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Published online: 16 May 2022.

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Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with Russia's strategic approach to the frozen conflict in Donbas and the two de facto states it generated, which differs from Russia's previous practices. It argues that the "Trojan Horse strategy" was tailored explicitly to Donbas due to the second-generation nature of the conflict which was driven by Moscow's interests in the confrontation with the West. However, when the strategy failed and created a stalemate, Russia had to adjust it. This resulted in Moscow's recognition of the two people's republics in the Donbas as independent, followed by an outright invasion of the rest of Ukraine.

Introduction

In the regions left over from the breakup of the Soviet Union, there remained many unresolved ethnic and political disputes that at some point escalated into armed conflicts. These "frozen conflicts" have spawned several self-proclaimed de facto state entities that are either not internationally recognized or only partially recognized. Direct or indirect military involvement and peacekeeping management by the Russian Federation have played an important role in all of them. In pursuit of its geopolitical goals, Russia has reacted to the existence of de facto state entities in its geographical vicinity with selective revisionism using three different strategic approaches: (1) informal recognition of independence (meaning active assistance in maintaining their existence and quasi-independence, but without de jure recognition); (2) formal recognition of independence; and (3) coercive incorporation. All the de facto states qualifying for the first or second categories can be considered Russian protectorates—entities that would be incapable of political survival without active and multi-layered Russian political, economic, and security backing. The current Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) are products of the conflict in Donbas and the most recent examples of states whose independence has been formally recognized by the Russian Federation. However, we argue that recognizing their independence was actually Russia's "Plan B," enacted after the failure of its original Trojan Horse strategy, the strategic uniqueness of which lies in the way Moscow responded to the emergence of the DNR and LNR.

Research Design and Research Questions

This article is a single case study interpreting a particular case as being distinct from previous theoretical assumptions. It relies on an extensive apparatus of secondary sources such as peer-reviewed monographs and articles and tertiary sources such as analyses and media sources. Its main task is to provide a conclusive answer to a primary research question: *How did Russia's strategic approach to the conflict in Donbas and the de facto states it generated (DNR and LNR) differ from other post-Soviet area frozen conflicts?* Assuming that the conflict in Donbas and the strategic approach to the DNR and LNR represent a unique example, we continue by answering the additional research question: *Why and how did Russia's new strategy fail?* The following text is thus divided into four sections. The first provides a theoretical framework for analyzing de facto states and Russian protectorates within the post-Soviet area. It also briefly summarizes earlier research that provided a rationale for distinguishing between the first and second generations of conflicts within the post-Soviet space. The three following sections represent the empirical-analytical core of the article and provide conclusive answers to each research question. We argue in the second section that Russia did not aim to pursue one of its three well-known strategies in the case of the Donbas conflict but instead sought to adopt an entirely new approach, the one we call the "Trojan Horse strategy." Owing its name to the mythical wooden horse used by the Greeks as a ruse to overcome the defense of Troy (Pickles 2014), we assume that the strategy was based on the idea of using the DNR and LNR as vehicles for implanting a decisive Russian influence on Ukrainian security and foreign policy. The next section then explains how the Ukrainian counter-strategy caused the failure of the Trojan Horse strategy and brought the entire conflict in Donbas to a frozen status[1] that Russia, in the end, decided to break by choosing one of the three "standard" strategic approaches and formally recognizing the independence of the DNR and LNR. We discuss the latest developments and their potential consequences in the final section and briefly summarize our arguments in the concluding part of the article.

Two Generations of Frozen Conflicts in Former Soviet Countries and Russia's Selective Revisionism

The phenomenon of frozen and freezing conflicts within the post-Soviet space is a topic that has been studied extensively and in detail, with a whole array of academic and empirical books, articles, and studies written on the topic (see for instance Cornell 2002; Coyle 2018, Hoch and Kopeček 2020). However, since this phenomenon is not the primary subject of this article, we adopt a rather minimalist but sufficient theoretical definition of a frozen conflict. We consider a frozen conflict to be a conflict that has demonstrated (by its quality and dynamics) that its active, armed phase has ended, but that the conflict also lacks any viable perspective on finding a political resolution to its fundamental causes.

These conflicts are often accompanied by the creation of a de facto state (or quasi-state)—a state-like entity possessing territory with a permanent population and an apparatus to administer local political and economic relations. However, these entities usually lack general international recognition, for which they persistently strive (Kolstø 2006).[2] The existence and survival of a de facto state is often guaranteed by lasting and comprehensive support from a third party, usually a neighboring power—a patron that lends the de facto state political, military, and economic assistance. In exchange, the de facto states serve as foreign-policy tools for their patrons, usually for building pressure and influence over their parent state—the one from which the de facto state seceded (Legucka 2017). Entities like the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), the Republic of Transnistria, the Republic of Abkhazia, or the Republic of South Ossetia qualify as pure examples of that kind of de facto states within the post-Soviet space, all of them owing their limited sovereignty to Russia.[3]

Considering the many frozen conflicts on its doorstep, Russia is perceived as a master of creating and strategically using them (Coyle 2018). Fearing that countries of the former USSR would integrate into Western political structures, Moscow has fueled and used several ethno-political[4] conflicts to tie these states more firmly to its sphere of paramount influence (Coyle 2018). Andrei Kazantsev, Peter Rutland, Maria M. Medvedeva, and Ivan A. Safranchuk have argued that the genesis of these conflicts, the de facto states they spawned, and Russia's strategic approaches to them should be divided into two different generations (Kazantsev et al. 2020). The first encompasses the era of the late Soviet Union and the first half of Boris Yeltsin's presidency (roughly 1988–1994), when all these ethno-political conflicts gradually emerged, escalated, culminated, and froze. The origins of these processes lay mainly in defective Soviet ethno-federalism,[5] which proved unable to settle ethnic and territorial disputes definitively and sustainably. Russia's political weakness and fatal inability to establish effective peacekeeping mechanisms resulted in freezing the conflicts without resolving their primary causes. The second generation occurred during Vladimir Putin's and Dmitry Medvedev's presidencies, during which some of the conflicts became instruments of Russia's strategy in geopolitical confrontation with the West. The August 2008 Russian–Georgian War is seen as a point of transformation between the first and second generations, with the later conflicts in Crimea and Donbas representing the first examples of purely second-generation-nature conflicts (Kazantsev et al. 2020).

Building on the research by Kazantsev et al. (2020), we argue that with the second generation of frozen conflicts, Russia's peculiar "selective revisionism" (Fischer 2016) came to the fore. It manifested itself in Moscow's use of three different strategic approaches to the emerged de facto states (Riegl, Doboš 2018). The first one—informal recognition of independence—has been applied to Transnistria, thus continuing the practice established in the 1990s. Russia's engagement in the conflict on the separatists' side resulted more from spontaneous developments and unpredictable coincidences than from a long-term contingency plan (Coyle 2018). Nevertheless, once engaged, Russia took advantage in order to maintain its military presence in the region and keep Moldova out of Western political integration (Coyle 2018). From the Russian perspective, the existence of Transnistria as an informally recognized de facto state is assured predominantly by the lack of other feasible strategic alternatives (Rogstad 2018).[6]

Russia applied the same strategic approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia until August 2008, when it justified its military intervention in Georgia as being necessary to protect the local populations (almost all Russian passport holders) against alleged genocide by the Georgian army (Lavrov 2008). This time, Moscow preferred official recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence to punish Georgia for Tbilisi's audacity to lean West. The formal recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence allowed Moscow to secure its political and military positions in the South Caucasus and halt NATO expansion. Despite enjoying formal "independence," however, both entities are mere by-products of Russia's great-power politics in the 2000s—actual protectorates, unable to survive independently. Even though Moscow has supported them consistently, it may still desire to reconcile with Georgia (Kanashvili 2018),[7] which most likely explains its staunch unwillingness to incorporate South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, despite repeated requests from Tskhinvali, or to allow Abkhazia to develop genuine sovereignty.[8] So far, the most Moscow has done to please Sukhumi and Tskhinvali is to allow limited political and economic integration (Ishchenko 2020) and creeping expansion of their territories at the expense of Georgia proper (Coffey 2018; Menabde 2017)—the so-called "borderization" process (Hamilton 2018).

The last strategic approach—coercive incorporation—has been applied to two de facto states, one during the first generation of the frozen conflicts (Chechnya) and the other during the second generation (Crimea). In the case of Chechnya, the war-ruined, institutionally weak, impoverished, lawless, clannish, and eventually failed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria enjoyed de facto independence from 1996 to 1999. As neither Russia nor any other state officially recognized it, however, its very existence violated Russian constitutional law and threatened further disintegration of the Federation (Aliyev, Souleimanov 2019).[9] Moscow could not tolerate such a situation for an extended period, and so, after the outbreak of the second Chechen war in August 1999, it resolved the conflict by the violent (re)integration of a restive Caucasian

province into the federal structure. It succeeded because Grozny lacked a strong patron state, a crucial element for all de facto states' survival and one that all post-Soviet de facto states enjoy (Kopeček 2020). Successful "Chechenization" of the conflict also benefited Russia, although it eventually resulted in Ramzan Kadyrov's despotic rule in the current autonomous Republic of Chechnya (Falkowski 2015).

The coercive incorporation of Crimea is a different case. It is correctly referred to as an annexation, an act of a forcible acquisition of one state's territory by another (Okunev 2021). The Kremlin first helped to stage an anti-Kyiv putsch to cover its military occupation of the peninsula, invoking its responsibility to protect the local Russian-speaking population against oppressive, bellicose, and West-serving Ukrainian "nationalists," "anti-Semites," and "fascists" who had seized power in Kyiv (Harding 2014; Toal 2017). It then organized a rigged local plebiscite that delivered the expected Soviet-style result in favor of incorporation (Coyle 2018; Pifer 2019), and promptly accepted the one-day-old "independent" Republic of Crimea's formal request for integration into the Russian Federation.[10] Aside from the existing historical sentiments as well as the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affiliations of Crimea to Russia, geopolitical calculations played a significant part in Moscow's decision making on the fate of the strategically immensely important peninsula (Biersack, O'Lear 2015; Blockmans 2015; Klimenko 2018). The hypothetical notion of Ukraine becoming a member state of the European Union (EU) and NATO is so unacceptable to Russia that the Kremlin took the risk of challenging Ukraine by hitting it at its most vulnerable spot (Allison 2014; Trenin 2014).

Regardless of various legal and rhetorical exercises formally justifying Moscow's conduct, the current Russian leadership seems to be consistent in its policies on post-Soviet conflicts, since Russian geostrategic interests and long-term intentions always drive them. Moscow could not allow Chechen separatists to succeed and risk further disintegration of the Federation, just as it could not accept letting Moldova, Georgia, or Ukraine leave its self-proclaimed "sphere of privileged influence." Also, regardless of the strategy applied to various de facto states, the basic principle of Russia's relations with them remains the same. As thoroughly demonstrated further in the examples of the DNR and LNR, these entities play the role of mere puppets whose future is entirely manipulable by Russia. Being formally recognized by Moscow or not, all post-Soviet de facto states serve their patron's current interest in keeping their respective ethno-political conflicts frozen, with the Kremlin having the final say in their resolution. Should more favorable circumstances occur, Russia would flexibly adjust its policy accordingly. Both informal[11] and formal recognition of independence are politically and symbolically significant acts,[12] but they are nevertheless reversible; withdrawal of an informal recognition is particularly easy and may happen at literally any moment and without high political and diplomatic costs. By contrast, incorporation (whether in the form of annexation or re-integration) is not; it is always perceived as final, definite, unchangeable, and unnegotiable for a whole array of strategic and political reasons. Here lies the explanation for Russia's use of coercive incorporation, the most overt method, only in the cases of Chechnya and

Crimea (Gazeta.ru 2016). Although these conflicts differ in their geopolitical context, legal perspective, and disputed territory, their main essence (the threat of the Federation's disintegration, or an imminent threat of losing a geopolitically critical territory) mattered so much that the Kremlin opted for definitive and irreversible resolution.[13]

Regardless of Russia's selective revisionism methods, Czech scholars Tomáš Hoch and Vincenc Kopeček argue that there are only three possible ways a frozen conflict that has generated a de facto state may end. The de facto state may: (1) be re-integrated into its parent state (the cases of Gagauzia in Moldova, Adjara in Georgia, and Chechnya in Russia); (2) be absorbed by its patron (Crimea); or (3) eventually gain international recognition (Mongolia in 1961, after more than 50 years of existence) (Hoch, Kopeček 2020). The authors perceive the present existence of de facto states such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia as a temporary, transitional situation that sooner or later must end in one of the three definitive solutions.

Based on previous assumptions, we approach the Donbas conflict as a unique example among other frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. We argue that the conflict represents an example of Russia's hitherto unconsidered fourth strategic approach to such conflicts.[14] In this case, however, Russia's strategic approach failed to bear the desired fruit. Instead, it generated a frozen conflict with a status quo that satisfied no one, such that Russia was forced to adjust its strategy in late February 2022.

The Trojan Horse: Russia's Desired Fate for Donbas

Given Moscow's desire to maintain leverage over Ukrainian foreign policy, the Kremlin did not repeat its strategic approach from Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Crimea, as neither the formal recognition of independence nor the outright incorporation of the DNR and LNR would serve Kremlin's strategic interest. If Moscow were to follow the scenario from the Transcaucasus, it would have to assume responsibility for consolidating two more poor protectorates (Marusic and Grigas 2016). Nor did Russia envision the outright and immediate incorporation of the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas,[15] by contrast to Crimea; should Moscow have desired to incorporate them, it had countless opportunities during the hot phase of the armed conflict in 2014. On the contrary, Russia did not make any territorial demands regarding Donbas, and in fact, Moscow itself was initially caught off guard by the developments there, which it did not expect.[16] The separatists' immediate calls for unification with Russia were ignored (Coyle 2018). Only after the initial successes of the Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in the spring and summer of 2014 did Russia decide to flood the east of Ukraine with weapons and "volunteers," and only when this proved insufficient did Moscow opt for its "deniable" military invasion in August 2014 (Coyle 2018). By saving what was left of the "Novorossiia" project, Russia turned DNR and LNR into crippled protectorates, the direct ramifications of an artificially induced and partially Moscow-manufactured conflict (Jensen 2017).[17] Nevertheless, the territory of Donbas, with its two self-proclaimed republics, did not lose significance as a political

unit, and Russia quickly adjusted its strategy. First, it forced the replacement of a whole array of insurgency instigators and relatively autonomous local elites like Aleksandr Borodai, Valerii Bolotov, Igor "Strelkov" Girkin, and Igor Bezler with more reliable, completely Moscow-controlled figures (Šmídová and Šmíd 2020). Second, it did its best to install itself in the position of "peace mediator" in the Normandy format, pretending it was not a party to the conflict—although it had been the whole time (Peters and Shapkina 2019). Third, Russian diplomats even managed to "smuggle" representatives of the DNR and LNR into the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG, originally comprising only Russia, Ukraine, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE]). By doing so, Moscow succeeded in putting its pawns on a par with the sovereign Ukrainian authorities (Alan 2020).

In the subsequently negotiated Minsk I and Minsk II Peace Protocols (Financial Times 2015), Russia "generously" pledged to enable Kyiv to restore its formal authority over Donbas, but with significantly less political power (Robinson 2016). The Kremlin initially demanded that Ukraine adopt broad constitutional reforms, anchor an "eternal" neutrality clause to the new constitution, and grant DNR and LNR special status and extraordinary powers, including the right to sign separate "interstate" agreements (Alan 2020). The Russian reasoning for demanding such far-reaching concessions is obvious. Such an arrangement would render Moscow several vital advantages: the territory of the DNR and LNR would physically separate the rest of Ukraine from the core of the Russian state[18] while simultaneously providing Russia with additional transport routes to Crimea. Moreover, thanks to their having the right to negotiate and conclude "international" agreements, no Ukrainian (let alone foreign) security forces would be allowed to enter the DNR or LNR, while for their Russian counterparts, the doors would be wide open. Political elites of the separatist regions would be given a deciding say in Ukrainian foreign policy, assuring that the consequently weakened central government in Kyiv would never again deviate from Moscow's power orbit (Bowen 2019). And if it did, the Kremlin would have several tools to escalate the conflict anytime it wanted (Götz 2016).

The most prominent of these would be the well-known narrative of the necessity to protect a threatened Russian-speaking minority and compatriots. Since President Putin does not consider Ukraine to be a fully independent state and perceives the Ukrainian nation to be nothing but a branch of the Russian nation (Prezident Rossii 2021), Moscow fully applies its principle of protecting compatriots living abroad (the so-called "Medvedev doctrine" of 2009) (Friedman 2008; Pieper 2020) to the citizens of DNR and LNR. It also continues with the deliberate manufacturing of "protection-worthy" Russian minorities through the passportization of locals (Nagashima 2019).[19] From April 2019, when a presidential decree launched a simplified procedure for inhabitants of the DNR and LNR to obtain Russian citizenship, until late January 2022, around 630,000 people from Donbas obtained it (Burkhardt 2022).[20] Should Moscow ever bother to take the wishes of these people into account, surveys conducted in December 2016 and March 2019 indicated that a simple majority of DPR and LPR inhabitants (35 percent and 31 percent,

respectively) would prefer the entire Donbas to have a special status within a decentralized Ukraine (Sasse and Lackner 2019). Annexation by Russia with a similarly special status placed second with support from 33 percent of inhabitants in 2016 and 27 percent in 2019 (Burkhardt 2022). [21]

Ukrainian Response and a Consequential Stalemate

Had Russia succeeded with its Trojan Horse strategy, it would have scored a nearly absolute strategic victory in the whole conflict. It could also have succeeded in one of the three ways the theory poses for all de facto states: it would have achieved reincorporation of DNR and LNR back into Ukraine, but in an extraordinary way. If Ukraine had played out according to the "Moscow accords," it would have effectively ceased to exist as a sovereign and independent state (Alan 2020). Instead, however, the Ukrainian government cunningly saw through Russia's intentions with the Trojan Horse, did everything it could to thwart them, and eventually succeeded. Several reasons explain how this was possible.

First, Ukraine successfully objected to the conditions of the Minsk II Peace Protocol that most favored the DNR and LNR; thus, the provisions for an "eternal neutrality" clause or the right of the DNR and LNR to sign "interstate" agreements did not make it into the final version of the peace protocol. Second, the parties to Minsk II disagreed on priorities and procedures, once the document was signed. Ukraine insisted on fulfilling the military clauses of the agreement first (Alan 2020),[22] while Moscow pushed Kyiv on implementation of the political clauses (Alan 2020).[23] Third, after suffering painful military defeats from the Russian army in the autumn of 2014 and spring of 2015, then-president Petro Poroshenko embarked on a strategy of attrition, with the ultimate goal of fully re-integrating Donbas once Russia was sufficiently exhausted by Western sanctions and political pressure (Alim 2020). Instead of putting a neutrality clause into the Ukrainian constitution, Poroshenko was instrumental in abandoning Ukraine's neutrality. Under his auspices, the constitution was amended with a provision committing the country to pursue NATO and EU membership as a strategic priority (RFE/RL 2019), and it was his signature that confirmed Ukraine's accession to the Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement (DCFTA) as well as an Association Treaty with the EU in 2014 (Gardner 2014). His successor, current president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, follows the same path on NATO and the EU policies (Pifer 2020) and enjoys solid political support and military assistance from the EU and the United States (Altman 2020).

Tellingly, Zelenskyy originally planned to pursue a different strategy. He campaigned with a pledge to reach a political solution to the conflict, and upon his election in May 2019, he abandoned Poroshenko's sharp nationalist-populist rhetoric, embarking on a more compromising course. In October 2019, Zelenskyy agreed to abide by a simplified version of the Minsk II Peace Protocol, the so-called "Steinmeier formula,"[24] and in March 2020 even agreed to direct negotiations with DNR and LNR representatives (Bugayova, Clark, and Barros 2020). As a result, he suffered a severe political backlash (International Crisis Group 2020a; Ukrinform 2020) and his ratings fell significantly (Hromadske International

2019; UNIAN 2020), especially since the symbolic gestures of goodwill failed to deliver any practical political results.[25] The Ukrainian government refused to hold local elections unless it regained complete control of the lost parts of the Russo–Ukrainian border, while a significant portion of the Ukrainian public perceived fulfilling Minsk II as a betrayal of national interests and insisted on a fundamental renegotiation of the document (Astrov 2019). Ultimately, the massive concentration of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine in the spring of 2021 forced Zelenskyy to give up any residual illusions and harden his policies toward Russia and the Donbas conflict (Samorukov 2021), giving no chance for significant concessions from the Ukrainian side.

Thus, both sides' noncompliance with the Minsk II Peace Protocol generated political rather than legal consequences and unwittingly contributed to the current zero-sum-game impasse. Ukraine was not willing to accept peace at any cost, while Russia was left with the task of keeping two economically decrepit and politically non-viable entities alive (Mykhnenko 2020) while being itself a "victim" of Western economic sanctions.[26] Even though Moscow did have some tactical victories and achieved some short-term goals, its Trojan Horse strategy resembles a gallery of blunders and outright failures from a long-term perspective.

First, Kyiv lost control over a part of its territory, but Ukrainian sovereignty and political independence were not compromised entirely and irreparably. The Kremlin did not prevent Ukraine from pursuing Western integration. Instead, Ukraine anchored a Western geopolitical orientation in its constitution, signed significant agreements with the EU, and cooperated with NATO in many practical ways. In contrast, the notion of Ukrainian membership in a Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) that Moscow pursued so vigorously before 2014 is pure phantasmagoria. Equally minimal is the chance that openly pro-Russian candidates would gain the majority in the Ukrainian parliament or win a presidential election (D'Anieri 2019).[27] Paradoxically, by seizing Crimea and intervening in the military conflict in Donbas, Russia helped to consolidate the modern Ukrainian nation and its civic consciousness—a goal that Ukraine had not been able to achieve in the time since the dissolution of the USSR (Terzyan 2020).

Second, Russia failed to "smuggle" its Trojan Horse back into a "new," constitutionally decentralized Ukraine and compel Kyiv elites to accept Donbas representatives as their equal peers. The Ukrainian government did carry out a massive decentralization reform and even held local elections for newly established territorial administrations in October 2020. However, these developments had nothing to do with the Minsk II provisions or Russian ideas for Ukrainian decentralization. The reform did not affect Donbas in any way, let alone guarantee any special status to DNR and LNR (Rabinovych 2020). Kyiv thus remained faithful to the diction of the Reintegration Law of 2018, which does not presuppose any special treatment for the regions, but, on the contrary, envisions their full re-integration once the circumstances are more favorable (Verkhovna Rada Ukrayiny 2020).

Third, instead of wheeling its DNR/LNR Trojan Horse back into Ukraine and gaining a deciding influence, Russia is left with subsidizing two dependent de facto states that are crippled by violence, institutional weakness, a poor economy, and chronic criminality (International Crisis Group 2020c; Jensen 2017). As Russia finds itself under Western sanctions while being engaged all around the post-Soviet space, in Europe, and in an array of African and some Latin American countries (McClintock, Hornung, and Costello 2021), it may desire to save priceless resources wherever it can.

Finally, Moscow encountered unexpected but understandable resistance from the quickly rotating political and military leaders of the DNR and LNR, whose legitimacy would not exist without Russia's will. These persons justifiably fear prosecution and punishment should Donbas return to Kyiv's control. Therefore they firmly insist on official recognition or incorporation into the Russian Federation—demands that Moscow did not appear to be planning to meet, at least until February 2022 (International Crisis Group 2020b). Meanwhile, a critical portion of the remaining local population (roughly three million) has not turned into a passionately Russia-supporting mass. Although hundreds of thousands of them have applied for a Russian passport (mainly for practical reasons), the DNR and LNR populations have mostly been apathetic, occasionally expressing their disillusionment, disappointment, and even feelings of abandonment or betrayal (de Waal 2018; UAWIRE 2016).

Moscow's Adjustments and Latest Developments

The frozen conflict in Donbas ended up in an actual paradox. Even though it falls entirely into the second (geopolitically driven) generation of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space, it delivered the same stalemate result as the first-generation ethno-political conflicts of the 1990s. It clearly demonstrated that the problem of insufficient (or rather non-existent) conflict-resolution, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding mechanisms persists within post-Soviet territorial and mental spheres regardless of time, place, and geopolitical considerations. Disappointed with the initial failure of the Trojan Horse strategy, Moscow has adjusted its strategy in several ways since 2014/2015. At the beginning of 2020, Vladislav Surkov (a hardliner, proponent of "Novorossiia," and mastermind behind the Russian interpretation of the Minsk II Peace Protocol) was replaced in the position of chief Kremlin curator of the Donbas with the long-time political official Dmitry Kozak (Socor 2020). A pragmatist, Kozak was the principal architect of the existing Moldova–Transnistria–Russia relationship and is known for seeing the frozen conflicts and de facto states largely through the scope of economic relations. Based on that, some pundits concluded that President Putin might have tasked Kozak with breaking the impasse of the Donbas frozen conflict in a similar way (Socor 2020).[28] A significant impetus for a new strategic approach was delivered later that year by the Russia-negotiated settlement of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, which Moscow sells to the world as its genuine geopolitical success. Some influential

voices within the Russian elite immediately indicated that Kozak should strive for similar results in Donbas (Gamova 2020).[29]

However, Kozak's effort failed to deliver the desired results throughout 2020 and 2021. In late autumn 2021, Russia adjusted its strategy, returning to its demanding, pressuring, threatening, and even aggressive face. Between November 2021 and February 2022, Russia amassed some 200,000 troops along the Russian–Ukrainian borders, including Crimea, and forced the United States and NATO to sit down for a series of direct talks on security guarantees and the design of future security architecture in Europe. As for Ukraine and Donbas, Russia's intentions remained blurred for a more extended period. Nevertheless, experts believed Russia was pursuing one of two options: either compelling Kyiv to implement the political clauses of the Minsk II Peace Protocol and grant DNR and LNR broad autonomy (thus reviving its original Trojan Horse strategy) (Baunov 2021; Kortunov 2021), or setting the ground for formal recognition of DNR and LNR independence, followed by deploying Russian troops on their territories (Binnendijk and Pavel 2021).

The second option proved to be the one chosen on February 21, 2022, when Russia formally recognized the independence of the DNR and LNR and immediately sent its troops to their territories. This move proved that Moscow had completely abandoned the original Trojan Horse strategy, thus killing the entire Minsk peace process and enacting one of its already "tested" strategic approaches. Unfortunately, the Russian Federation then went a long way further and launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, sparking the most significant security crisis in Europe since the end of World War II. At the time of completion of this article (first half of April 2022), the war was entering its second phase, with Russian forces concentrating on advances in eastern and southern Ukraine after they failed to conquer Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other population centers. Therefore, it was impossible to draw any more or less probable scenarios for further developments and the future of the two, now partially recognized, people's republics in Donbas, beyond stating two preliminary conclusions. First, the Trojan Horse strategy was an original but ultimately unsuccessful Russian attempt to approach a specific frozen conflict and the two de facto states by a new, hitherto unknown, strategic approach. Second, the case of Donbas confirmed the presumption by Kopeček and Hoch that any de facto state eventually ends up being reincorporated into its maternal state, being annexed by its patron, or gaining (at least partial) international recognition.

Conclusion

The article first reflects the theory developed by Kazanstev, Rutland, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk that there are two different generations of frozen conflicts within the post-Soviet space. On this basis, the authors define three strategic approaches applied by Russia in its "selective revisionism" as a response to the de facto states generated by these conflicts: informal recognition of independence; formal recognition of independence; and coercive incorporation. It further acknowledges theoretical assumptions formulated by Kopeček and Hoch

that all such de facto states must end up in one of three ways: re-incorporated into their parent states; annexed by the patron state; or gaining international recognition.

Our central argument says that the strategic approach Russia took toward the conflict in the Donbas originally represented a particular exception. Based on the evidence, we assume that Moscow's original strategic intention with the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics substantively differed from the previous three strategies. We argue that Russia's original plan, the one that Moscow even managed to anchor in the Minsk II Peace Protocol, was to force Ukraine to federalize and grant the two de facto state entities an unprecedentedly broad autonomy. Due to their absolute political and economic dependence on Russia, together with the personal ties of the Donbas elite to the Kremlin, Russia could then use these entities as proxies to influence Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. Nonetheless, this innovative strategic approach, which we refer to as the "Trojan Horse strategy," failed due to Ukrainian counter-actions and its persistent noncompliance with the Minsk II provisions.

Against that backdrop, we also interpret the developments at the turn of 2021–2022 as strategic adjustments by Moscow that resulted in its abandoning of the Trojan Horse strategy and the entire Minsk II peace process, and instead applying one of its known strategic approaches—formal recognition of DNR and LNR independence. However, the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine has made it impossible to draw any long-term and more detailed predictions or prospects on further developments in Donbas, thus opening up a space for further academic research on the topic once (hopefully) the war ends and political conflict deescalates.

Notes

1. We acknowledge entirely some experts' argument that due to the conflict's dynamics, the status of the Donbas conflict until late February 2022 should not have been defined as "frozen" but rather as "simmering." That type of conflict is in general characterized by a still high degree of conflict solidarity on both sides, leading them to perceive a military victory as achievable. Nevertheless, as both sides repeatedly fail to achieve decisive military breakthroughs, the conflict is stuck in alternating phases of irregular escalation and de-escalation. The conflict cannot freeze in that state, let alone terminate by politically negotiated means. However, since the debate on the typology of armed conflicts is not the article's main subject and, above all, the turn of events in Ukraine since February 2022 does not allow drawing definitive conclusions, we will continue to adhere to the concept of "frozen conflicts" when referring to the Donbas conflict prior to February 24, 2022. For further discussion on the Donbas conflict as a "simmering conflict," see Hill and Pifer (2016) and Kimmage and Kofman (2021).

2. We use the term "de facto state" consistently throughout the text even though the term is interchangeable to a certain degree with other related and similar terms such as "quasi-state," "proto state," "contested state," "unrecognized state," and others. Kolstø's (2006) authoritative works on the topic originally conceptualized the term "quasi-state," but since 2010 he has used the term "de facto state" instead. A disputation about nuances and conceptual differences among these terms is far beyond the scope of this article. For a detailed conceptualization of these and other related terms, see Souleimanov (2020). Some authors (for instance Florea 2020) also add a time criterion for identifying and conceptualizing the de facto states, usually a period of existence exceeding at least 24 months.

3. We acknowledge that the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) case is unique as its actual patron, the Republic of Armenia, is heavily dependent on Russia regarding security, economy, and politics.

4. We acknowledge that while some conflicts in the post-Soviet space bear outright an ethnic dimension as the main driver of the conflict (the case of Nagorno-Karabakh), some others, like the conflicts in Transnistria or Donbas, lack ethnic division as the central conflict element while emphasizing other sources of division (regional, linguistic, political, etc.). Therefore we use the combined term "ethno-political" to cover various conflict drivers in the post-Soviet conflicts of the first generation.

5. For more on ethnofederalism, its specific Soviet multi-layered variant, and conflicts emanating from it, see (Hale 2008 or Anderson 2015).

6. Moscow did not accept Tiraspol's formal requests to recognize its independence in 2006 and 2014 (Büscher 2016).

7. However, that kind of rapprochement presupposes that Georgia will give up on all plans to integrate with the West and commit itself to remain within the exclusive sphere of privileged Russian influence. For instance, Georgia could form a loose confederation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and enter one of the Russia-led integration organizations within the post-Soviet space (most probably the Eurasian Economic Union). See Rondeli (2013).

8. While Abkhazia does its best (so far in vain) to mimic sovereignty and legitimacy, South Ossetia desires to become a "second Crimea"—to be integrated with North Ossetia and thus become an integral part of the Russian Federation (Fischer 2016; Kartsev and Braterskii 2015; Kucera 2022).

9. Zürcher (2007) even argues that Chechnya had been de facto independent of Russia after its unilateral declaration of independence in June 1991.

10. The Crimean and Russian political elites cited Kosovo's precedent as justification for a unilateral declaration of independence (Riegl and Doboš 2018; Toal and O'Loughlin 2014).

11. The one enjoyed by Transnistria and also by DNR and LNR until February 24, 2022. The informal recognition of independence from Russia entails thorough economic, political, and especially security assistance from Moscow to these entities but without further incorporating them directly into Russia or formally recognizing their independence (Riegl and Doboš 2018).

12. Although in the case of informal recognition, we cannot speak about a standard diplomatic "act" as such. It is also true that withdrawal of the formal recognition of a UN-member state is sporadic. When it comes to de facto states with limited formal recognition, the withdrawal of recognition is far more acceptable and expected, as the Kosovo or South Ossetia examples demonstrate (Civil.ge 2019; European Parliament 2019).

13. The Russian perspective does not prevent Western politicians and experts from elaborating on reverting to the previous status quo, for instance, debating the circumstances conducive to Crimea's return to Ukraine (Pifer 2019).

14. As in the case of Crimea, we believe that the primary conflict causes can be found in the Kremlin's geopolitical interests, even though Moscow justifies its conduct on "humanitarian" and ethno-political bases much as it did in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 or Crimea 2014.

15. If so, then only in connection with the "Novorossiia" project, and only until the final demise of the idea. For more on Novorossiia, see (Toal 2017; Šmídová and Šmíd 2020). If Moscow had successfully instigated a popular uprising in the entire Ukrainian East and South, Russia would also have obtained a direct land connection with Transnistria. That possibility may have altered the Kremlin's strategic intentions regarding the Moldovan breakaway region (Bowen 2019).

16. President Putin himself first called on representatives of the self-proclaimed republics to postpone their "independence plebiscites" and later expressed his hope that their results would be implemented peacefully (Robinson 2016).

17. By no means do we claim that there was no conflict potential in Donbas in the spring of 2014. On the contrary, there was, but there was also only a relatively small chance that the conflict would have transformed into its current form and lasted for so long without active Russian involvement. After all, in mid-summer 2014, Ukrainian security forces achieved a series of successes in frontline battles and pushed the separatists deep into defense; only the direct deployment of the regular Russian army saved the insurgents from complete military defeat. For various conflict cleavages present in Donbas for decades, see (Ivanov 2015). To assess the roles and influence that the Russian regular armed forces played in Donbas in 2014–2015, see (Fox 2017).

18. Given the intensified cooperation, practical integration, and enhanced interoperability between the Ukrainian army and NATO, Ukrainian territory is a matter of utmost strategic sensibility for Moscow. The Kremlin perceives Ukraine as a bridgehead for hypothetical NATO military aggression against Russia. Therefore it seeks to create and maintain security buffers in the whole region ranging from the Baltics to the Black Sea. For Russian perception of East European geography and the significance of Ukrainian territory in current Russian strategic thinking, see (Steil 2018; TASS 2021).

19. It is also noteworthy how the policy of passportization underwent a similar transformation of its nature and role in the Russian strategic approach vis-à-vis the post-Soviet states and de facto states. What was originally a humanitarian-motivated effort to find a way to deal with millions of ethnic Russians who found themselves as foreign nationals living in the newly sovereign post-Soviet republics once the USSR collapsed was later turned into an instrument of revisionist policy toward neighboring countries, vainly hidden behind a quasi-humanitarian façade (Fischer 2016).

20. The European Council also concluded that issuing Russian passports to Donbas citizens contradicts "the spirit and the objectives" of the Minsk II Peace Protocol and exerts pressure on Ukraine (Burkhardt 2020). However, according to Russian law, the right to permanent residency in the Russian Federation is conferred only by a Russian passport that indicates this. Inhabitants of the DNR and LNR are issued Russian passports that do not indicate the country of permanent residence, which makes them virtually "international homeless persons" (Vestnik Migranta 2019).

21. Just for a comparison, in 2021, the percentage of the Russian population agreeing with DNR and LNR as autonomous parts of Ukraine reached 16%, while another 25% supported annexation of the de facto republics by Russia and the largest number, roughly 28%, supported the idea of DNR and LNR becoming independent states (Levada-Center 2021).

22. These encompass, for instance, withdrawal of heavy weapons, forming a security zone, restoring control over the 400 kilometers of the Russian–Ukrainian border in the conflict zone, or expelling all foreign armed formations (Alan 2020).

23. Russia insists on constitutional reforms establishing special status for the DNR and LNR and the organization of new local elections. It conditions the transfer of control of part of the common border to Kyiv (Alan 2020).

24. A peace plan from 2016 named after its proponent, former German minister of foreign affairs and current president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, outlines a series of steps to end active fighting in the Donbas. It presupposes holding local elections in the DNR and LNR under Ukrainian law and OSCE standards. Once the elections are proclaimed free and fair, Kyiv will amend the Ukrainian constitution and grant the DNR and LNR special status (Global Risk Insight 2020).

25. Contributing "only" to resolving partial aspects of the conflict, such as prisoner exchanges and partial troops disengagements (Bugayova, Clark, and Barros 2020).

26. The estimates say Russia spends over two billion USD per year on nonmilitary expenditures in Donbas alone, plus another two billion USD in Crimea (Hornisch 2019). Even though Russia adapted to living under the sanction regime quite successfully (to a certain degree thanks to the oil price rise in 2016–2018),

international economic restrictions had some negative impact on its military-industrial complex performance (Foy 2020; Inozemtsev 2019).

27. Via Ukrainian oligarchs, Russia funds smaller radical and nationalist parties in Ukraine (staffed with members of former president Yanukovych's Party of Regions) to maintain the greatest influence possible and undermine genuinely anti-Russian parties (Kanal 24 2014; Vorobiov 2020).

28. The hypothetical scenario of "Transnistrianisation" was first envisaged in 2016 by Paul Robinson, who argued that Moscow would go for it if the Ukrainian government continued to refuse to concede and comply with Russia's interpretation of the Minsk II Peace Protocol (Robinson 2016).

29. President Zelenskyy's statement after the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh War might have strengthened these intentions when the Ukrainian president stated that no conflict was frozen forever—implying that Donbas needed a definitive political solution as soon as possible (Interfax 2020).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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