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INTERSTATE WAR?
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Dimensions and Interpretations of
the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020

With a foreword by Andrew Wilson

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Foreword

Andrew Wilson

The war in the Donbas has lasted longer than both the First and Second World Wars. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported between 13,000 and 13,200 deaths by the end of February 2020, including 3,350 civilians (OHCHR 2020). Attempts to redress the economic damage, such as the World Bank's (2020) \$100 million "Eastern Ukraine: Reconnect, Recover, Revitalize Project," have barely scratched the surface. The war has frustrated two Ukrainian presidents: Neither Petro Poroshenko's military-first approach nor Volodymyr Zelenskyi's flexible diplomacy has brought much more than periodic cease-fires and prisoner exchanges. The war even provided the background to President Donald Trump's impeachment, as he was accused of withholding U.S. military aid to Ukraine.

The debate over the causes of the war is the key to any possible diplomatic or military solution to it. The center of academic discourse has shifted somewhat since 2014, with the publication of detailed studies into the operations of Russian "curators" on the ground and their active involvement in fomenting unrest in southern and eastern Ukraine (Hosaka 2018; 2019; Shandra and Seely 2019). However, as Jakob Hauter writes in his conclusion to this volume, the academic debate is far from over and additional research is required to determine whether the Kremlin, indeed, "controlled rather than merely supported the key actors behind" the unrest. Much of the literature on Russian curators focuses on events in Crimea, Odesa, and elsewhere and on the period before and after the spring of 2014 rather than directly on the Donbas in the build-up to the war. Studies that use open source intelligence for forensic assessments of the downing of MH17 and other operations in the Donbas itself mainly come from journalistic sources (see, for example, Bellingcat n.d.).

Not all debate is research-based. In Ukraine as a whole, a growing number of domestic, Russian, and Russian-backed voices

have been reviving a debate about the events of 2014. Viktor Medvedchuk's expanded media empire, Party of Regions veterans like Andrii Portnov and former Justice Minister Olena Lukash, various Telegram channels, as well as websites like *strana.ua* and *ukraina.ru* have been reviving "Anti-Maidan" narratives—Maidan protestors were paid, the West was behind them, not so many were killed—and echoing Russian narratives about the Donbas conflict as a "civil war." They have also added a further narrative about domestic oligarchs maintaining the war and profiteering from it (Bratushchak 2020; Poptsova 2020). These framings have been undermining the founding narratives of post-Maidan Ukraine—the idea of a new civic nation and the "European choice" that was written into the constitution in February 2019 (Haran, Yakovlyev, and Zolkina 2019).

The need for informed analysis is therefore just as strong as in 2014. This volume is an invaluable guide to the debate about internal versus external factors as causes of the war and on how that debate has developed since 2014. It also provides some indicative ways on how to overcome that divide. As Hauter says, "the question is not whether the war is purely internal or interstate, but which of the two components outweighs the other." An impressive range of scholars have been collected to show some of the best existing research and analysis and offer a thought-provoking guide to further investigation. This book is a must-read for any scholar of Ukraine, Russia, or conflict studies.

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