Crimea.

The deadly violence on Maidan caused the collapse of the central government, but not of the central levers of state power. After the president was removed by parliament, the security institutions housed in Kyiv – army and police – immediately recognized the new authorities that had backed Maidan as legitimate claimants to political power. Outside of the capital, however, the loyalty of security officers varied according to regions. State capacity had faltered in the Ukrainian West prior to the resolution of Maidan, when protesters stormed police stations and established impromptu checkpoints, but order was quickly restored after the regime change. The situation was ominously different in the East, the electoral base of the ousted regime.

In the Crimean peninsula, local elites quickly coordinated on sedition, mediated and facilitated by prewar state institutions. More than two-thirds of government officials, civil servants, security officers, and army personnel defected to the Russian state. As a result, Russia captured an entire state apparatus through the surgical use of coercive tools. A mere two deaths were reported. In the continental East, however, the streets largely determined the political fate of key oblasts. Over a period of two months, clashes frequently occurred between anti-Maidan and pro-Maidan groups across the East, with little police intervention. Pro-Ukrainian forces ultimately prevailed, except in Donbas. The Ukrainian state proved sturdier in areas where ethnic Ukrainians formed a strong majority compared to areas of ethnic Russian concentration, but our story emphasizes the agency of actors and communities over structures. Demographics were not destiny.[2]

[2] In the last Ukrainian census, carried out in 2001, ethnic Russians formed approximately 60 percent of the population in Crimea (70 percent in the port

In Eastern Donbas, the urban and industrial core of the region, state institutions imploded chaotically. Armed men seized buildings. The regional and local administration gradually ceased to function. Few government officials defected as antistate forces came out of the woodwork and haphazardly established parallel institutions. Indigenous actors likely had some assistance from Russia, but the extent of Moscow's influence in these early months is contested and will likely remain so. Importantly, Ukrainian state weakness in Crimea and Eastern Donbas was contrasted with institutional resilience most everywhere else. Despite street pressure, most state officials remained in their posts. The Ukrainian West massively supported the abrupt regime change. The residual capacity of state institutions to endure in Ukraine's East could not have been confidently predicted in advance.

Our second argument emphasizes Ukrainian political agency during what came to be known in the Russian media as the "Russian Spring," that is, the anti-Maidan demonstrations in the East in March–May 2014. The evidence of unified Russian command and control over local actors in Ukraine's East is clearest in Crimea. In Chapter 5, we document the use of Russian special forces to seize the levers of state power. Evidence of similar activities occurring elsewhere is sparse. In retrospect, it seems to us that Russia deployed so-called Little Green Men (unmarked Russian soldiers) conservatively, sending them only to areas of Ukraine where they knew they would be able to operate in safety. In Donbas, Putin held back for months before ordering the military to intervene in order to stabilize the front lines, not to pacify additional territory.

The purpose of this distinction is not to absolve the Kremlin of blame for the violence or downplay Russia's role. Russia initiated the armed conflict by seizing Crimea. The sequence in the Donbas is less clear. On the one hand, Russian public diplomacy and television – what might be called information warfare – spared no effort to delegitimize the post-Maidan Ukrainian state. On the other, Ukrainian protagonists had a decisive impact shaping the 2022 war map.[3] After Crimea, Russian

city of Sevastopol), and just under 40 percent in the two Donbas provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk (Rowland 2004, 502). In the Donbas areas where the insurgency had stabilized after September 2014, ethnic Russians were close to, or exceeded, 50 percent of the population. In no other Eastern oblast was the figure higher than 26 percent.

[3] Ukrainian in the territorial citizenship sense (resident of Ukraine prior to the conflict). Many protagonists defined themselves as political Russians in February 2014. Many surely still do.

involvement was reactive. This book documents a largely ineffectual quest by the Kremlin, beginning in 2013 and persisting until 2022, to find reliable Russian political surrogates in Ukraine.

The Donbas rebellion turned into an actual war, a military conflict, when a commando headed by Russian citizen Igor Girkin, also known by his *nom de guerre* Strelkov, seized Sloviansk (Donetsk oblast) in April 2014. The Ukrainian government reacted by sending the army to besiege the town. In the Ukrainian narrative, Strelkov was an agent taking orders from the Kremlin. The war, in this narrative, was thus clearly initiated *externally*. The optics at the time certainly reinforced the impression. The Girkin men looked like the Crimean Little Green Men and arrived from Crimea. Yet available evidence suggests that Strelkov was a freelancer, someone tolerated (but mistrusted) by Russian authorities, who hoped to incite a local uprising. Whether Moscow *ever* had direct control over Strelkov remains disputed. His departure from Donbas appeared to have been a condition for Russia to intervene militarily in August. It is plausible to us that Sloviansk marked the beginnings of a Russian policy of encouraging volunteers to go and fight in Donbas, hoping that the contagion would spread to destabilize the rest of Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine.[4]

The point here is not to deny that Russia had military intelligence personnel, perhaps even special forces, in operation in Donbas in the four months before Russian soldiers were sent in. It is rather to assert that there is no compelling evidence that these Russian actors *controlled* events on the ground until August. Even less convincing is the notion that Russia activated an existing pro-Russian network of agents in Donbas. On the contrary, available evidence suggests that Russia spent months seeking local agents of influence. Unlike in Crimea, in Donbas, Russia was forced to reach outside the existing (and fast imploding) power structure, leaving behind as potential partners for the Kremlin only a smattering of former police officers, fringe Russian nationalists, street hooligans, and individuals from the lower rungs of the Party of Regions.[5]

[4] In the months preceding Russian military intervention, thousands of volunteers from Russia joined anti-Kyiv battalions in Donbas. These men received logistical assistance from the Russian military to cross the border but were not in service (contra the soldiers sent later that summer).

[5] We agree with Hauter (2021b, 222), who takes several authors to task for a tendency to "assume rather than prove causality" when it comes to Russia's role as an instigator. We understand our project as an answer to Hauter's call for careful causal process tracing.

The Kremlin was clearly reticent to act if there was a legal discontinuity in the establishment of anti-Kyiv governments, as was the case with the proclamation of Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" (known by their Russian acronyms DNR [Donetsk People's Republic] and LNR [Luhansk People's Republic]) in May 2014. In areas where insurgents were forced to improvise the creation of new parallel state institutions from scratch, they received less Russian support. If quickly coordinated locals could retain control of existing institutions, the Kremlin was more willing to act. The failure of Eastern Ukrainian elites to coordinate outside of Crimea meant there was no "legitimate" institutional face of insurgency for Russia to support. Many abortive uprisings took place nonetheless. The hope that Russian support was just over the horizon motivated thousands. Statements of Kremlin officials, very large Russian military troop movements at the Ukrainian border, and other signals led insurgents in Donbas to believe the Russian military was about to arrive.

Our third argument is that ignoring the local roots of the conflict in Donbas generated the wrong policy prescriptions during much of the 2015–2021 period. This is not to relativize the Russian violations of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and especially not to link Ukrainian or Western behavior to the unprovoked Russian invasion of 2022. Our more modest goal is to explain why some opportunities for resolution were rejected by political actors in Kyiv and Moscow. The narrative that Russia had engineered the war from the start pointed Ukrainian actors toward a "No to Capitulation" position that only unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces could yield lasting conflict resolution. The Minsk Agreement implicitly acknowledged that for the conflict to be resolved, the political grievances of Donbas actors had to be addressed first (through elections and what amounted to autonomy over language, police, and trade) before Russian forces withdrew (with Ukraine resuming control of the border). The very notion that Donbas warlords could acquire internationally validated electoral legitimacy and a special status for their territory was considered anathema in Ukrainian political discourse, a "red line" that could not be crossed. This book explains how that impasse came to be constructed as natural and hegemonic by Ukrainians. In January–February 2022, despite the threat of a military invasion and the request by France and Germany to revisit its positions (Sorokin 2022), the Ukrainian government would not budge on Minsk.

The Concept of Civil War

The seemingly simple matter of *naming* the war in Donbas was extremely controversial. In Ukraine, the term civil war remains politically radioactive. This is because Russia appropriated the term from the 2014 outset to assert that the conflict was entirely between Ukrainians – between citizens of Ukraine – and that Russia's only involvement was humanitarian in nature. In fact, Russia sent heavy weapons to Donbas fighters, shelled Ukrainian positions, stealthily dispatched regular troops to support an insurgent offensive, and eventually integrated Eastern Donbas battalions into the Russian military chain of command. In that sense, *civil war* in its political use by the Russian state was wrong and offensive. Political and academic discourse sympathetic to Ukraine rejected the term out of hand, which precluded any meaningful discussion about its validity.

Names, however, serve a different purpose in scholarly research than in public discourse. As an analytical tool, the concept of civil war applies to an observable situation wherein a critical mass of individuals, who belong to the same polity (state), fight each other beyond a minimal threshold of deaths (Kalyvas 2006, 17).[6] This does not preclude the presence of foreign actors on the theater of operation. As a matter of fact, foreign intrusion in civil wars is quite frequent, closer to the norm than the exception. Civil wars since 1945 have often featured an international component – not just direct foreign intervention, but also diaspora mobilization, the use of mercenaries and freelancers, arms sales, intelligence sharing, and information warfare.[7]

As already mentioned, a number of Russian military intelligence agents were probably active early on, and likely increasing in number before the Russian army sent weapons, and then soldiers, to Donbas. But with the exception of the Strelkov commando unit (of sixty men) and of the thousands of Russian volunteers pouring in, the great majority of fighters joining improvised militias and battalions were locals. This was

[6] A common coding rule for empirical political scientists using cross-national data is a violent event that leaves 1,000 citizens dead, including at least 100 on the government side, following Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Sambanis (2004).

[7] A large body of scholarly work challenges the black-and-white typology of civil vs. interstate wars, including Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) and Gleditsch (2007). Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (2009) estimate that about 45 percent of rebel groups receive explicit support from

recognized by the Ukrainian army at the onset of hostilities. Military commanders and soldiers were reluctant to fight what they thought was a domestic insurgency (Bukkvoll 2019, 299). The war began as an armed rebellion goaded a state overreaction. The rebel insurgents were people who lived in Ukraine before the hostilities. Russia directly intervened later on, making the war both internal and external, a civil war and an interstate war. Russia would never officially acknowledge its military presence and intervention in Donbas. The Ukrainian government considered it a war of aggression from the very outset.

International humanitarian organizations, which had personnel on the ground in Donbas, also emphasized the internal nature of the conflict. In summer 2014, when the military clashes escalated, the Red Cross and other prominent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) made the determination that the violence had now become a *noninternational armed conflict*, which is to humanitarian law what civil war is to political science (International Committee of the Red Cross 2014; Williamson 2014). After the Russian army directly intervened in late August 2014, *international armed conflict*, the equivalent of an interstate war in the social science lexicon, was added to – but generally did not replace – the noninternational categorization of the conflict.[8]

The war in Donbas was thus a civil war at its root. The warfighting technology of the Donbas war was unusual in that the conflict developed fairly rapidly into a highly conventional civil war. After being initially fought on both sides by irregular formations (improvised volunteer battalions that sometimes intermingled with the civilian populations), pro-Ukraine and anti-Ukraine forces resorted to heavy

a foreign government. Other recent high-profile studies on the effects of third parties on civil war processes, all of which assume that foreign intervention is ubiquitous, include Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce (2008), Popovic (2017), and Lee (2018). Research programs on proxy warfare (Berman and Lake 2019), cross-domain deterrence (Gartzke and Lindsay 2019), and nonstate warfare (Biddle 2021) all intentionally blur the comfortable subdisciplinary distinctions between intrastate and interstate conflict.

[8] In September 2014, Amnesty International announced that the armed conflict was now "international" (Amnesty International 2014). Other major NGOs were more nuanced. Human Rights Watch (2016) said the conflict remained "primarily non-international." The Moscow-based NGO Memorial called it both internal and international (Pravozashchytnyi tsentr Memorial 2015). The Kharkiv-based NGO Human Rights in Ukraine said that it "may qualify" as international (International Partnership for Human Rights 2016). All these NGOs seemingly agree that the war began as an internal (noninternational) conflict.

weaponry characteristic of interstate warfare, complete with trenches, artillery battles, mines, and snipers.[9] This explains one comparatively unusual aspect of Ukraine's civil war: the relatively low civilian death count between 2015 and 2022. The estimates of at least 3,000 deaths in Ukraine paled in comparison to 50,000 in Bosnia, or over 100,000 in Syria (Seybolt, Aronson, and Fischhoff 2013, 5; Guha-Sapir et al. 2018). The proportion of civilian to combatant deaths was also much lower in Donbas (over 25 percent) than in Bosnia (over 50 percent) or Syria (over 70 percent).

This is because – like most conventional interstate wars since the nuclear revolution – two armies eventually settled into clashing with each other across a contested line of control. Both sides were supported by civilian populations, but both sides also held back from total war, so civilians could gradually remove themselves from lines of fire. Ukraine's violence never felt like 1990s Bosnia. There were no roving bands of predatory militias, no mass graves, no mass rapes. As the security levers of the Ukrainian state collapsed in a large area of Donbas, most of the early combatants on both sides had little military training. Still, most military encounters gradually took on a conventional guise, as if theatrically recreating World War I tactics.

If irregular warfare had spread across the country, or if Ukrainian volunteer battalions had tried to occupy hostile urban centers, or if Russia had used its military much earlier instead of just threatening to do so, civilian victimization could have been far more widespread, brutal, and atrocious.[10] Until 2022 Ukraine's war was fought like an interstate war, but it was largely a conflict where Ukrainians (in the territorial sense) shot at other Ukrainians.

Our argument is that the concept of *civil war* is analytically useful for scholars and also instrumentally useful for policymakers trying to

[9] One striking difference between Donbas and other intrastate battlefields is that aerial bombing was used only intermittently for most of the period covered in our study.

[10] Our point is that *systematic* attacks on civilians did not occur as part of armed encounters, contra Syria, Yemen, or numerous other civil wars ongoing in 2014. For evidence that civilian victimization tends to be higher if a style of warfare closer to the irregular ideal-type is employed, see Kalyvas and Balcells (2010; 2014). Following Biddle (2021, 9), our analysis of military matters in this book shoulders "the social science challenge of understanding actors' internal political dynamics rather than the traditional military task of counting weapons or assessing technology per se."

understand the roots of one of the most important conflicts of the early twenty-first century. The DNR/LNR came into being because of the breakdown of the inherited post-Soviet political institutions that had managed high-stakes bargaining between social forces until 2014. The story of "Ukraine fighting off an invasion" in 2022 has quite naturally crowded out the story of "Kyiv bargaining with its Russian-speaking periphery." Our aim is to gently correct the shift in language for the historical record. We suspect many Russian-speaking communities living in Ukraine's East would recognize themselves in the story we present prior to the 2022 war. Naming the Donbas war 2014–2021 a civil war was controversial from a policy perspective, admittedly, since it drew attention to and placed causal weight on domestic factors in Ukrainian politics. This could be caricatured as "blaming the victim." In our view, however, domestic Ukrainian politics *were* root causes of the war in 2014.

The decision by Putin in 2022 to unleash a full-scale war of aggression on Ukraine is not the subject of this book. The war was unprovoked. The claim that the Donbas population had to be protected from "genocide" is an absolute fabrication. In fact, after a violent spike in summer 2014–2015 (see Chapter 7), civilian casualties had remained low between March 2015 and February 2022 (see Chapter 8). Static trench warfare dividing two competing, but consolidating, state projects – one recognized by most of the international community (based in Kyiv) and the other basically kept on life support by Russia. But the population supplying the foot soldiers for the anti-Kyiv side had lived in Ukraine before 2014. The Russian language was hegemonic on their side of the line of control, too – but also spoken quite a bit on the Kyiv side.

Prior to the pre-February 2022 war, then, violent and competitive political processes pitted Eastern Ukrainians against each other. If one were willing to adapt Russian terminology, what was occurring was the first *intra-Russkii mir* (Russian World) civil war in nearly a century.[11]

[11] *Russkii mir* is a construct premised on the idea that Russian language, culture, and politics are one, and aiming to validate Russian intervention abroad (Toal 2017, 70–91, 204–5, 237–44). After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Ukraine was the principal terrain of a devastating civil war that initially opposed monarchists ("Whites") and revolutionaries ("Reds"), most of whom saw themselves as Russians. The war later involved Ukrainian nationalists and peasant-anarchists.

Since Ukrainian independence, the loyalty of Russian-speakers in the East toward the Ukrainian state had never been tested as it was in 2014.[12] Fighters on both sides were motivated by perceptions of political equality and cultural security. Some feared domination by a Ukrainian-speaking center. Some feared domination by Putin and Moscow. Russian-speakers outside Donbas, imagined by Russia to belong to this Russian World, on the whole remained loyal to a Ukrainian state in 2014. They did so again in 2022, with far greater unity, since the first cities to be bombed indiscriminately were Eastern Ukrainian Russian-speaking majority cities. Our story emphasizes the initial division *among* Russian-speakers, between a Donbas constituency and the rest of the East.

A War of Narratives

The war in Donbas is about territorial control, but, as is always the case with violent internal conflicts, it originates in disputes over political legitimacy. There are two polarized views on how to describe Maidan and the Donbas war. In both versions, the two events are causally connected. The war of narratives presents Maidan as either a protest against state violence (a "Revolution of Dignity") or a coup. The Donbas war is described as either a war of aggression or a civil war.

On Maidan, the divide is over the interpretation of violence. Violence was first used by the police against peaceful protesters in late November 2013. Groups of protesters resorted to violence against the police on the following day, but were disavowed by Maidan leaders. In January–February 2014, these groups used violence against the police in order to break a political impasse. Violence by protesters was now framed as self-defense, and therefore legitimate, in the pro-Maidan narrative. The disproportionate use of counterforce by the police, which culminated in a sniper massacre, brought down the government, and the president was removed.

The counternarrative is that Maidan produced a coup, or *coup d'état* (*perevorot*, in Russian). The image of protesters firing at the

[12] Russian-speaker is defined here as the *preference* to speak Russian, not the ability to speak it (see Chapter 3). By that criteria, surveys show that most people in Ukraine's East are Russian-speakers, and most in the West are Ukrainian-speakers, that is, prefer to speak Ukrainian.

police, and of the government falling shortly thereafter, lent credence in some quarters to the idea that a coup – understood here as the use of violence to bring about a change in power – had taken place.

Narratives of legitimacy are selective: the self-defense of protesters in one is overshadowed by the self-defense of state agents (the police) in another. In political discourse, Revolution of Dignity or coup are used normatively to legitimize or delegitimize a political outcome. In our book, our interest is more analytical than normative. We hope that readers will come to understand the logic of violence and its political consequences. The police used what certainly appeared to be disproportionate force, particularly at the very beginning and the very end. Frontline protesters used violence strategically in order to provoke a political change.

The Dominant Policy Alternative: Hybrid Warfare

There is an alternative way of viewing the conflict that puts the locus of blame on great power politics. In this account, Ukraine is being fought over by Russia and the West. When Russian policy elites felt they were losing the tug of war, they decided to punish Ukrainians by unleashing new "hybrid warfare" techniques. This is not our argument, but we acknowledge that it has more than a grain of truth to it.

The standard account of the war in Ukraine begins with geography. Ukraine is located between Russia and the West (or the Western Security Community). Realist considerations drive decision-making at the highest levels in the Kremlin and in NATO capitals, and this is not lost on Ukrainian political elites. Their country is a buffer between great powers. Just as the United States would not allow Mexico to join a mutual defensive security alliance with China, the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO is anathema to Russia.

For many decades, balancing these interests was possible. In the early 1990s, against the backdrop of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the August 1991 failed coup, the United States and Russia bargained and compromised. As a sovereign nonnuclear Ukraine emerged, the West was sensitive to the need to help moderate forces in Russia consolidate power. This meant treading lightly, since nothing in the post-Soviet periphery was seen as worth the risk of trading Russian President Boris Yeltsin for someone like Gennady Zyuganov (Yeltsin's Communist opponent) or Alexander Lebed (a Russian general who had acted as a

free agent in the 1992 war in Moldova). Russian diplomats failed to secure a written commitment that NATO would not expand eastward, it seems, because they did not think that they had to.[13] There is scant evidence that NATO expansion to Ukraine was considered or even discussed in the early 1990s (Krawchenko 1993, 83–4, 90–5). Ukraine was understood to represent a vital Russian interest.

Another aspect of the compromise was that Ukraine would have the diplomatic support of Western powers, so long as it relinquished its nuclear weapons (a gamble eased by the recent experience of the Chernobyl disaster). Ukraine agreed to comply under the framework of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which the United States volunteered security "assurances" that fell conspicuously short of a commitment to use force to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Pifer 2017, 49).[14] In the following decade, Ukraine sought to balance Russian and Western geopolitical interests in a pragmatic "multi-vector" foreign policy (D'Anieri 2019b, 73–8).

[13] Following Sarotte (2014) and Itzkowitz Shifrinson (2016), we are intrigued by the historical counterfactuals. What might have been had Russian elites in 1990 not been so internally divided, so optimistic about Russia's ability to join the West, and so myopic about the temporary leverage that they had? Russia might, for instance, have demanded that the United States sign a simple, clear, unambiguous promise never to expand NATO into former Soviet-dominated territory. Russian diplomats could have bundled these kinds of "concessions" (which at the time might not have seen as concessions at all, but simply formalization of mutually shared understandings at the highest levels) with the resolution of the German question, or traded them for authorization by the UN Security Council to use force in the First Gulf War against Iraq. Our point is not to advocate for these kinds of positions, nor to argue that they would have been enforceable, but simply to note that alternative arrangements for Ukraine from the 2000s–2010s onwards might have been feasible if Russian elites had behaved differently than they did in the early 1990s.

[14] Western governments made economic and geopolitical support for Ukraine contingent on the removal of nuclear weapons (Cohen 2017). In hindsight, Ukrainian nuclear disarmament can be seen as overdetermined by the fact that the state was too poor to pay for its maintenance and would have been barred from legally acquiring necessary components from abroad (Rublee 2015, 145–7). At the time there were grave concerns that economic pressures might tempt Ukraine to follow North Korea's example, and export weapons or technical expertise (Jones et al. 1998, 93–6). Mearsheimer (1993) and Posen (1993, 44–5) warned that unilateral nuclear disarmament would give Russian nationalists more freedom of action, raising conflict risks. Stone (2002, 184) notes that as part of the package deal of abandoning nuclear weapons Ukraine became, for a time, the third-largest recipient of all US foreign aid.

Russian–Western relations declined gradually.[15] The United States opened diplomatic and economic relations with all of the post-Soviet republics, and NATO expanded into Central Europe despite Russia's objections (Charap and Colton 2017, 30–94). NATO fought an air war against Serbia in 1999, which eventually yielded independence for Kosovo in 2008, despite Russian opposition. Russian diplomatic concerns about "encirclement by NATO" were dismissed as rhetorical exaggerations. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members" (NATO 2008).[16] Russian calls for a geopolitical sphere of influence that would be analogous to the US Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere were rebuffed with the claim that sovereign countries should be able to choose which international agreements they wish to join. Russian military power had started to rebound in the first decade of the twenty-first century as well.[17] The 2014 Winter Olympics, hosted by Russia, were its best foot forward in terms of soft-power production.

Against this background, things came to a head. Late in 2013, Ukrainian President Yanukovych's abrupt decision to forego a free trade deal with the EU signaled intent to explore membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's proposed geoeconomic competitor to the EU. In Ukraine, the proposed Economic Union was more popular in the East than the West. Western-oriented Ukrainians took to the

[15] Whether the increased antagonism was due to changes in Western values and policy, changes in Russian values or policy, both, or neither, is a fount of academic dispute. For an argument that the choices made by Russia are dependent on its type of regime, see McFaul (2020). For an argument that a different Russian leader or regime might have made similar choices under a similar international environment, see D'Anieri (2019b, 18).

[16] The West saw the statement of intent as a compromise, since no membership path was offered, as had initially been envisaged (D'Anieri 2019b, 163). Russia saw it as a threat and a slap in the face (Freedman 2019, 58), and signaled its displeasure with a small, ugly war in Georgia a few months later. NATO expansion was also accompanied by EU expansion, with eight Central European states joining the EU in 2004 (including the three former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and two more in 2007.

[17] Contextualizing Russia's temporary/local strength with cutting observations of its long-term decline as a society, and a global power (vis-à-vis China and its neighbors), was common in the West after the Cold War. By the time of the events of Chapter 4, the balance of power between Russia and the United States had favored the NATO alliance member states for a generation (Wohlforth 1994, 102–15). The gap is starker if US power is added to that of its allies and Russian power is added to its impoverished dependents (Kotkin 2008, 24).

streets and did not disperse. In the Russian version of this conflict, external enemies choreographed mass protests in Maidan – part of a longer-term pattern. The nonviolent 2004 Orange Revolution was bankrolled by Western NGOs, they argued, and the violent 2014 Maidan militants were trained by Western security services (Wilson 2005, 183–8; Ernst 2015). In the Western version, the Kremlin responded by testing its new *hybrid warfare* techniques in Crimea and Donbas.

What is hybrid warfare? It is an umbrella term for military coercion steeped in plausible deniability. The strategic goal is to send a threatening signal, avoid escalation, and impose costs on another state.[18] Hybrid warfare methods include various kinds of disruption using clandestine agents, disinformation and media manipulation, social media trolling, covert funding for political parties, economic tools (like sanctions and parastatal companies), spycraft, and the use of soldiers without insignias trying to pass as civilians (Reisinger and Golts 2014; Charap 2015; Van Herpen 2015; Conley et al. 2016; Kier 2016; Chivvis 2017). The extent to which any of this was actually new is disputed (Galeotti 2019).[19] Whether Russia or the West is responsible for initiating hybrid hostilities is also open for debate.[20] The important escalation was that Russia sent troops into Ukraine while claiming that it was not, violating a commitment to respect borders made in a 1994 multilateral memorandum (when Ukraine agreed to give up nuclear weapons) and a 1997 bilateral

[18] Another term of art in US military circles is "gray zone" conflict (Schram 2021).

[19] New frontier technology applied to warfare may be leveling the playing field between weak and strong nonstate and state military actors (Biddle 2021, 8). Cell phones, for example, interact with the "Web 2.0" leading to the production of high-quality content at low cost, and the dissemination of the content quickly, semi-anonymously, and independently (Walter 2017; Pomerantsev 2019, 85–97). Speculative scholarly efforts to document "hybrid war" techniques in Ukraine as a window into the future of war include efforts to evaluate the efficacy of cyberattacks (Kostyuk and Zhukov 2019), the potential to repurpose patterns of social media for military intelligence (Driscoll and Steinert-Threlkeld 2020).

[20] Orenstein (2019, 11–17) astutely notes that this question, asked in this way, really has no answer, since the West and Russia are in a security dilemma. Galeotti (2019, 1) points out that "Moscow considers itself rather a *target* of Western hybrid aggression." Consider a famous 2013 speech by Valery Gerasimov, often referenced as the authoritative description of Russia's "new" strategy, with ample references to "the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures" and "concealed" fifth-column armed forces. Gerasimov, in context, is reflecting on *American* military practices of war (Freedman 2019, 174–5).

treaty with Ukraine. Few analysts are tempted to call the flagrant violations of those same commitments in 2022 "hybrid warfare" for many reasons, but one of them is that Russia openly announced it was sending its military (while avoiding full mobilization and not calling it a "war").

In the Western policy-shorthand version of this conflict (among most NATO military professionals), the Donbas militants were, and are still, directed by Russia. Pro-Russian rebels took over government buildings in Kharkiv or Donetsk in the spring of 2014 because Russia told them to (Umland 2016). This caused anxiety in the NATO alliance. How would its member states respond if the same sort of thing occurred in Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia? A host of seemingly technical questions, such as how to precisely define aggression in the cyber-realm, gained new salience to war planners. Since Ukraine was not yet a NATO member state, a contained hybrid war served a theatrical purpose. Russians, Americans, and others could observe each other play war games, update public statements, and begin to signal what they would be willing to risk in the event of a more severe clash of interests in Eastern Europe (Shaplak and Johnson 2016).

Zones of fighting ossified into stable front lines in late summer 2014 and winter 2015, after Russia overtly sent regular troops to tip the scales at two critical junctures, the Battles of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve. Until February 24, 2022, territory had barely changed hands since those battles. As the war conventionalized along a frozen and fixed line of contact, the number of deaths dropped considerably.

The great powers began to circle their wagons for a long game of trying to wait out the other. The optimism in the West depended on a theory of soft power, the optimism in Russia rested on a theory of hard power. Many social forces within Ukraine saw NATO, the EU, and the West as Ukraine's future. They argued that Russia has shown it cannot win – or even compete – in what Gramsci (1987) would have called a global *war of position* over interpretation of the war. Most members of the United Nations rejected Russia's interpretation of the Crimea events. The Ukraine conflict exposed Russian soft power as much weaker than had been previously assumed, and "increased American power and European influence in Russia's western borderlands."[21]

[21] This is the analytic conclusion of Kivelson and Suny (2017, 392), who take a historical view of Russian cultural ("soft") power projection. For historical retrospectives on soft power in the Cold War period, see Selznick (1952,

The Kremlin, for its part, was also comfortable imagining a long game in which geography and demography are destiny. In this view of hard power, a protracted war, fought over a part of the planet that Russia cares about much more than any other great power, is not going to go on forever. When it ends, a war on Russia's border is likely to end on Russia's terms. Due to geography and history, Russia cannot "leave" Ukraine. The Kremlin has military leverage. It will enjoy political influence post-settlement.

Distilling Ukraine's conflict down to a contest between Russian hybrid warfare and Western soft power is appealing for many reasons. It is simple (see Appendix B), teachable, and prescriptive for military planners. It leaves out a great deal, however.

The Policy Implications of Academic Language Choice

This book is a reaction to many descriptions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict between 2016 and 2021. It frustrated us that the dominant frames in Western policy circles so quickly calcified into morality tales of Russian aggression, where Ukraine was abstracted as a helpless victim. Even those inclined to locate all the blame on Kremlin policy had to admit that some changes had taken place in Ukrainian society since March 2014 that Putin probably did not anticipate or engineer.

To put a fine point on it: In Western policymaking circles, the language of hybrid warfare conflated "Eastern Ukrainian" with "Russian" interests and "Western Ukrainian" with "Western" interests. While it was clear that Russian military intervention in Crimea and Donbas was not supported throughout Eastern Ukraine, public opinion in the Russian-speaking East remained divided on assuming responsibility in triggering the conflict.[22] This blurring was common

48–70) and Barghoorn (1964). In retrospect, the United States had a clear comparative advantage in soft power throughout the Cold War: "American music and films leaked into the Soviet Union with profound effects, but indigenous Soviet products never found an overseas market. There was no socialist Elvis" (Nye 2004, 74). Recent observational (Avgerinos 2009; Gentile 2020) and experimental (Fisher 2020) studies conclude that Russia still competes at a relative disadvantage in the production of credible news.

[22] In a 2019 survey, while 45 percent of the entire population saw the Donbas conflict as "Russian aggression," the proportion fell to 22–24 percent in the Southeast, while 21–22 percent saw it as a "purely internal civil conflict" (Fond demokratychni initsiatyvy 2019).

in Ukrainian policy debates for historical reasons, as well. What made the "hybrid warfare" language such an impediment to creative discussions on the specifics of conflict resolution was its interaction with US domestic politics in the 2016–2020 period, when Democrats blamed Russian policy for the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government – increasingly aligned with the "No to Capitulation Front" that we will discuss in Chapter 8 – staked out policy positions on language, historical memory, and the implementation of the Minsk accords that were more popular in the Ukrainian West than the Ukrainian East.

One effect of this was the sidelining of anyone willing to challenging the narrative that the Donbas war had been, at its roots, a war of Russian aggression. In Ukraine, this had the practical effect of marginalizing the views of an important constituency of Eastern voters. This, in turn, as we shall see in Chapter 8, had implications for the status of contested territory in Donbas, for the status of the Russian language in secondary school curricula throughout Ukraine, for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, and much more. Criticism of state policy over any of these issues became associated with an indefensible pro-Russian position. The Russian army had seized Ukrainian territory, and Russia needed to leave. The hard truth is that in August–September 2014, and again in February 2015, the Ukrainian army could not fight the Russian army. Kyiv was forced to commit internationally to the principle of granting some kind of de jure autonomy to the two Donbas territories that it no longer de facto controlled. These political conditions proved politically impossible to implement. The de facto policy was to interpret the Minsk Protocol to mean that Russia had to withdraw its military completely before political steps could be taken.

We wrote our book in an effort to add nuance to the analysis of the Ukrainian political landscape between 2013 and 2021, before the Russian invasion of 2022. Our strategy for accomplishing this is an analytic narrative. Our aim is to challenge the notion that there was a hegemonic view in Ukraine on how to assess the origins of the war in Donbas and how to devise a political solution. This is not about whether Ukrainians, whatever language they speak at home, believed in the territorial integrity of Ukraine. A majority of Eastern Ukrainians identified with the Ukrainian state in 2014 and rejection of the Russian invasion of 2022 became nearly hegemonic quite early on

(Reiting 2022). Our goal, for historians interested in more nuance, is to analyze how Ukrainian politics actually operated before this invasion. Eastern Ukrainian opinion, parties, and elites could not be easily reduced to a "pro-Russian" position. For instance, an important strand in our narrative shows how even the Party of Regions, portrayed as aligned with Russian interests, was mistrusted by Russian officials and ultimately failed to accomplish what Putin expected.

A second problem with the language of "hybrid warfare" is that it functionally loaded the US conversation in favor of particular policy response: demonstrating resolve to Russia. This ignored a serious realist counter, which is that Western policy may have played a role in provoking the 2014 conflict – more than Western government agents can easily admit because of the nature of the security dilemma.[23] In practice, "hybrid warfare" conversations invited scholars to weigh in on an ongoing policy conversation asking, "What else can we do to assure our Ukrainian security partners and deter Russians from engaging in new styles of aggression?" For restrainers in the realist school, a prior question may be what US interests are in Europe and whether the generous support to European allies and partners actually serves those interests or can have unintended consequences.[24]

As social scientists interested in curating the historical record, we feel that ignoring Ukraine-specific details in favor of crude geopolitical plate tectonics misses many important stories. Filtering all incoming information about the 2014–2020 war through a top-down international relations (IR) lens obscured the agency of Ukrainian actors, effectively silencing the voices of millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. This is important because a theoretically informed understanding of how the conflict broke out in 2014–2015 is necessary to imagine an eventual final settlement. Specific policy-relevant questions include: Why did the Kremlin send troops to some places and not others? Why did the conflict zone have the geographical boundaries that it did in 2022, when Putin recognized the DNR/LNR and invaded?

[23] This is not our book's position, but neither was it a "fringe" position in 2014–2015. See, for example, Mearsheimer (2014), Walt (2014, 2015), Posen (2016), and Charap and Colton (2017).

[24] Posen (2014) ably summarizes the restraint position. His view of European security (including Ukraine) is informed by his study of the pathways to inadvertent nuclear use by Russian and NATO war planners (Posen [1991], especially 21–3, 45–7, 60–7, 146–58).

Why was Ukraine more cohesively "Ukrainian" (distinct from geopolitically "Western") seven years after Crimea? Why was settling the conflict in the Donbas so difficult?

These are not simply rhetorical questions. Our book provides clear answers.

1. The Kremlin sent troops where it did after observing the strategies of Russian-speaking communities within Ukraine.[25] Such communities directly adjoining Russia's border (Kharkiv and Donbas), and Russia's redefined border post-Crimea (such as the Donbas city of Mariupol and the oblasts of Kherson and Odesa – close to Transnistria and the ocean) acted with a higher chance of successful separation compared to the heartland areas of Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, or Mykolaïv. The Kremlin waited for either local allies to obtain the backing of the regional parliament or for local armed allies to secure territory first. Russia was responsive and opportunistic.
2. The conflict had the geography it did because of choices made by Russian-speaking elites. Russian machinations shaped the information environment, but the choice between sedition or loyalty to the post-Maidan Ukrainian political order was made within Russian-speaking communities. A tip toward sedition proved arduous, and despite a great deal of jockeying on the streets, most communities did not tip or come close. As elites worried their neighbors were approaching a tip, one response was violent threats against elites considering *sedition*. The only part of Ukraine with no antisecession vigilantes, Crimea, tipped in days. In the industrial core of Donbas, elites were pushed aside by angry mobs and anti-institutional newcomers in the space of a few dramatic weeks. Outside these towns, no other communities tipped.
3. Since 2014, Ukrainian political identity has come into its own as a "new" ethnic supermajority due to two processes. First, after the de facto border change in Crimea, the demographics and politics of Ukraine changed. This left the government in Kyiv more willing

[25] The concept of *community* is integral to the theoretical model that we are presenting in Chapter 2. We define community using the Taylor (1982) criteria: Direct face-to-face relations between members, many-sided relations, reciprocity, rough equality of material conditions, and common sets of beliefs and values.

to pay costs in blood in order not to cede territory. Second, the crisis altered perceptions of Russian military intentions. As a result of watching where Russia did – and did not – send its military, beliefs about the probability of Russian military intervention were revised downward. (These beliefs turned out to be false in 2022, but they existed until the very last minute.) Our prediction is fewer cultural concessions to Russian-speaking communities under these circumstances.

4. Settling was difficult for two reasons. First, the collapse of political institutions in 2014 made it impossible a return to the old social contract due to commitment problems. The relevant actors feared that the other side would renege on what they committed to if they moved first. Second, a narrative of the conflict has taken root within Eastern Donbas that sedition was legitimate. Social policies chosen in Kyiv reinforced the view that the Donbas population would be treated as second-class citizens if Ukraine ever reclaimed the territory.

Where Is this Book Going?

Employing the language of *civil war* violated a taboo in Western foreign policy circles throughout 2014–2021. Since Russia called the war in Ukraine a *civil war*, Western officials had to call it something else. Since both sides were sending costly signals of their intent to wait the other out, adopting the language of the enemy felt like a tactical concession.[26] With Putin's decision to escalate the conflict over Ukraine with a full-scale invasion, as well as repeated nuclear threats, this taboo has outlived its utility. If Western policymakers revisit this period critically, and describe this as an *intra-Russkii Mir* civil war, the shoe is suddenly on the other foot. The civil war that we describe in this book is not the civil war Putin imagines it to be. There is no war pitting "real" Ukrainians (the belief that Ukrainians are a subset of Russians) against "nationalist" Ukrainians (the belief that the Ukrainian nation is an artificial creation of foreigners and a threat

[26] For readers unfamiliar with the reference to "costly signaling," a common vein of argument is that professional diplomats engage in regular "cheap talk" performances (colloquially: diplomats lie). To show they mean business, sometimes states have to incur costs, like putting soldiers' lives at risk and running risks of escalation/war, in order to communicate with each other.

to Russia). This is rather a war that always divided a narrow subset of Eastern Ukrainians, mostly concentrated in Donbas, against the majority of Eastern Ukrainians, Donbas included (who were ambivalent on Maidan and on the sources of the conflict, but opposed Russian military intervention). In our historical and analytic narrative, we believe that reclaiming the language of civil war has the potential to do three things.

First, the grains of truth in the Russian version of events can be plucked from state propaganda (Radnitz 2021: 44–9, 119–28). What emerges is a bottom-up story, emphasizing that the genesis of the war in Ukraine came from choices made on Ukrainian territory. In the language of our model, critical first- and second-movers thought of themselves as political Russians defending their homes.

Second, employing the language of civil war to approach the 2014 origins of the Donbas war clarifies how different this part of Donbas was, and arguably remains, from the rest of Eastern Ukraine. Putin identifies *Russkii mir* with Russian-speakers and expected Ukraine to collapse over all of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The problem is that *Russkii mir* failed everywhere, except parts of the industrial core of Eastern Donbas, where Kyiv lost control of security institutions well before Russia sent troops. The 2014 war mostly opposed pro-Ukraine Ukraine-born combatants to anti-Kyiv Ukraine-born combatants. [27]

Third, reclaiming the language of civil war highlights the argument for more serious conversations within foreign policy circles, especially in NATO capitals, about what it is reasonable to expect from a post-war Ukrainian polity. Policymakers hoping to educate themselves on the war that preceded the Russian invasion of 2022 will find answers to many of their factual questions in the pages of this book.

In Chapter 2 we present our theory in normal language and describe the analytic narrative approach we will use in data presentation for the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 3 we present a gloss on Ukrainian political history in order to introduce key insights on Ukrainian identity, regional and memory politics, and demonstrate the plausibility of model assumptions.

[27] To clarify: We are not claiming that Russian-speaking Ukrainians see themselves as part of *Russkii mir*, but rather that a critical mass demonstrated in 2014 that it does *not*. It is only from the perspective of the talking points of the Russian state that the *Russkii mir* is at war with itself.

In Chapter 4 we describe the critical juncture of the Maidan protests (November 2013–February 2014) with a focus on the logic and consequences of political violence.

In Chapter 5 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in Crimea. This chapter explains why the secession of Crimea did not result in very much violence.

In Chapter 6 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (outside Crimea and the Eastern Donbas). An Eastern Ukrainian political rebellion, expected by Russia, did not happen and the street turned pro-Ukrainian.

In Chapter 7 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in the Eastern Donbas region. This chapter explains the outbreak of Ukraine's war.

In Chapter 8 we describe the international diplomatic stalemate on settling Ukraine's unnamed war, the effects of the war on Ukrainian society, and briefly comment on Russia's decision to engage in a full-scale war of aggression reminiscent of World War II.

2 *A Theory of War Onset in Post-Soviet Eurasia*

Since so many of the structural features of the Ukraine–Russia relationship did not change from 1993 to 2013, the timing of the outbreak of violence in Ukraine is puzzling. Something about the specific nature of the crisis of 2013–2014, and the contested information environment in subsequent years, led to Ukraine's unnamed war of 2014–2022. The failure to settle this war diplomatically created the conditions for the Russian invasion in February 2022. Can we be more specific about causal processes? What happens to citizens that sometimes causes many of them to turn violent?

Hobbes (1651) noted the ability of modern territorial states to prevent citizens from becoming violent most of the time. The state benefits from what Hobbes called *awe*: a widely shared assumption of an overwhelming comparative advantage in the production of violence and justice. Most of the time, most people moderate their behaviors due to deterrence or socialization. This vein of social theory taps into a lineage in political science stretching back to Max Weber by way of Huntington (1968). When civil wars reoccur in the same territory over and over again, we say a state is illegitimate or weak.

Why are some states more prone to bouts of large-scale violence than others? Empirical researchers have tried to address this question by investigating the structural features that put some countries at higher risk than others for onset of civil war. These scholars have found that, even for the poorest states in the international system, governments can usually adapt to crises or deescalate domestic unrest before it gets anywhere close to becoming a civil war.[1] Most citizens most of the time know this, so they can anticipate what behaviors state agents will tolerate and what they will not. Since the rules

[1] As explained in Chapter 1, scholars define a civil war using two empirical criteria: citizenship (most combatants on either side being citizens of the state prior to hostilities) and threshold of fatalities (a death count of at least 1,000, with at least 100 among government forces).

undergirding social order are common knowledge, violence needs only to lurk in the background to hold order in place. States must be able to repress effectively, however. Repression requires a certain kind of state capacity – competent intelligence gathering, paired with professional domestic security forces and an effective chain of command.

Citizens must believe other people share their own assessments of the strength of the state. Government-funded rituals can reduce uncertainty on this point: military parades, high-profile televised criminal trials, and the like. Citizens also make inferences about their state capacity by observing how the state responds to crises, such as mass demonstrations, street violence, terrorism, insurrections, or wars. When the state certainty of its control of repression falters, or many citizens begin to doubt the legitimacy of the state's repressive capacity, or both, there is a higher risk that domestic order falls apart. This sometimes even yields civil war.

Civil wars are very rare events, however. A more common outcome is gradual deescalation. Usually, social groups and state actors can demonstrate power and resolve to each other with vote counts and nonviolent civil resistance, reaching a cooperative outcome that maintains social order and avoids of large-scale societal breakdown.[2] States or citizens sometimes miscalculate in a way that spirals to sustained violence, however, due to a combination of information failures, emotional decision-making, and the inherent difficulties associated with policing and counterinsurgency. While we will discuss each in turn, information failure is at the heart of our theory. We see peace and order as an *equilibrium* (in rational choice jargon) held in place by an expectation of violence if anyone changes their strategies. When a crisis introduces uncertainty and forces armed actors to second-guess each other's strategies, the result can be deadly.

The Strategic Setting: Post-Soviet Eurasia

Because we are interested in state–society relations and how they sometimes break down, defining the relevant strategic players and the order of interaction requires transitioning from general political theory to a more locally scoped model of Eurasian political order. The context of

[2] For arguments about the general efficacy of *nonviolent* tactics as an optimal bargaining instrument for groups seeking to affect change, see Stephan and Chenoweth (2008) and Chenoweth (2021). For theoretical works on bargaining, see Elster (1989, 135–46), Fearon (1995b, 1998), and Wagner (2000).

bargaining is different for post-Soviet states than for states in central Africa. For one thing, all of the states that emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union were "born strong," inheriting a panoply of "strong state" institutions, such as a party network, centralized media, delineated borders (between republics), administrative units, high rates of literacy, and a secret police (Driscoll 2015: 4, 125). This basic fact goes a long way toward explaining why interethnic warfare was so rare during the breakup of the Soviet Union and why wars, when they did occur, ended so fast. Post-Soviet states have been able to control most of their people, most of the time, by channeling violence through institutions.

The relevant feature of post-Soviet states is that political games are played against the backdrop of inherited Soviet demography and interstate borders born from what were once ethno-federally demarcated territorial units. Across Eurasia, many communities contain a critical mass of people who prefer to speak Russian and/or self-identify as Russian. After the Soviet collapse, millions found themselves living outside the borders of Russia. They had to decide whether to organize as political Russians, encourage their children to assimilate (by acquiring fluency in the language of their new state), or emigrate to Russia (where most had never lived) (Laitin 1998, 2018).[3]

We are defining state capacity as the state's ability to cauterize violent challengers before they reach the boiling point of civil war. Eurasian demography relates to state capacity in two ways. The first involves facets of distributional politics that intersects with ethnic polarization to produce a feeling of zero-sum tradeoffs. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, there has been more-than-occasional push-and-pull between (1) communities defining themselves politically as Russian, (2) Russian-*speaking* communities sharing common interests with political Russians, (3) communities identifying with the majority (titular) nationality of the state, and (4) communities neither Russian nor titular. *Intrastate* bargaining over issues of autonomy and

[3] Laitin was inspired by the triadic model of Hirschman (1970): exit (immigration), voice (organization), and loyalty (assimilation). He named the emergent social category that faced this choice set the Russian "beached diaspora." In post-independence Ukraine, all three avenues were pursued by the beached diaspora, as we shall see. The Party of Regions aggregated the preferences of Russian-speakers throughout the East. The great majority of children in East (outside of Donbas and Crimea) were sent to Ukrainian schools. The 2001 census registered 3 million less Russians than 1989, either due to ethnic reidentification on census forms or to migration (mainly to Russia).

assimilation involve periodic flare-ups (at soccer games or bar fights) and can sometimes gin up votes. There can be salient differences between the preferences of peripheral Russian or Russian-speaking community elites and state elites when it comes to elementary educational curricula, language of primary school instruction, composition of police and border units, the language of bureaucracy, names on street signs, recognized holidays, regional public sector subsidies, monuments, sports mascots, flags, and more (Jenne 2004, 732–3).

The second, relatedly, is the *interstate* dimension: the shadow of Russian military intervention into domestic politics. Russia is enormous. Russians are more numerous than most any other Eurasian ethnic group. For the many independent post-Soviet states that share a border with Russia, this introduces a practical problem: When non-Russian capitals threaten elites that can claim to speak on behalf of communities that Russia sees as Russians, those elites can call for help from the Kremlin. A knife-edged interethnic peace based on deterrence hangs over the post-Soviet space. As we saw in 2022, Moscow may even opt to fabricate crimes against "its people" in order justify wars of aggression. The larger point is that in Eurasia everyone can calculate that if social order were to collapse, potential insurgents might incorporate into their calculations the possibility that Russia will launch a "rescue" operation on their behalf. This threat of great power intervention is simply not as acute or predictable in other parts of the globe.

Actors, Choices, and Order of Play

Domestic order in post-Soviet Eurasia is held in place by three kinds of players anticipating each other's strategies: (1) central political elites in Russia, (2) central political elites in the neighboring state, and (3) community-level elites in the periphery of that state. This *triadic relationship* is a defining feature of post-Soviet politics, since Russia has the potential to "insert itself" into bargaining between "its" communities and titular capitals (Brubaker 1995, 1996, 55–76).[4] There are three

[4] Brubaker's triadic configuration also inspired Laitin (1998), Van Houten (1998), Cetinyan (2002), and Jenne (2004). Sambanis, Skaderpas, and Wohlforth (2020) analyze a dynamic model in a triadic setting that explicitly endogenizes polarization of ethnic identities with third-party (Russian) intervention, and lean heavily on Russian intervention into Ukraine to illustrate the plausibility of their model's assumptions.

distinct locations of strategizing, all of which are watching the others for information that might provide clues about shifts in strategy.

During a crisis, the first locus of action is inside Russia-speaking communities. As individuals in these communities observe that normal constraints are breaking down, they look for information on television, on the Internet, and by listening to community elites. A few talented people, if they are centrally located in social networks and capable of linking diverse constituencies, can potentially induce many others to flip their stance or political identity (Popkin 1979; Petersen 2001). We call this producing a cascade to a social tip within a community. These elites, if they coordinate, can use their influence to capture local institutions and make it clear that street power will be allowed to "take off." These cascades can have outsized political effects and allow social actors that are normally on the fringe to enter politics.

The first major question on the slide to civil war, then, is whether or not there is coordination on the desirability of sedition – defined as insurrection against the state – by high-status members of these communities. We have in mind oligarchs, respected religious figures, high-status teachers, and the like. If *coordinated sedition* fails to emerge, there are no high-status brokers between the state and the street, so the crisis passes. If elites coordinate, and decide that their community needs to "bargain hard," they lay claim to the authority of precrisis institutions, including the police. This allows "the community" to speak with one voice. The community coordinates on a bargaining position, and makes it clear that they will activate a plan to secede from the polity if their demand is not met. We call this *coordinated sedition*: an entire Russian-speaking community uniting and constructing their identities politically as Russian, and demanding recognition of their rights as such.

Some communities are better positioned than others to make good on the threat to exit the polity. Geographic proximity to the interstate border is a factor. Elites in densely packed communities close to Russia's border are relatively well positioned to secede if they have to.[5] Important variables in determining what a community can expect to happen in a war include population density, demographics, terrain, and

[5] In Appendix A, parameter p is meant to capture many factors salient in the literature, such as proximity to an interstate border (Treisman 1997, 2001), as well as factors such as demographic concentration (Toft 2003; Lacina 2017), substate institutions (Roeder 2009), sacred land (Hassner 2007), foreign religious support (Toft and Zhukov 2015), physical geography (Fearon and

perhaps other things that local elites have a comparative advantage in assessing (such as the private beliefs of nonvoting citizens, intra- and interfamily social status hierarchies, etc.).

The demand shifts the locus of decision to a second class of actors: elites in the capital city. They face a critical decision point: They must either "buy off" the Russian-speaking communities with policy concessions to deescalate the crisis nonviolently, or try to arrest the ringleaders and restore order coercively. If repression is chosen, however, the risk is that Russia may intervene with disproportionate violence.[6]

State elites and peripheral elites should be able to compromise and avoid a clash of values that ends in violence and counterinsurgency. So long as every actor plays strategically, and since communities want to avoid police actions, elites coordinate to make a demand to elites in the capital that they expect will be actually accepted.

The key to an orderly, brokered equilibrium is common knowledge. There must be a reasonable expectation by all of the players that they are all correctly assessing facts the same way and that they understand the incentives and strategies of the other players. Most of the time, community elites are deterred from making excessive demands because it is risky to face off against a high-capacity state. Most of the time, elites in the capital hesitate before sending police to arrest community leaders, trying to anticipate how the Russian government might respond.[7] Most of the time, elites' broker deals and violent threats are not even articulated. In fact, though it is beyond the scope of the simple model we analyze in Appendix A, it is not difficult to see the advantage of coordination pooled across Russian-speaking elites in many communities. An orderly aggregation of preferences by voters transforms "seditionist" dissident politics into normalized special interest group politics: cohesively organized constituent demands. This

Laitin 2003), social structure (Petersen 2001; Parkinson 2013; Lewis 2020), or group socioeconomic characteristics (Alesina and Spolaore 2003; Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011; Zhukov 2016).

[6] Russia may also intervene anyway for reasons that have nothing to do with protecting the rights of Russian-speakers while cynically *claiming* to be intervening to protect Russians. That possibility was outside the scope of our analysis in this model, but we thank Tymofiy Mylovanov especially for continuously pushing us on this point.

[7] In the model, the costs incurred by community leaders in facing the center are identified as c (lowercase) and the costs facing the center in anticipation of Russian behavior C (uppercase).

describes well how the Party of Regions functioned before Maidan (as we will describe shortly, in Chapter 3).

When these normal institutions disappear, however, community elites face a terrible dilemma. They are forced to make choices without enough information, and are not able to anticipate correctly knowing how the crisis will unfold in the end. Because of the order of moves, only by going through with a rebellion can peripheral community elites collect information on Russia's true intentions. This entails dangerous risks. If only some elites attempt sedition, but not enough of them, there is no safety in numbers. First-movers, and their families, will be identified and subject to threats.[8]

The slide toward civil war begins with a crisis that raises the stakes of politics. Various players have to reassess each other's intentions. The crisis itself is an unanticipated event – an earthquake, an invasion, a currency collapse, or an irregular leadership change. The loyalty of a military is rarely tested as it is after an authoritarian leader dies unexpectedly or after an extra-constitutional change of power. The crisis is more dangerous if it provides new information revealing an absence of state capacity. All states benefit from *awe*, but this reverence can be rendered ineffective. If government buildings are obliterated by a natural disaster, and then a state cannot organize a response to search the rubble for survivors, citizens learn state capacity is weaker than previously believed. As *awe* disappears, anarchy can become more frightening. Time can seem to be moving faster as powerful emotions shape perceptions of events.

Common knowledge of rules and expectations of law enforcement can also be undercut by political crises. Citizens can gather information during extended standoffs between protesters and police. Say protesters converge in, and refuse to disperse from, the main square of the capital. Say that days turn into months. Say that clashes with riot police are indecisive. Clearly the capacity of the state to coerce and deter was never as absolute as had been assumed. One might infer that the state's coercive capacity was weaker than previously assumed. And if the state cannot even control its own capital, where the state can easily deploy elite troops, how could it possibly have eyes everywhere in the periphery (where the state may be unable to dispatch elite troops)? If seditionist leaders organize publicly using social media, and they are

[8] Formally, we call this intra-community risk of punishment μ.

not silenced, jailed, or sent to psychiatric prisons, this reveals information about the state's capacity to selectively punish dissident thinkers.

A crisis is especially dangerous if it results from the unexpected success of large-scale, steadily growing, self-declared "revolutionary" political processes that promise fundamental changes to the social structure or the country's geopolitical orientation. A literal act of nature (an earthquake or a stroke affecting the leader) may reveal a lack of state capacity. When a social movement can harness energy from grievances that have been "pent up" for a long time and challenge the state directly, it almost always reveals a lack of state capacity (since it begs the question of how the regime leadership allowed things to get so out of hand).[9] Political earthquakes are especially high stakes because they promise to change the institutional rules of the future: whose children are more likely to be rich and whose are more likely to be poor, who may have an edge in accessing state jobs or resources, who will be eligible to vote or access power.

To summarize: The crisis initiates a one-shot, high-stakes game. The primary actors are elites.[10] The path of play is the following: (1) Russian-speaking community elites either coordinate on sedition or do not; (2a) if elites coordinate, they articulate a demand and threaten to secede if their demand is not met; the state elites either accept the demand or opt to repress; (2b) if elites do not coordinate, state elites set the autonomy agenda, making a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the community; each elite within the community evaluates the offer and can either accept it or refuse (which amounts to sedition and invites targeted repression); and (3) if there is repression, the Kremlin decides whether to intervene militarily on behalf of seditious elites.

The Onset of War in Ukraine

The puzzle of war initiation can now be framed more sharply: Why did some Russian-speaking communities persistently issue demands so

[9] Fearon (2004, especially 406–12) argues that domestic social crises based on pent-up self-determination claims (e.g., an identity group instigating a domestic crisis to "call for external help," organizing with a terminal goal of partition, annexation, or alteration of interstate borders) are especially dangerous in the modern interstate system.

[10] This simple account of community-level politics does not distinguish between different types of elites. In our empirical chapters on politics in Ukraine's East, we often describe situations in which well-established institutional elites found

much higher than the post-Maidan government in Kyiv could accept? Our answer, clearer in 2022 than it could have been in 2014, is that both Donbas actors and Kyiv elites miscalculated Kremlin intent.

Before 2013, Russian-speaking community elites in Donbas had taken over much of the Ukrainian state through electoral means. They were ruthless and well organized, but they relied on elections and were nonviolent. Taking up arms against the state was not a "real" political strategy considered by most Donbas voters, most of the time.[11] The crisis that started on Maidan in the fall of 2013 gradually changed this. By January 2014, it became clear that the Ukrainian state lacked the capacity to stop protesters. This was partly because the state was not ruthless enough, partly because its tactics backfired in the social imagination, and partly because the cause being demonstrated for had huge support. This support came from the Ukrainian West, perennially unhappy with the political weight of Russian-speakers further East, and also from a variety of liberal constituencies with allies in Western Europe and North America. By the time the state began to rely on mass indiscriminate repression, rebellion had spread well beyond Kyiv, paralyzing the Ukrainian West.[12]

Rapid political change can create waves of destabilizing uncertainty. The decision by Ukrainian President Yanukovych to flee the capital on February 21, 2014 was shocking. His majority in parliament collapsed. It was a de facto regime change. The state security service members that had been fighting to preserve the old order, humiliated and demoralized, gave up. Russia called it a coup by fascists. In the next few days, Russian television selectively amplified and distorted incidents to stoke fears within Russian-speaking communities. The Kremlin sent troops to facilitate the rapid exit of Crimea from the polity. The Russian army entered Crimea, and it suddenly became possible that the same *might* happen elsewhere – which altered local calculations in Donbas,

themselves challenged by new entrants into the political arena coming out of the woodwork or emerging from the street. In our stylization, these "new elites" were always present in communities, just not visible until the crisis occurred.

[11] For the most part, the claims by fringe groups failed to cross (or even approach) what Lustick (1993, 42) calls an "ideological hegemony" threshold of political contestation, which is to say that the ideas did not pose threats to regime integrity. Chapter 3 discusses a few exceptions.

[12] Had there not been a regime change at the center, it seems probable to us that there would have been an antistate insurgency centered on Lviv (and possibly even a civil war – though we see this as unlikely).

Kharkiv, and Odesa. Ukraine was, in important respects, a completely different country by March 22, 2014 than one month before. No one knew where the territorial changes would end.

Observing this, other would-be seditious elites in Russian-speaking communities were forced to make agonizing decisions without enough trustworthy information. Could they replicate Crimea's success? How would they be treated if they tried and failed? Maidan was revolutionary change – but how would their families fare in the new social contract, which promised sweeping implications for political and property rights? If the Party of Regions had not been so internally divided and delegitimized by the Maidan events, it is likely that more communities would have coordinated, with more coherent demands leveraged on the capital – but the Party of Regions was gone.

The temporary breakdown of *awe* also introduced new political actors, as community elites found themselves pressured by street actors (both pro- and anti-Maidan) that they had no ability unable to control. All of the Russian-speaking communities contain large numbers of unemployed men, marginally employed youth, religio-charismatic anarchists, football hooligans, and fringe political activists. Instead of elites being drawn from the "normal" pool of union bosses, party organizers, teachers, elders, or oligarchs within the community, in some cases charismatic people emerged from the former group and proved effective at organizing, convincing others to accept risks, and using their social location to form network linkages and try to "push" their communities toward a cascade.

Russia plays a destabilizing role in our account, but ours is not a theory of seditious plots conceived, organized, or controlled from Moscow. Russian-speaking community elites were the primary agents, bargaining with central elites while being pressured by the street. War is the result of bad guesswork during a crisis. Elites are acting with incomplete information. Agreeing on a compromise is difficult since the crisis has thrown some of the model parameters into dispute. Estimations might change not only as a result of the crisis that begins the game, but also because of interactions that are haphazard, because elites are watching misleading television statements or observing troop movements and drawing the wrong inferences. More specifically, according to our model, war occurs because Donbas elites asked for too much (anticipating Russian intervention), yielding a domestic police action (because Kyiv did *not* anticipate a Russian intervention would take the

form it did). In the end, Russia intervened.[13] This only happened after many missed signals and off-ramps that might have avoided war.

To scaffold our theory of civil war outbreak, we wish to emphasize two salient findings from the civil war literature: (1) the causal role of emotions unleashed by a threat of group-status-hierarchy reversals, and (2) the military challenge of urban pacification by armies equipped with heavy weapons but no training in counterinsurgency operations.

The internal collapse of the Party of Regions and the triumphant success of demonstrators at Maidan altered the balance of power between the Ukrainian East and West. The monumental decision by the legislature to repeal the official status of the Russian language as their first order of business after President Yanukovych was removed was probably driven by emotion, not calculation. Among ourselves, we see a decision driven largely by spite, efforts to reverse humiliation, and desire for symbolic payback – not the sort of cold, forward-looking calculation that our model assumes.[14]

The repeal of the language law was just one of many examples in this book of an emotional decision that was not very well thought out. Following Petersen (2002, 2017), we recognize that emotions can change how information is processed and what beliefs and preferences are formed in the minds of participants. Emotion is not synonymous with irrationality. Emotions have cognitive antecedents that can be studied. When citizens notice that more and more of their neighbors are attending rallies for far-right parties that would have been "fringe" before the crisis, it is a reminder that the politics of antiliberal exclusion was always possible – just not a strategic choice under prior constraints.[15] As it becomes increasingly clear that those constraints are

[13] In any setting in which actors may not assess the strategic parameters in the same way, they are potentially susceptible to bluffing. If gains can be extracted by strategic dissimulation (bluffing, or theatrical sedition), then, as in poker, eventually someone has to "call" (Gartzke 1999). In the higher-stakes context we are describing, the analogy to "calling" is state-initiated militarized repression.

[14] For descriptions of spite, malice, and envy, see Elster (1999, 62, 68–70, 164–203). Chapters 3, 4, and 6 will discuss this law further. The practical effect of the repeal was to restore the pre-2012 status quo (no official status for Russian, though with Russian used as the language of regional administration), but the symbolism of "banning" Russian was quite potent, as we shall see.

[15] De Figueiredo and Weingast (1999) argue that in these settings, even small probabilities of outcomes can trigger rationalizable defensive reactions.

disappearing, the possibility of terrible outcomes becomes more real, and thus more emotionally salient.

Often the assumption in conflict studies is that a descent into anarchy amplifies the emotion of *fear*. Citizens come to be afraid of each other, or afraid of state security services, or both, and often reasonably so.[16]

Another distinctive emotion is *resentment* – usually triggered by an expectation or realization of group status reversals. The prospect that sudden political change might lead to institutionalized subordination, below a group previously lower in the status hierarchy, can be a motivator to violent action.[17] The highest risks involve explicit ethnicized discrimination – the prospect of a group being thrown out of power, and the institutional rules changed to make this subordination of status permanent.[18] Having the rules changed, as a result of the irregular transfer of power, in a way that limits your (or your children's) ability to ever return to power elicits an emotional response distinct from fear. The prospect that new elites (and their children) may benefit from the new social order at the expense of old elites (and their children) can unleash massive energy.[19]

[16] Posen (1993, 32) identifies indefensible pockets ("islands") of ethnic groups as a special risk for defensive mobilization spirals of this sort (magnified by the impossibility of distinguishing offensive from defensive intentions by weapon type). When citizens notice that violent, antisocial groups are self-organizing into citizens' self-defense militias, and that these irregular infantry units can just as easily go on the offense as hold neighborhoods defensively, it can yield arms racing.

[17] Petersen (2002: 40) defines *resentment* as caused by "the perception that one's group is located in an unwarranted subordinate position on a status hierarchy." Coding criteria for identifying ethnic status hierarchies in multiethnic societies can be found in Petersen (2011, 142). If subordination in a status hierarchy is foreseeable below a group that is not only resented, but also *hated*, the risks of violence are even higher for a variety of reasons discussed in Petersen (2002, 62–8) and Elster (1999, 64–8).

[18] For a treatment of the sources of fear, see Fearon (1995a, 1998). In Ukraine, status competition described in Chapter 3 is (we argue) not so much ethnic, as intra-ethnic: the fear that Eastern Ukrainians would be subordinated to Western Ukrainians.

[19] Empirics are contested, but studies suggesting a link between institutionalized ethnic discrimination and civil war include Davenport (2000), Wimmer, Cederman, and Min (2009), and Cederman, Wimmer, and Min (2010). The review in Davenport, Melander, and Reagan (2018) on how this point is treated in the "peace studies" literature (with a general focus on outbreak and termination, at the expense of the quality of peace) is highly valuable and complements our bottom-line prescriptions.

The second salient finding in the civil war literature pertains to the correlation between the kinds of military operations employed by armies and overall levels of civilian victimization. Insurgents sometimes employ asymmetric strategies against state military opponents, interspersing themselves among civilians, using human shields, and daring militaries to strike back with indiscriminate force. Against an insurgent army employing these tactics, only unusually disciplined forces with special training can avoid inflicting high civilian casualties as they pacify the enemy.

When they were tasked with fighting the "terrorists" emerging in a few Eastern Russian-speaking communities, the Ukrainian military was not initially prepared for urban counterinsurgency operations. Assaults were spearheaded by volunteer battalions. These soldiers lacked training for complex urban operations. Both sides in the Donbas war used weapons that could not discriminate between civilian and military targets. What temporarily introduced conventional military symmetry to the conflict, and reduced overall levels of civilian victimization, was the stabilization of the front lines resulting from the arrival of Russian regular troops in late summer 2014.[20] In 2022, the Russian regular troops altered their mission, moved the line of control, and began attacking population centers (events summarized in Chapter 8, ending our book).

Toward an Analytic Narrative

Beginning in the fall of 2013, coordinated street protests raised the political stakes in Ukraine. The formation of self-defense militias, protest violence, the seizure of government buildings, attacks on police stations, the establishment of checkpoints on roads leading to the capital – all of this was unprecedented. This escalation in the contentious political repertoire, and the abrupt fall of a Russia-oriented Ukrainian president and government, paved the way for Russia to seize Crimea with minimal resistance. Seditionist militants in the East began to imagine the Russian military would help them, as well. In Donbas, after a month of unrest, government buildings were seized. War followed.

[20] This point applies largely to the period following the second Minsk Accords in February 2015. After a four-month lull, indiscriminate shelling resumed in January–February 2015, mostly from Russia-backed forces, causing a spike in civilian deaths.

We describe these events using an analytic narrative approach.[21] Analytic narratives are tools for disciplining empirical description without sacrificing richness of contextual detail.[22] The modeling enterprise forces scholars to "reconsider the narrative and then to re-evaluate the extent to which key elements of the narrative lie outside the proposed theory" (Bates et al. 2000, 687). Formalization also provides a measure of confidence that analytical rigor is being maintained without forcing readers to break narrative prose for clunky hypothesis testing (Bates 1998). Deductive rigor disciplines the narrative. Reductionism commits us to a single "fundamental utility," or the main benefit pursued by actors, for our study. As Levi (1999, 155–6) puts it, "the assumption of a fundamental utility radically simplifies the world and the people within it, but, if done with attention to the problem, it simplifies the world realistically and usefully."[23]

In our theory, actors are trying to maximize *security* in an uncertain environment. Individuals and groups are potentially threatened, have access to arms, and are considering taking steps to defend themselves. Security calculations are magnified by rapid and unexpected institutional breakdown. Security in our study refers to both *securing physical safety* as state institutions weaken, and also to *securing cultural preservation* for a minority community from a hostile majority.

The members of the Eastern Ukrainian communities in our analytic narrative have complex identity repertoires. In censuses and surveys,

[21] The theory generation process began inductively, with observation of Ukrainian politics during the 2014–2015 period after Maidan. The initial draft of the narrative – material that would become Chapters 6 and 7 – was written prior to any mathematical formalization, and intentionally leaned heavily on sources from Ukraine to maximize local validity. We decided, as a guiding principle, that action emerging from within what we call Russian-speaking communities was the most critical, and so our formal utility assumptions, and the analytic narrative in this book, will try to capture the perspective of these elites as much as possible.

[22] Identifying actors, defining a sequence of strategic interactions among them, reducing the choice set available to these actors to something manageable, specifying the structure of information (e.g., signals actors send each other to inform others of their beliefs), and the payoffs to actors for choosing different strategies – some find this reductive exercise plodding and tedious, but others find formalization makes it easier to generalize from one case to another.

[23] Levi cites Scharpf (1990, 484–5) on this point. If an economist investigates market behaviors with a simplifying assumption that all firms are trying to maximize wealth, it leaves out a lot, but the body of conclusions flows from a conversation bounded by similar premises.

asked to define themselves in terms of a nationality (ethnic belonging) and a language of origin (*ridna mova*/*rodnoi yazyk*, generally, if misleadingly, translated as mother tongue), respondents in Eastern Ukraine often chafe at the attempts to impose classification categories. Ukrainian-speakers live close by Russian-speakers. One complication is that many self-identified Ukrainians claim Russian as their language of origin. Even more prefer to use Russian in their daily interactions. The Ukrainian dominant narrative presumes that a self-defined Ukrainian identifies with the Ukrainian state irrespective of language spoken. The Russian dominant narrative (Putin's so-called *Russkii mir*) presumes a Russian-speaker identifies with the Russian nation – and, by extension, the current Russian nation-state.

Our model assumes that identity can be reconfigured by strategic behavior. In the post-Maidan uncertainty, the main actors – elites and street militants – revealed themselves as either political Ukrainians or political Russians by taking actions oriented toward defending the Ukrainian state or embracing Russian irredentist policy.[24] Since the identity markers distinguishing Ukrainians from Russians are more political than cultural, we approach the concept of minority through a constructivist lens, as well. To say that Russian-speakers form a minority does not mean they were a numerical/demographic minority, but that they found themselves in the *political* minority. After Maidan, some feared a minority status was being institutionalized.

We describe Russian-speaking communities with nationalists on both sides itching for a fight – activating a Russian or Ukrainian political identity by flying flags, firing guns, saying prayers, and getting tattoos. Many high-risk actions were attempts to signal to other community members that a social "tip" was imminent or underway. Outside Crimea, most Russian-speaking communities "tipped back" toward loyalty to Kyiv.

Importantly, we posit no theory of Kremlin decision-making processes. We do not need to psychologize Putin to tell our story. We have little reliable information on his thought processes. For our argument

[24] On the rise of political identities in a complex identity environment during a conflict, see Dragojević (2019). The core members of the leading Ukrainian volunteer battalions in 2014 were Russian-speakers from the East. They may have been culturally indistinguishable from the political Russians they were fighting against, but they acted as political Ukrainians and radical Ukrainian nationalists.

to cohere, all that is necessary is to notice that Ukrainian political elites in the spring of 2014, at the center or the periphery, did not have reliable information, either. It is unrealistic to assume that local actors within Ukraine could correctly make inferences about Russian behavior and then backward induct. Uncertainty about Russian policy objectives and military designs is critical to our account. The question of "what the Kremlin is signaling" with a military action can be an endless font of speculation.[25] In this book we focus instead on choices and calculations within Eastern Ukrainian communities regarding Russia's intentions, since these matters can be assessed with empirical data.

Complete analysis of a simple multistage game can be found in Appendix A. The purpose of the model is to reduce from local complexity, highlight essentials, and ease comparisons to other cases. While many Ukrainians remember Maidan, the invasion of Crimea, and the war in Donbas as a chain of unique historical events, we see them as an example of something that occurs at unpredictable intervals in many societies: *temporary* weakness of state institutions, with expectations that strong state institutions will endure. Status hierarchies in the reformed state become salient.

There are just a few parts of Ukraine with critical masses of ethnic Russian minorities sufficiently close to the Russian border to have a reasonable chance at successful secession (high p). In our account there was a military intervention, but little killing in Crimea. War broke out only in the Donbas region. We attribute this to an unusual cascade of events with local roots. Everywhere in the East, one mainly observed thousands of mostly anti-Kremlin Russian-speakers taking up arms in militias to control the streets. At times they clashed with pro-Russia militias, defending their cities against a perceived Russian invasion. At other times, elites stayed safely indoors.

In our chapters we compare outcomes across many different Russian-speaking communities. Table 2.1 summarizes our book's

[25] Why didn't the Russian army intervene in Donbas in April/May 2014? When it did in August 2014, why did it "stop pushing" at the line of control – but then move that line in 2022? Were threats of retaliatory punishment (economic sanctions) from other great powers a deterrent? Were the costs of occupying a territory housing a hostile Russian-speaking population salient? Were Kremlin elites acting emotionally? Improvising? Miscalculating? Acting on incomplete intelligence? We can speculate, but no better than others.

Table 2.1 *Analytic narrative structure*

	Physical site of contestation	Key parameter values	Coordination mechanism	Response from Kyiv to autonomy demands	Russian-speaking community payoffs (often x^*)
Before Maidan (Ch. 3)	Entire country. Focal point in capital city *K*	p = variable by [geo/demo]graphy a = low, but > 0 μ = low	Party of Regions (succeeds)	**Accept:** Brokered autonomy + expectation that power will rotate	Brokered autonomy (x^*)
Irredentist Annexation (Ch. 5)	Urban centers in Crimea	p = very high a = 1 μ = zero	Little Green Men + Rump Party of Regions (succeeds)	**Concede:** Unchallenged secession of Crimea	Best: Bloodless homecoming ($x^*=1$)
The "Russian Spring" (Ch. 6)	East/Southern Russian-speaking communities	p = variable by [geo/demo]graphy a = nonzero μ = high	Russian television (fails)	**N/A:** No offer, no coordination. (Terminal payoff: enforced assimilation)	Coordination fails + vigilantism ($p-c+\varepsilon-\mu$)
The Donbas War (Ch. 7)	Communities in Donbas region, including DNR/LNR	p = fairly high a = high, but signals mixed μ = nonzero	Street power overwhelms old Party of Regions elites	**Offer rejected:** Domestic police action → internationalized conflict	Worst: Conventional war ($p-c$, high c)
The War: 2015–2022 (Ch. 8)	Entire country, but changed de facto borders. Focal point in capital city *K*	p = variable by [geo/demo]graphy a = nonzero, raised starting fall 2021 μ = moderate	Russia's military presence in DNR/LNR	**Reject:** Frozen conflict in DNR/ LNR, enforced assimilation elsewhere	$x^*<$ in Ch. 3 due to absence of Party of Region voters, Crimea & DNR/LNR. High *C* starting 2022.

empirical strategy. The parameters that matter the most in our causal narrative are: (1) the probability of successful insurgent secession (p), (2) the probability Russia would intervene militarily in a police action (a, a source of uncertainty), and (3) the local risk of antisedition vigilante violence in a community (μ).

Chapter 3 provides background on Ukraine since independence. One of the most important points of departure between our book and others in this space is the decision to take seriously the *choice* of political identity – in this case Russian. A political identity is the output of a bargaining process, not a culturally driven (let alone primordial) outcome within communities. This is an assumption that allows us to analyze seditious community politics as sometimes being theatrical. This more malleable, constructivist language, in the shadow of Brubaker's (1996) triadic configuration, also draws attention to something obvious, but uncomfortable, to many Ukrainians: between 1991 and 2014, Russian-speaking communities have been able to subtly and indirectly extort the Ukrainian center with the implied threat of renegotiating the border with Russia.[26] *Coordinated sedition* in the model occurs when a critical threshold of high-status community members embraced the Russian narrative with the intent of destabilizing Ukrainian national politics – "shaking up the center" to maximize their leverage. To do so, they become politically "Russian" in order to bargain. In a simple setting which reduces the choice set to a simple binary, the performances of a few elites "activating" their "latent" Russian identity can potentially tip a community.

Though it has become common shorthand to describe the Party of Regions as a "Russian Party" or nefarious conduit for Kremlin influence, we believe it is more analytically useful to imagine it as a machine for aggregating preferences across multiple constituencies. Coordination is achieved most efficiently through institutions (Weingast 1997; Roemer 2019, 11) and the Party of Regions, which largely carried the Eastern Ukrainian vote in elections between 2002 and 2012, served that coordination function within Russian-speaking communities.[27] Even though the Russian language was nearly hegemonic in urban centers of the

[26] We are not originators of this point. Van Evera (1997, 40–1), though often tagged with primordialism, made a very similar argument, as did Van Houten (1998).

[27] Tsebelis (1990, 38) argues that iterative institutionalized settings are the most appropriate for rational choice approaches.

East, many Russian-speakers were anxious about the political dominance of Ukrainian-speakers at the center. The Party of Regions – and in the 1990s, the Communist Party and other Eastern-based parties – made political capital out of these concerns. Compromises were struck among elites (until a Donbas-driven language law in 2012 severed the political equilibrium). In the one instance where *ethnic* Russians formed a majority of the population, the peninsula of Crimea, additional autonomy protections were brokered. Eastern Ukrainian community elites had bargained by provoking crises at the center more than once, with Russia casting a shadow over regional bargaining within Ukraine.

Since the sequencing of actions is important for model predictions, we provide evidence that demands for autonomy were often initiated in the periphery (through community-level mobilization, sometimes backed by an overt threat of secession), and foisted on the center as take-it-or-leave-it offers.

Chapter 4 describes the crisis – the Maidan events – which collapsed the Party of Regions, initiated the game, and, in our causal narrative, started the war. Maidan symbolized the rejection – by a mostly Western Ukrainian constituency with a high potential for mobilization – of the explicit pro-Russia reorientation of the Yanukovych government (the abrupt decision to drop an EU trade agreement) after decades of balancing Western and Russian interests. It also marked the first time since independence that state agents – an elite police unit – used excessive force against protesters. This prompted a radical wing of protesters to use violence against the police as a strategic response to break a political impasse. The escalation of violence ultimately impelled Party of Regions MPs to defect and officials to flee, ending the Yanukovych government. The irregular (extra-electoral) transfer of power to a coalition of opposition parties was a source of anxiety, heightened by a symbolic vote to repeal the 2012 language law that had granted official status to Russian in Eastern Ukraine.

All of this created two high-powered geopolitical narratives, one espoused by Western officials and the other by Russian officials, which persist to this day. In the first, the illegitimate violence against protesters finished the regime. In the second, the illegitimate violence against the police overthrew the government. Fears of status reversals became salient. Some anti-Maidan protesters who began to organize in Crimea, Donbas, and elsewhere in Eastern Ukraine formed militias, acting on the second narrative. In that sense, the roots of Ukraine's civil war can

be traced back to the square. The question was whether elites in peripheral communities would accept the first storyline or accept the second storyline and opt for *sedition*.

Chapter 5 describes the rapid coordination by elites in Crimea on sedition. Crimea distinguished itself from the rest of Ukraine by the speed of coordination; the drama played out over days, not months. There was also never a pro-Ukraine self-defense group attempting to control the streets, due to the presence of Soviet veterans, Russian military units based in Sevastopol, and – just days into the crisis – the arrival of Russian soldiers in the capital. It seems to us that the Kremlin's preferred sequence would have been for the local parliament to signal its intent to separate through a referendum and then invite Russian troops for protection. When a massive pro-Ukraine demonstration by Crimean Tatars prevented parliament from voting, however, Russian soldiers were sent in to seize parliament (and government buildings) and the vote took place. In the language of our model, prior to the arrival of Russian soldiers, on February 26, Tatar demonstrations and fear of retribution from Kyiv inhibited coordination. With Russia's arrival, the fear subsided ($\mu = 0$). This did not guarantee the outcome, but choosing the higher-payoff equilibrium in a lower-risk social environment made elites' coordination easier. By March 1, *coordinated sedition* was a fait accompli.

Why did Russia intervene in Crimea so rapidly? We believe that despite the uncertainty over the degree of Crimean Tatar resistance and the loyalty of local elites, the extremely high value that the Russian military put on maintaining access for its Black Sea Fleet to the deep-water port at Sevastopol was probably the deciding factor. The Party of Regions networks served a coordinating function, repurposing state institutions to legitimize the Russian presence and ensuring institutional continuity. Crimeans voted to leave Ukraine, the Kremlin argued it was a victory for self-determination, the new government in Kyiv was checkmated, and an orderly evacuation of rump Ukrainian military units occurred. *Coordinated sedition*, however, would not unfold so neatly in Donbas, Kharkiv, Odesa, or anywhere else.

Chapter 6 describes the chaotic "Russian Spring." As everyone watched Russia's de facto borders expanding and Ukraine's contracting with the annexation of Crimea, the existential question was whether the Ukrainian state was in danger elsewhere in Eastern Ukraine. Since the Party of Regions had imploded at the center, dozens of Russian-speaking communities each had to extemporaneously decide whether sedition or loyalty to Kyiv would prevail. Once the mechanism of Party

of Regions cross-oblast aggregation broke down, in the 24–48 hours after the Kharkiv Congress on February 22 (the day that President Yanukovych was removed), peripheral elites were on their own. We describe elites in different communities trying to second-guess the center and keep a lid on the explosive energy erupting from the streets, as anti-Maidan protests became a regular feature in several Eastern oblasts. Russian television provided a script that delegitimized the Ukrainian state and amplified a threat of domination by "fascists," magnifying both the threat of physical risks for those considering sedition (μ) and the political risks of inaction. But who would act out this script?

Most elites were cautious of overt sedition. Russia attempted, but failed, to recruit established Russian-language-speaking community elites in Ukraine's South and East, and secessionist uprisings were not attempted in most Russian-speaking communities. An abortive uprising in Kharkiv was put down through improvisation. For a four-month period, between February and May, elites carefully weighed their options. Finally, after a fire in Odesa killed nearly fifty pro-Russia militants, anti-Kyiv protests died down virtually everywhere – except in Donbas.

Why? The standard answer is that Russian-speaking Ukrainian elites did not *believe* in a map revision based on *Russkii mir* (or its related construct of *Novorossiya*, Russian territorial claims going back to the era of Catherine the Great) as a viable focal point for *seditious* social coordination (Roeder 2018, 94–5). Surveys conducted in Ukraine's East (excluding Donbas and Crimea) showed that only 15 percent of respondents supported *Novorossiya* as a basis for separation from Ukraine (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2017, 33). Survey behaviors can be imperfect gauges of sentiment, but it is reasonable to assume that most people did not believe in the legitimacy of Putin's project. It could also be that overt behavior challenging the Ukrainian state after Maidan was too risky with guns on the street. Russian-speaking elites may have feared vigilante violence, which became indistinguishable from state repression once the government legitimized volunteer battalions to go and fight in Donbas. The fear was amplified by the narrative on Russian television. Separately, elites might have intuited that bargaining and escalation processes might get out of hand – especially in communities close to the Russian border, and particularly by late May 2014, when it had become clear that Kyiv's policy response to sedition would be fully militarized (e.g., artillery shelling).

What did failed or partially-successful community-level attempts at seditious coordination actually look like, in practice? They were very

messy. In the end, very few communities tipped toward sedition. The chapter describes street crowds pushing each other, elites making speeches to empty rooms, keyboard warriors fact-checking each other's assertions or spreading disinformation as fast as they could, and Russian flags being raised over buildings only to be taken down overnight. Diverse social actors were anxiously searching for information and trying to update their strategies. Elites in Kyiv had to choose to engage in a police action without certain knowledge of whether Russia would come to the aid of rebels – and indeed, whether it already had. Confusion about whether enemies were local militias or cross-border Russians was a defining feature of what Kyiv called an "antiterrorist operation" (ATO).

Chapter 7 describes the collapse of social order in Eastern Donbas. A population, which featured a plurality or near majority of self-described ethnic Russians, turned in on itself, then rejected Maidan completely. New social actors emerged and new militias found themselves in control of the territory, organized voting exercises (in an attempt to ape Crimea), and refused to recognize the legitimacy of the central government. The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) emerged on maps. Military miscalculation occurred at many stages on the escalation ladder. Seizing government buildings and hoping Russian assistance would arrive to bail them out (with brokered amnesty) may have been a bad bet, but militia leaders in the Donbas were not gambling irrationally. The confused sequencing of moves and countermoves on the part of local commanders, and the emergence of social actors from the streets (bypassing community elites) is discussed. Consistent with our model, even at the peak of conventional momentum in August 2014, it was not obvious to anyone whether Russia would actually send troops into Eastern Ukraine to assert control. Actors in Donbas overplayed their hand. Russia's presence has internationalized the conflict, and quietly facilitated coordination since 2015.

Prior to Russia's military arrival, we describe how "tidal" political processes on the streets quickly hardened what were previously fluid identity choices.[28] The Luhansk Council, in Donbas, was the only

[28] With the breakdown of institutions, in our narrative the relevant process-based mechanisms of coordination on *sedition* strategies, where they occurred, were informational cascades (Lohmann 1994), herd behaviors (Banerjee 1992; Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1992), and likely various kinds of norms (family/clan and honor-based ties, reciprocity-based communal ties) (Petersen 2001).

regional parliament in the Southeast to issue a direct challenge to the post-Maidan government in Kyiv in the Crimea model. The far more significant Donetsk Council did not follow suit. What occurred, instead, was a process whereby the street overwhelmed old institutions as it became obvious that coordination by elites was not emergent. (Even in Luhansk, the council stopped functioning.) In the language of the model, we would say that there was no coordination in the first period, a hastily improvised autonomy offer from *K* (sending police but ordering them not to fire), and rejection of the offer by new elites who came out of the woodwork. The realization that no law enforcement body was consistently making arrests emboldened some groups. The emergence of new local players who dragged their communities into sustained *sedition* is critical to our narrative. In any event, miscalculation occurred. It was common for anti-Maidan protesters across the East to take to the streets armed and prepare to face-off against pro-Maidan protesters (μ), with hopes Russia might intervene to alter the momentum of events (a). In the Donbas, eventually, Russian troops did arrive. When they did, they inflicted huge costs on the Ukrainian government (C) in defense of "their people" living in this territory, but only after local volunteers demonstrated an ability to hold buildings for weeks (p).

Chapter 8 stands apart from the rest of the book. First it describes the aftermath of the Russian military arrival: "frozen conflicts" in Crimea and the DNR/LNR. The geopolitical status quo had not changed between 2015 and 2021. In Ukrainian-controlled territories, however, there were substantial social changes. Consistent with model predictions, the diminishing bargaining power of Russian-speaking community elites amplified the policy preferences of the Ukrainian West. Ukrainian language policy removed the teaching of Russian as a first language from high schools and memory politics emphasized the historical break with Russia and the Soviet Union. The failure to reconstitute anything like the Party of Regions that might allow Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine to coordinate efficiently facilitated these policy changes. In the language of the model, a *brokered autonomy* equilibrium was replaced by an *enforced assimilation* equilibrium. The second part of the chapter describes the barriers to conflict-resolution sequencing, demobilization, and reconstruction that prevailed in 2015–2021. Sequencing was difficult because of commitment problems in settlement, that is, the fear that the other party might renege. Finally, we describe Putin's 2022 decision to considerably escalate the interstate war, raising costs C.

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successful military secession by R
npted insurgency (repression of R by K)
at Russia intervenes militarily
d on K if Russia intervenes militarily
ity" to 2nd secession attempt by I if M<N in stage 1
ffer by R that K should accept (= p+aC+ε)

ions (formal cheat sheet)

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Appendix B
Formalizing a Story of Why Putin Chose War

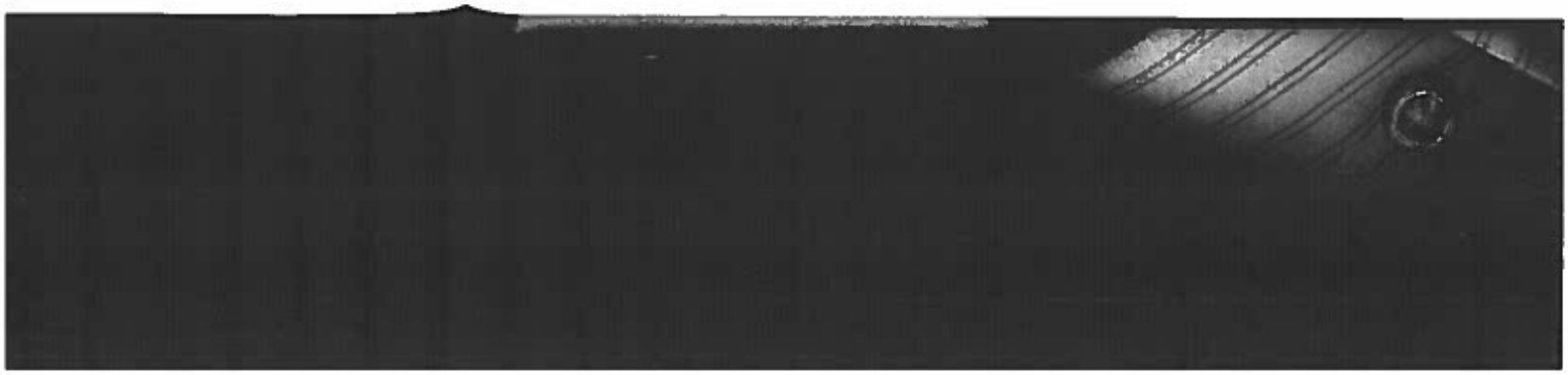
This short appendix formalizes a familiar account of war in Ukraine as a result of geopolitical bargaining. The assumptions informing this model are not objectively true. They are defensible and seem (to us) to reflect Putin's beliefs based on his statements.

We begin by assuming a single policy dimension with utilities that are zero-sum. Russia's gain of influence in the Ukrainian polity is the West's loss, and vice versa. In international politics, unlike domestic politics, there is no third-party enforcement, so the only stable bargains that emerge have to be self-enforcing. Figure B.1 visualizes a range of possible bargaining outcomes. *R*, *W1*, and *W2* represent *ideal points*. Both *R (Russia)* and *W (the West)* prefer outcomes closer to their ideal to those further away.

Points closer to *R* represent limited Ukrainian freedom of action in foreign affairs and more deference to Russian preferences. Points further right represent greater Ukrainian freedom of action to make choices aligned with Western preferences. If a bargain is not reached that satisfies both Russia and the West, war occurs as Russia attempts to destroy Ukrainian institutions by force (*f*). *f* is drawn closer to *R* than to *W1* (or *W2*).

f is not good from Russia's point of view, but it is preferable to any bargain right of Russia's break point. It is drawn at a point as far from *R* on the right as *f* is from *R* on the left. *f* is terrible for the West – worse, in this two-dimensional stylization, than "giving" Ukraine to Russia unambiguously. Why? Because Russia has decided that it has vital interests in Ukraine, and the West has decided it does not.[1]

[1] Following Schelling (1960, 187–203), we mean Russian leaders are more willing than their Western counterparts to endure huge risks over Ukraine-related specifics. Relative willingness to accept "not a small *bit* of retaliation, but a small *probability* of a massive war" (199) favors Russia. Figure B.1 makes it explicit that strategic stability between Russia and the West matters more to Western decision-makers than the fate of Ukraine-specific outcomes.



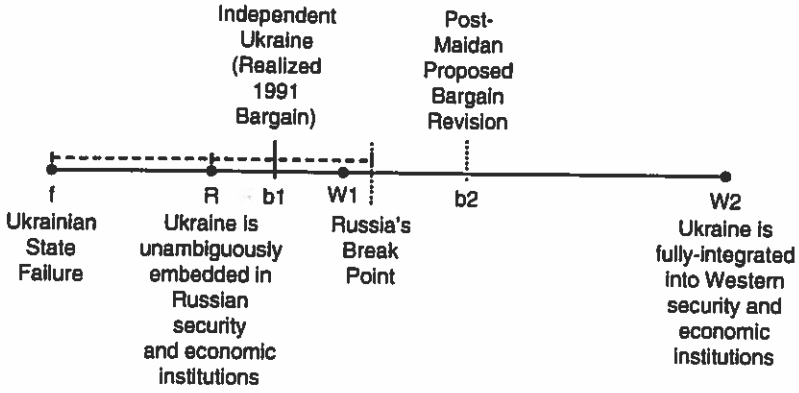


Figure B.1 Bargaining over Ukraine

R, the Russian ideal point, stays fixed in this stylization. Russia still desires what it has desired since 1990: a pliant Ukraine embedded in Russocentric security institutions. Western policy preferences do change over time in the stylization. *W1* was the West's ideal point in 1990. *W2* was the West's ideal point in 2013–2014. *W1* indicates more willingness to cede Ukraine to Russia as part of a geopolitical "sphere of influence." *W2* indicates changes in values or priorities – or perhaps just widely recognized shifts in relative power (both hard and soft power – see Chapter 1).[2]

Movement rightward from *f* to anywhere on the line segment between *R* and Russia's break point is at least a good for one party and no worse for the other (Pareto-improving). With many Pareto-improving bargains superior to *f*, and no supranational institutions to coordinate on (or enforce) a compromise, it is difficult to predict exactly which point on the *RW1* segment or *RW2* segment will be selected (Schelling 1960, 21–2, 54–74). All we can say with certainty is that it will not be to the right of Russia's break point, since any of those bargains would be worse than *f* from Russia's perspective.

To tell a serviceable story of postindependence Ukraine from the vantage point of Russia, begin with the geometric "fair" bargain *b1*, exactly between *R* and *W1*. Wind the clock forward twenty-five years. Replacing *W1* with *W2* visualizes gradual preference divergence

[2] This should not be decoded as our opinion of which actor is the "real" revisionist – but a gap widened between *W* and *R* on Ukraine-related issues over time.

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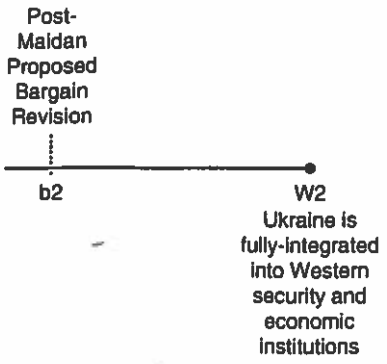
[3] For a formal treatment of arguments
Powell (2006).



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between Russia and the West (described early in Chapter 4). Suffice to say that some components of a previously "fair" bargain of *b1* came to feel like concessions to Russia for many Ukrainians, and also to diverse constituencies in the West. The row over the EU Trade Agreement and the Eurasian Economic Union was framed by Moscow's diplomats as formally locking-in aspects of the old bargain *b1* (again, see Chapter 4). It was framed in Western capitals differently, as a coercive attempt to revise the bargain leftward, closer to *R*. None of this could be resolved peacefully – hence Maidan, Crimea, the Donetsk People's Republic/Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR), Minsk, and all the rest (material in Chapters 4 – 8).

The growing gap also raised the problem of commitment. If Russia permitted a revision to the new "fair" bargain *b2*, already past Russia's break point, who could say that in the future there would be no *W3* even further away (and a new demand *b3*)?[3] Elites in the Kremlin seem to have realized, at some point between 2018 and 2022, that they had "lost Ukraine." Rather than accept a shift to *b2*, the Kremlin response was to forcibly redraw the map (the end of Chapter 8).

The hope in Russia was that the occupation of Ukraine and forcible alteration of its institutions would be quick and easy. Western capitals hope that *f* will be a long, costly war for Russia, and less costly for the West over time. Perhaps attrition warfare, sanctions, and shunning will move *f* so far to the left that *b2* or *W2* is closer to *R* than *f*.

If the goal is developing a language to assist in brokering intra-Ukrainian compromise, a model in which Ukrainians themselves are not actors is the wrong place to start. It is foolish to assume that this conflict can be, or should be, settled "over the heads" of tens of millions of Ukrainians. This is why we anchor our book in a revisionist analytic narrative approach.

[3] For a formal treatment of arguments in this vein, with useful extensions, see Powell (2006).