

**ROLE OF IDENTITY AND KIN STATES IN FORMATION  
AND PRESERVATION OF DE FACTO STATES: CASES  
OF SERBIAN KRAJINA AND LDPR**

By

Egor Balalykin

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Supervisor: Erin Kristin Jenne

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# Abstract

Scholars argue a lot about kin states role in creation separatist political entities. Often, they claim that kin state plays the only significant role. Same remarks can be heard often from academia and public in regard to Serbian Krajina and Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LDPR). This thesis will argue that significance of identity in creation of these de facto states is usually downplayed, while actions of kin state (Serbia and Russia respectively) are overestimated. This thesis will show that identity was a very important variable in birth of both Serbian Krajina and LDPR, as it created the ground for separatism. Although kin states provided support to separatists, the history of Krajina and Donbas conflict should not be reduced to Belgrade and Moscow actions. In addition, in certain periods of time, separatists had more autonomy from kin states than it usually believed. This thesis will use qualitative methods and Most Different Systems Design to show the significance of identity and kin state in different historical and political contexts.

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# CHAPTER 1. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

## Introduction

De facto states are political entities which govern a territory, provide local population with certain public good, but lack international legitimacy, that is, official recognition from sovereign states (Pegg, 1998, 1). They are “parallel structures of socioeconomic and political organization”, that is, power, alongside with sovereign states in the modern world (Florea, 2014, 806). De facto states are born out of secession process. Secession is an act of separation of a certain territory from a host state. Among examples, that one can list Somaliland, Kosovo, Taiwan, Chechnya in the 1990s. However, history has witnessed a number of cases when a de facto state was created not just on separatist ground, but also on the irredentist one. As Saideman and Ayres (2000, 1126) write, irredentism can be described as “political movements to unite the territory of an ethnic group with the territories of other segments...”. In this case, a certain ethnic or identity group lives on a certain territory which borders the kin state, that has claims on the territories of the kin group. It is mostly likely when there is conflict or even war between the minority group and the host state. Here, actions of kin states’ can be crucial, as it can politically or even militarily support their co-ethnics to successfully separate and further to join the formers. A good case of kin state importance is the case of Sudetenland. In the scholarly literature one can find statements that support from a strong enough national homeland is a key determinant of separatist actions by kin groups (e.g., Nagle, 2013, Jenne et al., 2007). From this, some scholars and observers claim that de facto states, if they have their sovereign kin neighbor are their puppets and their separatist military actions, as well as future survival is fully dependent of kin state actions.

However, the autonomy of local separatist leaders and groups seem to be overlooked, both in the initiation of military actions and in management of separatists. The origins of this bias lie in the fact that reports on the supply of arms, assistance by military specialists, diplomatic support and economic aid to separatists can give an overly simplistic impression of the determining role of kin states in creating

and maintaining the viability of de facto states. The latter seems to be overestimated and the importance of identity for the initiation of separatist actions downplayed.

## **Case-study and research questions**

Serbian Krajina and Donbas are cases of de facto states where a strong contradiction can be noticed among researchers. On the other hand, there is a widespread belief that both entities were born and supported solely through the intervention of Serbia and Russia, respectively. There can also be identified another point of interest. It is usually claimed that both Serbian Krajina and Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics when already created were fully controlled by their patrons from Belgrade and Moscow. Thus, the conclusion is that de facto states were not more but just puppets. This thesis acknowledges that kin states had a huge importance in providing resources for sustaining the existence of de facto states. However, the importance of identity in stimulating collective actions has been underestimated just as the importance of kin states in preserving de facto states is overestimated. Separatist enclaves were dependent less on their patrons during certain periods of time. Also, the autonomy of Krajina and Donbas insurgents' actions (again, during certain periods) was much higher than widely believed. The general academic value of the research is not only to analyze these two cases more carefully, but also to expand our understanding of how de facto states preserve their autonomy. So, there will be two research question in this work. **How did identity and kin states' actions influence the formation and sustaining of de facto states of Serbian Krajina and LDPR? What was the level of Serbian Krajina and LDPR autonomy from Belgrade and Moscow?**

There is a large literature on the impact of kin states action on formational of separatists' enclaves. Cetinyan (2002) argues that kin states can interfere the so-called ethnic bargaining process which can either increase or decrease the severity of conflict between the home state and minority. Similar argument is found in Cantir (2020) who claims that kin states can involve in minority-central government disputes, with the possibility of exacerbating the conflict. Additionally, Jenne (2007), one can find evidence that kin states provide support for their co-ethnic and thus sustaining the existence of

their polities. Coggins (2014) and Florea (2013) showed how “branding”, that is, creation and openly showing the distinct identity and cultivating traditions, is used by de facto states to attract kin state support. It can be also a source of more successful appeal to regional powers or international organizations. Also, Fearon (1998) writes that in certain conditions, so-called peripheral groups may fear the dominant and more powerful governmental center, and may use force to protect their identity and receive certain autonomy.

There is no doubt that the context in which the Serbian Krajina and the LDPR were born were quite different. While the former was created during the disintegration of a country (Yugoslavia), the latter case was preceded by a revolution in the host state. On the other hand, both cases occurred in a situation of serious political crisis and were caused by identity clashes between local minority and new political leadership in home states. Thus, in both cases, there is the following picture. The conflict of identities in the context of a political crisis with significant irredentist urges, interacts with the significant involvement of kin states in domestic political crises. In both cases, this led to the formation of de facto states. They both existed in the future for some time after which they "died". Here one can observe a similar sequence of events. However, the nature of this "death" was completely different in both cases. If in the case of the Serbian Krajina it was destroyed by government forces, then in the case of the Donbas republics they were absorbed by the kin state. The causal mechanism can be mapped as follows. Local identity served as the basis for the growth of separatist sentiments and caused a wave of minority protests in the context of the political crisis. At the same time, kin states provided diplomatic and military support for the successful creation of de facto states. Later, kin states continued to support de facto states in military, diplomatic and economic ways to maintain the viability and military strength of separatist enclaves to resist government forces. Differences in the relative power of kin states – Serbia and Russia – became the main determinant of the different "death" of separatist polities. Serbia proved unable to expand and absorb its kins' territory or at least to effectively freeze the conflicts to preserve Krajina. Identity did not play a role at this stage; its role was important at the stage of the creation of de facto states.

## Case-study and research questions

There is very little literature on the comparison of Serbian Krajina and Donbas cases. Lachowski (2020) only briefly mentions that Serbian Krajina received a huge amount of military and economic aid from Serbia, similar to Donbas republics from Russia. In Ashbrook and Bakich (2010) there is an account of military support of Krajina's militia from the Serbian army and state in early 1990s, however it misses a detailed analysis of further dependence on Belgrade as well as the degree of autonomy in decision-making by insurgent formations. Although Ramet (2006) rightly points to the nationalist rhetoric and expansionist intentions of Milosevic and his cronies, she also overlooks the separatist sentiments of a significant portion of Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia, as well as the confrontation with Croatian forces in different parts of Krajina at different times with different dynamics. Mitrokhin (2015), although he describes the connections between many leaders of the Donbas rebels and Russia, does not point to the lack of coordination and unity of separatist formations at the beginning of the conflict. A similar criticism can be made of Maliarenko (2015). In addition, origin of some insurgents from Russia or even from Russian power structures do not take into account the further disagreement of some with the goals and means of conducting the conflict with Kyiv. A good example is Igor Strelkov, who, after his departure from Donbas, criticizes the Russian leadership, which challenges the narrative of total control by Russia.

At the same time, other scholars have highlighted the importance of locals' identity issues, as well as the relatively less important role of kin states' actions on birth and preservation of separatists' polities. Kolstø and Paukovic (2014) conducted research on why Serbian Krajina failed as a de facto state compared to some other separatist polities, pointing to the lack of Belgrade's military support for the rebels after a 1995. Wilmer (2002) conducts sophisticated research on the role of identity as a factor crucial for the outbreak of separatist actions of the Serbs in Krajina. Visser and Duyvestein (2014) describe relatively peaceful relations between Serbs and Croats just before the outbreak of the war in 1991. In Caspersen (2007) there is important data that provides information about the occasional inability of the Serbian leadership to influence the dynamics of events and political governance in the Serbian de facto states during the Yugoslav wars, both in Bosnia and Croatia. In the Donbas conflict,



the presence of strong pro-Russian identity can be found in Matveeva (2016) and De Cordier (2017). The work of Matveeva is especially important, because she argues that the identity basis for the war was not a direct consequence of Moscow's activity, but rather it goes deeply into history of the region's population. Also, a very momentous book by Arel and Driscoll (2023) provides historical data and details about the development of 2014 processes in Donbas, including how the identity of many locals influenced separatist actions. The influence of Moscow and Belgrade on de facto states is deeply analyzed in Bowen (2019) and Pavkovic (2011) respectively. This literature will create the basis for my theoretical framework.

The argument of this study is that the identity and separatist/irredentist sentiments of minorities served in both cases was a significant reason for the growth of separatism and the creation of de facto states. Despite the extremely important role of the kin states, which gave the necessary support to the rebels, the Krajina and Donbas conflicts should not be considered as simply products of outside actors. At the same time, the kin state played an important role in preserving the de facto states by supplying economic and military resources, as well as diplomatic cover, which was especially strong in the case of Donbas. However, the balance of power between the kin and host states and their patrons (the West in both cases) predetermined the different end of the Serbian Krajina and the LDPR (destruction by host state and absorption by kin state, respectively). I conclude that the level of autonomy of de facto states was larger than is usually thought, so the rebels had more freedom than generally believed concerning tactics and strategy and general political positioning.

## **Methods and research design**

Identity and international political factors will be measured on a qualitative basis. On identity, I use scholarly research, media reports and public figures' statements about the divergence of minority and majority identity, showing how they developed during the corresponding political crises. In regard to international political factors, I focus on the power of the kin state. Scholarly literature will be used to assess the relative power of Serbia and Russia at every point of time, particularly their incentives to

intervene in respective conflicts. Also, in both of Krajina and Donbas conflicts, there was significant foreign involvement. For example, the United States and its allies participated as intermediaries in both conflicts but also supported Croatian and Ukrainian integrity. Serbia and Russia were pressed by the West in order to make concessions during diplomatic negotiations. There is a need to separate both conflicts at certain stages for a more accurate assessment of the role of identity and influence of kin states.

This work uses the following periodization. Donbas: 1) March/April – August 2014 (the LDPR is formed in April, in August the Russian army invades the Ukrainian Donbas in large numbers to save the republics), 2) September 2014 – February 2022 (the conflict is mostly frozen, ties with the rest of Ukraine are seriously reduced, here you can analyze Russia's patronage over the republics), 3) February – September 2022 (invasion and annexation of Ukraine). Serbian Krajina: 1) August 1990 – December 1991 (Serb protests, the formation of three separate Serbian autonomous regions, eventually united into the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK), plus the participation of Serbian troops in the first clashes of the war), 2) December 1991 – February 1992 (unification into the RSK and the subsequent withdrawal of Serbian troops from their territory), 3) February 1992 – August 1995 (Serbia's assistance to the Croatian Serbs, the attempts of the former to preserve the RSK and the destruction of the latter by Croatian troops). In general, the study will use Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), within each case, I use comparative historical analysis and process-tracing. The logic is that the study compares two cases across different contexts: Krajina's case occurred during state disintegration (Yugoslavia in 1990s), while Donbas republic born after a revolution in an independent country. Still, the study shows similarities in factors that explain de facto states creation and survival using the same variables, namely identity and kin state actions.

## CHAPTER 2. SERBIAN KRAJINA

### Identity

Serbo-Croatian tensions began to rise in the 1920s and 1930s, when the two peoples were united within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Although the idea of Yugoslavism – that is, the building of a unified state of all Southern Slavs – was popular among all Balkan Slavs at that time, there were already disagreements between the Serbian and Croatian communities. The royal government in Belgrade sought to unitize the state, which inevitably led to the domination of the Serbs in Yugoslavia. The Croats, on the other hand, sought to preserve the federal structure of the country, so that all constituent peoples would have self-government on its territory (Grgić, 2018, 464). Another traumatic moment in the history of Serbo-Croatian relations was the Second World War and the policy pursued by the Independent State of Croatia toward the Serbs. The genocide of the Ustasha regime (following the slogan "Srbe on the Vrbe" ("Serb - on the willow!")) was imprinted in the national memory and made evident during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Although the topic of the genocide of the Serbs was deliberately hushed up during communist times, it became relevant later on.

The Croatian Serbs were opposed to the formation of an independent Croatia. Initially, when the process of disintegration began (in the late 1980s and early 1990s), there was no panic among the Croatian Serbs. Relations between Croats and Serbs were peaceful. This is consistent with the data on the first multiparty elections held in Croatia in 1990. Among ethnic Serbs, few voted for the aggressive nationalists represented by the Serbian Democratic Party. This began to change when the newly elected Croatian leader Franjo Tudjman and his government began to pursue nationalist policies. For example, he famously said in 1990: "Thank God my wife is not a Jew or a Serb" (cited from Visser and Dyvenstein, 2014, 79). Also, in 1990-1991, a cleansing of the police force along ethnic lines was carried out. This was

especially intense in the regions inhabited mostly by ethnic Serbs. Such steps could not but create grounds for interethnic tension. It aroused the discontent of Croatian Serbs, but their initial demands were moderate. The then-leader of the Croatian Serb community, Jovan Raskovic, publicly stated his desire for a unified Croatia and cultural autonomy for Serbs, as enshrined in the constitution (Hayball, 159). The Zagreb government nevertheless ignored these demands. According to Hislope (1998, 64 – 89), it was only after the consistent refusal of the Tudjman government to give substantial autonomy and constitutional status to the Serbs (who had previously been recognized as one of the constituent peoples of Croatia) that the more militant and secessionist-minded Serb leaders began to gain the support of the local population. This created the basis for armed secession. At the same time, special attention should be paid to the role of the kin state. In neighboring Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic came to power in the late 1980s and immediately began to engage in nationalist rhetoric. He fairly quickly asserted control over the country's political system and the state media. Belgrade propaganda (the media were under the control of the authoritarian government) reinforced the fears of Croatian Serbs by inflating the image of "Croatian fascists" (Gagnon, 112 – 113). This enhanced Croatian Serbs' fear of new political realities. The basis of Serbian propaganda was an appeal to the traumatic experience of World War II, when the pro-fascist Ustasha regime was established in Croatia. The territory they controlled included not only Croatia, but also all of Bosnia and part of modern Serbia.

One could say that identity became a serious basis for the formation of a separatist de facto state of Serbian Krajina. Interethnic tension, on the one hand, was created against the backdrop of the political crisis caused by the breakup of Yugoslavia. Croatian Serbs were now at risk of becoming an ethnic minority in the new state. As Posen (1993, 35 – 37) claims that previous ethnic conflicts during the WWII created a mutual fear between Serbs and Croats

argue, and the rise of nationalism in Croatia exacerbated ethnic fears in the face of an unknown future and the preservation of Serb rights in the new political realities.

## **Serbia's involvement**

It is often argued that Serbia was the main and perhaps only source of wars in the former Yugoslavia. There are also opinions that the Republic of Serbian Krajina, created in late 1991 and early 1992, was completely under Belgrade's control. During 1990-1991, Croatian Serbs created three so-called Serbian autonomous oblasts (regions): SAO Krajina (1990), Western Slavonia (1991) and Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmia (1991). They were created with significant support from the local Serbian population, and there was a noticeable initiative coming from the local Serb leaders. However, there was no Serbian direct military intervention or any serious evidence of Belgrade's military and economic support for Croatian Serbs during this period. Nevertheless, kin state support manifested itself in the form of massive propaganda through the Milosevic government-controlled media. Serbian media inflated the danger emanating from the emerging Croatian state in relation to the Serbs. For this purpose, the traumatic experience of the Second World War was exploited, when the collaborationist Independent State of Croatia, led by the so-called Ustashe, carried out the genocide of the Serbs (Kaufman, 2001, 6). At the same time, the image of the Serbs as brave partisans defending their home was promoted, and the new Croatian government as supporters of the Ustasha regime. This further exacerbated ethnic tensions between Croatian Serbs and Croats. Milosevic sought to support the separatist tendencies of Croatian Serbs. At first, this was done in order to keep the disintegrating Yugoslavia from collapsing completely, at least by keeping all the Croatian-populated territories within one political space (Györe, 2006, 101 – 105). Milosevic presented the Croats' desire for secession as an act of separatism that had to be resisted.

On the other hand, the local Croatian Serb militias, starting to organize in early 1991, took de facto control of most of the RSK even before the first clashes with the Croatian police in March 1991, before the declaration of Croatian independence in June 1991, and before the open invasion of Croatian territory by the Serbian army in August 1991. Thus, it can be said that identity clashes not only took place, but were an important reason for the formation of a separate de facto state. Nevertheless, Serbia's involvement was decisive in helping them resist Croatian forces.

Serbia already in 1991 demonstrated an aggressive attitude toward the possible dissolution of Yugoslavia in general and toward Croatia's independence in particular. In the period since August 1991, there is a reason to believe that Belgrade was indeed of great importance to the success of the separatists. The full-scale war in Croatia in 1991 began with the siege of Vukovar by the Yugoslav People's army (JNA) and local Serb militia. For the rest of 1991, clashes between Croatian armed formations and Serbs took place with large-scale participation of regular Serbian forces. Eventually, with the military patronage of Serbia on the territory of the de facto independent Croatia, the Serbian Autonomous Oblasts united to form the Republic of the Serbian Krajina in December 1991. Under pressure from the international community, a ceasefire was signed in January 1992, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was dissolved, and regular units of the JNA (in fact, Serbia) were forced to leave the territory in the spring of 1992. According to Sokolov (2019, 93 – 101), the JNA left a significant number of weapons and equipment to the Krajina Serbs when it left the Croatian territory. The territory that was under the control of the RSK in the spring of 1992 was identical to the territory that the JNA fighters, that is, Serbian forces, had occupied earlier. Thus, it can be said that Serbia played a key role in the emergence of the RSK as it began its existence. The JNA provided direct military support for its occupation and supplied it with large quantities of weapons.

Next, one should look at the period of existence of the Serbian Krajina from 1992 to 1995. It is not entirely clear how much money Serbia sent to the RSK. However, a number of authors point out that throughout the existence of the RSK, it received substantial support from Belgrade. Lachowski (2020, 166) and Pavkovic (2011, 306) say that Krajina enjoyed a vital economic, political and military support from Serbia. Kolstø and Paukovic (2014, 317) claim that many from RSK military received salary from Belgrade, and also RSK was dependent economically.

Data on the Krajina economy are scarce. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that Serbia provided vital economic support to this de facto state. As Guskova (2001, 210) shows, the territories that made up Krajina were poorer than the rest of Croatia even before the war. She also shows that the entire Krajina financial and banking system was completely dependent on Serbia. Among other things, foreign economic relations of RSK were hampered by international sanctions and the inability to undertake legal foreign economic activity due to the lack of international recognition. Guskova also documents that the unemployment rate in RSK was about more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the total population. What allowed the economy to hold on was direct aid from Serbia. In addition Guskova indicates that Serbia often paid the salaries of the RSK army and also provided arms and humanitarian aid (p. 223). Foreign trade took place either with another Serbian unrecognized entity, Republika Srpska, or went semi-legal with Serbia. It is the support of neighboring Serbia, not only providing significant economic support directly, but also in actual cross-border trade, that shows that the kin state was an extremely important element in maintaining the relative viability of the Serbian Krajina. From this, it can be concluded that kin state was vital for preservation of the de facto state in the case of Serbian Krajina.

Also, there are substantial grounds to believe that if Serbia had not sent its own troops to Krajina, this would have crippled general war planning and army management. The Croatian government was meanwhile firing many Serbs from the republican police and Ministry of Internal Affairs. So, the first members of paramilitary groups were policemen and local volunteers. Discursively, Milosevic supported local Serbs, although the initial militia was self-governing. Still, there are grounds to claim that Belgrade was already assisting Croatian Serbs. The first Krajina militia around Knin was formed in early 1991, soon after the proclamation of SAO Krajina. In Stojanovic (2021) there is a reference to an International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) verdict that states that there is substantial evidence that Serbian secret services were helping SAO Krajina with “weapons, communication equipment, and some limited technical assistance”. The same, according to the article, applied to SAO Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmia. In the spring of 1991, the territorial defense (TD) units of the Serbian Krajina began to form. Here, the kin state was more involved, as TD subordinated to the JNA (which was already becoming de facto Serbian army), since they were formally a part of the Yugoslav federal paramilitary forces and thus subordinated to Belgrade. Still, actors independent of Belgrade played a role in sustaining de facto state. For example, Vuk Drašković created the Serbian Guard on June 4, 1991 with his supporters from the nationalist Serbian Renewal Movement. Drašković was the main opposition leader to Milosevic regime that led mass protests in Belgrade in March 1991, so he cannot be accused of collaborating with the Serbian government. During summer 1991- winter 1991/1992, local Serb forces were operating with JNA against Croatian forces, so there is a reason to claim that Serbia had direct control over military actions of SAOs and later Serbian Krajina. In spring 1992, according to the Sarajevo accords, Serbian forces were withdrawn from Croatia and UN peacekeepers sent to the frontlines. Since Autumn 1992, after Croatia launched its successful June offensive during the Battle of Miljevci Plateau and with the inability of UN forces to



preserve the frontline status quo, the creation of the official armed forces was announced with more centralized command. The supreme command of the Territorial Defense, and later of the Krajina Army was, partly, generals who simultaneously held the rank of general in the Serbian Army (ICTY, 2013; Djordjevic, 2012). These data signify that while Croat Serbs were initially recruited by locals and supplied by Serbia Secret Forces, at the time of full-scale confrontation with Croatian police supreme army command, military training and defense planning of Serbian Krajina was in the hands and under the control of Serbia. Despite the fact that there were volunteer battalions, they played a substantially secondary role in the initial separatist struggle.

## **The autonomy of Serbian Krajina**

In sum, there is evidence to suggest that despite RSK's huge dependence on Belgrade, the autonomy of the Krajina Serbs was greater than is commonly believed. First of all, this applies to the top leadership of the republic. The original leadership of the RSK, namely the president Milan Babic, was openly supported by Milosevic. However, Caspersen (2007, 628) writes that some contradictions between Knin and Belgrade had appeared already in 1991. At first, Croatian Serbs openly insisted on unification with Serbia, while Milosevic insisted on preserving the RSK as a part of united Yugoslavia, but as a separate entity. However, these contradictions became more serious later on. As Caspersen adds, by late 1993 and early 1994, Milosevic realized that the strategy of uniting all Serbs in one state was not feasible and changed his approach to the RSK as a whole, inducing the Krajina Serbs to negotiate with the Croatian side (p. 630). At the same time, the separatists' goals remained unchanged, with the Krajina leadership continuing to insist on absolute separation from Croatia as their ultimate political goal. The Croatian Serbs were counting on Serbia's support until the end, and after

Operation Storm in August 1995, they openly accused Milosevic of first warming them up to the uprising and then abandoning them to their fate. This suggests that RSK was completely dependent on Belgrade, which could not exist without its economic and military support. Nevertheless, this did not hinder its significant autonomy from kin state.

Despite the aforementioned military and economic dependence, within Krajina there were different political forces which tried to pursue their own agendas. An article published in the Los Angeles Times by Murphy (1993) describes the debate within the Krajina community between hardliners and those more inclined to negotiate with Croats. It mentions that the hardliners opposed any peace talks with Zagreb and sought to secede from Croatia and merge with the neighboring unrecognized Republika Srpska to create a single state of "Western Serbia". Another point of interest is the reaction of the Croatia Serbian community to the so-called Daruvar agreement of 1993. The local Serb leaders in Western Slavonia had agreed with the Croats and the UN to introduce a peacekeeping garrison to the region. When the Knin central authorities found out about this, they arrested those who had signed the secret agreements and reversed the decision. This indicates that there were disagreements within the RSK about what action to take and the autonomy to reject deals negotiated on their behalf. The reason for the agreement was that the Serbian-held Western Slavonia lacked electricity and fuel, and the neighboring Croatian city of Pakrac lacked water supplies. The main opposition to the plan, according to the Murphy, was from the then-interior minister of the RSK and future president Milan Martić. This evidence again indicates 1) the relative autonomy of rebel governance, and 2) the problems of unified political control since part of the Krajina elite had split.

Kolstø and Paukovic (2014) provide extensive information about Knin-Belgrade relations. The Serbian uprising originated from the Serbian Democratic Party, established in February 1990 in Knin, "strongly influenced by Milosevic policies". However, it failed to spread beyond Knin as 46% of Serbs preferred the reformed Croatian Communists (p. 313). But as Serb-Croats hostilities grew, more and more Serbs became SDS-inclined as it was a nationalist party. In the first half of 1991, the Croatian Serbs decided to join Serbia. Although the territories controlled by the Serbs were under JNA protection, Belgrade insisted that the right thing to do was to stay in Yugoslavia and not join Serbia. Kolstø and Paukovic also point to statebuilding problems. The constituent parts of the RSK were separated from each other under the constant state of war (p. 318). Also, they say that Milosevic changed his strategy regarding the RSK in late 1993-early 1994. If before it was the idea of "all Serbs in one state," Milosevic later realized that this strategy was unrealizable and began to lean towards a more negotiating position with the Croats. The Croatian Serbs were counting on Serbia's support until the end and after Operation Storm in August 1995 openly accused Milosevic of first instigating an uprising and then abandoning them to their fate. The author claims that the RSK was totally dependent on Belgrade and that it could not exist without its support. As Kolstø and Paukovic insist, economically Krajina was indeed very dependent on Belgrade, but the RSK itself was highly divided. This territorial separation exacerbated the factional splits within the RSK leadership, as Belgrade had much more control over elites' form and territories of the Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Syrmia than that of Knin (Capersen, 2010, 105). Babić and his party were in alliance with the local Krajina's radicals and kept their distance from Belgrade. Their relations were "frosty" and they did not accept any concessions. Milan Martić, who became president of Krajina in 1994, also became more radical and distanced himself from Belgrade in 1995, apparently to strengthen his position among local Serbs. This came to light during discussions around the Z-4 plan, proposed by the international community to

Croatia and RSK. It proposed the creation of autonomy for Croatian Serbs, although with reduced territory. While Milosevic supported this plan, as did Tudjman, the Krajina leadership flatly refused it, as showed in Kolsø and Paukovic (2014, 319). Despite the fact that Martić had the unconditional support of Belgrade and Milosevic during 1993-1994 presidential elections, he could afford voluntarism. Also, claimed by Kolstø and Paukovic account, the Krajina parliament was not under Milosevic's control, which added to the internal power struggle inside RSK and made it more autonomous from Belgrade (p. 321). There were also independent paramilitary groups: the "red berets" of the Serbian Radical Party and Serbian Volunteer Guard led by the criminal "Arkan". However, their size compared to other Krajina forces were not large, so they should not be considered as powerful autonomous actors.

Hayball (2017, 159) describes internal power struggle during 1990-1991 within Croat Serbs community between Rašković (moderate) and Babić (more radical and secessionist), with the former receiving support from Belgrade. It was Milosevic's support of Babić's candidacy in the inner-party struggle that led to the announcement of Knin's secession from Croatia on March 18, 1991. Although the JNA later came to the aid of the Krajina Serbs and showed it would give the necessary support even before then, Babić openly protested against Milosevic making deals with Tudjman on behalf of Krajina. Babić insisted that Milosevic was president of Serbia only. As Caspersen (2007, 628 – 630) shows, Milosevic played on the contradictions within the Krajina elite. Babić, though initially supported by Milosevic, had already disagreed with the Carrington plan in 1991, though Milosevic had supported earlier versions of it. Milosevic persuaded the chairman of the RSK parliament to hold a session in the town of Glina, away from the capital, where parliamentarians removed Babić from power. But Babić held a session of parliament in Knin, which voted against his removal from power. Eastern Slavonia was less autonomous from Belgrade because it was closer to Serbia (it bordered the latter) and because there were more paramilitary units made up of Serbian

volunteers. The Krajina Serbs enjoyed certain ties and influence with Milosevic's opposition within Serbia itself, such as with Vojislav Sesel and his Serbian Radical Party, which helped to reduce Knin's dependence on Belgrade. It can also be said that in Serbian Krajina, the leadership and elite were quite split, which prevented the kin state from establishing its full control over the de facto state.

As can be seen from the analysis above, Serbian Krajina was not a monolithic polity. There were various factions, that engaged in a real struggle for power. Yes, the kin state regularly intervened in the internal political processes of the separatists. However, this interference was not always successful. In the case of Krajina, an additional problem of homogenization of the separatists was their geographical division. Since its creation, the Serbian Krajina consisted of three non-bordering parts, roughly corresponding to the borders of the SAOs proclaimed in 1990-1991. While Eastern Slavonia bordered on and was most controlled by Serbia, the situation in Knin and Western Slavonia was somewhat different. Knin, as the capital of the secessionist state, was often the center of the political struggle for supreme power, while Western Slavonia could in some places act independently, since it was surrounded on three sides by Croatia and was thus distanced from the main political competition among the secessionist leaders. The possibility of separatist negotiations by Serb leaders in Western Slavonia, as well as data indicating that the separatists in Eastern Slavonia were significantly controlled, may indicate that there was no clearly functioning hierarchy in the RSK. The consequence of this was rather significant autonomy of the de facto state.

## CHAPTER 3. DONBAS

### Identity

“Donbas” usually refers to the territory of Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine. This region was a special region in Ukraine. Not counting Crimea, it had the largest percentage of the ethnic Russian population before 2014. Moreover, the region was overwhelmingly Russian-speaking, even among ethnic Ukrainians. Election data from 2004 and 2008 and 2012 showed strong support for pro-Russian politicians and parties (Arel, 2018, 188). On the one hand, the region as a whole had much in common with southeastern Ukraine before 2014. Up to and including 2014, we can talk about a significant political split within Ukraine - the more eastward, the more support there was for pro-Russian political forces and initiatives. On the other hand, Donbas stood out even against the background of other relatively pro-Russian regions. For example, in 1994 local councils organized a local referendum in which about 85-90 percent of the population voted for 1) granting Russian the status of the second state language in Ukraine, and, 2) for Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism with regard to publishing decisions of local state bodies, 3) pro-Russian integration projects. Although this did not result in any significant change in the status of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, these events demonstrate the peculiarities and autonomist sentiments of the local population.

The topic of Donbas began to have great significance in public discourse during the so-called Orange Revolution. The context was the election of the president of Ukraine, in which the pro-Russian Yanukovich and the pro-Western Yushchenko were competing in the second round. Yanukovich and his Party of Regions was considered by many as a quite pro-Russian president in contrast to the pro-Western opposition (Kuzio, 2015, 157). Unlike the latter, he tried to establish more friendly relations with Russia and Party of Regions, indicated in its program that it would strive for good-neighborly relations with Russia, decentralizing state

power to the regions and giving the Russian language the status of the second state language (RBK Ukraina, 2012). When Yushchenko's supporters protested against the official results of the runoff election, a re-election was called, but Yanukovych's supporters began to hold their own protests in response. The latter were mainly in southeastern Ukraine. In general, the political programs and rhetoric of the Party of Regions and its supporters shows that a pro-Russian foreign policy orientation of Ukraine prevailed, including giving Russian the status of the second state language, as well as federalization of the country, which in their opinion better protected the ethno-linguistic rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians. One of the landmark events of the Orange Revolution was the so-called Severodonetsk congress in Luhansk oblast. There, deputies representing pro-Russian parties advocated for the federalization of Ukraine and the creation of a so-called southeastern Ukrainian autonomous republic in the southeast. On the basis of these data, it can be argued that the political crisis in Ukraine in 2004 was based in an identity conflict between east and west of Ukraine. Voting patterns in the presidential and parliamentary elections generally remained unchanged until the 2019 elections in Ukraine. Regarding Donbas, during the Orange Revolution local activists in Donetsk created the "Donetsk Republic" organization. It proclaimed its goal to federalize Ukraine, but its rhetoric also had a distinctly irredentist component, i.e., a desire to join Russia. It was the flag of this organization that would become the official flag of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014. In 2007, the "Donetsk Republic" was banned by the Ukrainian authorities for separatism (URA-inform Donbas, 2007). Although no similar organizations existed in Luhansk, this shows the strong pro-Russian tendencies in Donbas at the time, which advocated separatism and even irredentism.

Kudelia (2014, 4 – 5) cites a whole set of interesting data on the Donbas region. By the time of the beginning of hostilities about 70 percent of the population associated themselves primarily with the region, rather than Ukraine as a whole. Meanwhile, 46 percent in the Donetsk and 33 percent in the Luhansk regions considered disarmament of nationalist formations such as the Right Sector the key to maintaining the integrity of the country. Right Sector was a group of Ukrainian nationalists who were one of the most radical participants during Euromaidan clashes. Interestingly, the same researcher cites data which shows that in the summer of 2014 – that is, when hostilities were already underway – from a quarter to a third of the region's population trusted the separatist (LDPR) government structures. Kudelia (2016, 14) also says that by the time Igor Strelkov occupied Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, local separatist bodies were already being formed there, as well as in Severodonetsk and Alchevsk in the Luhansk region, before the arrival of armed groups over the border. This indicates significant grassroots support for anti-Kyiv and often pro-separatist initiatives.

The above-mentioned identity clashes made themselves felt during the Euromaidan protests. In parallel with the growth of mass protests in Kyiv, there were Anti-Maidan protests in the traditionally relatively pro-Russian regions and in Kyiv itself, i.e., protests by opponents of the revolution and supporters of pro-Russian policies. Although their numbers were significantly lower than those of supporters of European integration, this showed a certain amount of internal tension. Particularly notable protests by opponents of regime change in Donetsk and Luhansk. Major protests began on March 1, 2014. Then, for about a month, activists seized administrative buildings and tried to get their demands met by the new Kyiv authorities. The protesters were seriously concerned about the repeal of the Language Law by the new Verkhovna Rada, which they saw as a threat to the status of the Russian language in the regions (Arel and Driscoll, 2023, 128). As the dialogue between the protesters and the new authorities did not progress, the protesters' demands shifted from federalization (i.e.,



constitutional insurance of their autonomy) to secession from Ukraine and annexation to Russia.

Stronger regional and pro-Russian indemnity was one of the reasons why “people’s republic” in Kharkiv failed (Nitsova, 2021, 1845.). On April 7, 2014, the Kharkiv and Donetsk People's Republics were proclaimed. In Kharkiv, Ukrainian security forces eliminated a separatist cell the next day without any problems. In Donetsk, however, the actions unfolded very differently. Immediately after the declaration of independence of the HPR and DPR, Ukrainian authorities announced the start of an anti-terrorist operation, and a week later the first open armed clashes between the separatists and the Ukrainian security forces began. The first open hostilities occurred on April 12 near the town of Slovyansk, northwest of Donetsk, when units under the command of Igor Strelkov seized the village. Much of the fighting in the first months of the war was concentrated around it. In Luhansk, the LPR was not proclaimed until the end of the month, on April 27.

To conclude, a strong presence of pro-Russian identity in Donbas played a role as a background for successful separatist actions and establishment of de facto states.

## **Russia’s involvement**

There are reports indicating that Russia is helping the separatists. There are accounts for the participation of Russian security forces in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in spring 2014. Mitrokhin (2015, 220 – 223) and Tsybulenko and Francis (2018, 126) say Russian special forces helped separatists to capture administrative buildings in Luhansk and Donetsk.

It can be reasonably argued that there was some involvement of Russian special services in helping the separatists seize administrative buildings and establish a degree of control over

the regional centers of Donbas. Nevertheless, to say that Russia fully controlled the separatists' actions or that it was exclusively driven by Russian detachments is incorrect. A closer look reveals that the separatist battle groups were very fragmented and were rather led by local field commanders, i.e., they lacked centralized command. This could be observed despite the building of political institutions by the separatists, in particular the Ministry of Defense of the DPR and LPR. Local anti-Kyiv activists widely believed that Russia would take the same step as it did in Crimea in March 2014 – unilateral incorporation (Dergachev, 2014). Putin, despite calling Donbas “Novorossiia” (appr. “New Russia”), refused to send a substantial number of “little green men” to seize all administrative and military facilities: *“I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiia (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then.”*. (Putin, 17<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014; citation exported from Laruelle, 2016, 57).

What follows is a brief overview of the rebel groups in the first months of the war. Igor Strelkov, as mentioned above, commanded the fighting in the Sloviansk-Kramatorsk agglomeration from April, which he captured with his group, while the formal head of the Defense Ministry (until early May 2014) Igor Khakimzyanov tried to establish control of Mariupol in April and May (Sazonchik, 2014). There were other little decentralized groups in Donetsk. In May, disparate groups merged into Vostok and the People's Militia of Donbas. A similar pattern was observed in another large city near Donetsk, Horlivka. There, the leader of the rebels was Igor Bezler. According to a well-known Russian journalist who communicated with Bezler in Gorlovka, he had a rather negative attitude towards the very project of the DPR - he called it a "banana republic" (Dzemaal, 2014). From the same report, it follows that Bezler coordinated only with Igor Strelkov, the military leader of the DPR, i.e., he commanded independently and had no contact with the political leadership of the separatist republic. There was also a conflict over economic management of the controlled territories, compared to the

rest of the DPR. Bezler was the only one who allowed businesses to operate under Ukrainian laws and, moreover, went into direct dialogue with representatives of the Ukrainian authorities. As for the Luhansk People's Republic, there was also no organizational unity. There was the so-called Army of the Southeast, which can be considered the main formation of the LPR government. Effective groups such as the “Zarya” (“Dawn”) battalion were created in early May, after the separatists had established full control over Luhansk at the end of April and proclaimed of LPR independence (Kudelia, 2016, 13). It also included relatively independent groups led by Luhansk Oblast natives Aleksandr “Batman” Bednov and Alexei Mozgovoy's “Prizrak” (“Ghost”) Battalion. At the same time, Cossack detachments led by Nikolai Kozitsyn were active in Luhansk Oblast. He had been an active member of the Don Cossacks in Russia for many years, but was not known to the general public. Although operational cooperation between the detachments probably took place (Koshik, 2014), there was also a certain degree of decentralization.

Decentralization between these formations manifested itself in the following ways. First, one of the largest rebel units, the so-called Prizrak battalion, operated in parallel with other LPR units. For example, its leader, Oleksiy Mozgovoy, operated independently of LPR armed structures and coordinated military actions with Strelkov (Melnikov, 2014). Mozgovoy was also a critic of the Minsk agreements. He said that concluding the armistice in September 2014 was “nothing but betrayal” by LPR leadership, because he believed that they were directed against the interests of the “Novorossiya” idea (Obozrevatel, 2014). Second, immediately after the signing of the Minsk agreements, the Cossacks leader, Pavel Dremov, proclaimed the creation of the “Stakhanov People's Republic,” centered in the city of Stakhanov (Caroll, 2014). This was a direct reaction to the Minsk agreements and signified their intention to continue the armed struggle against Ukrainian forces. This may indicate competing views among influential leaders of the Donbas groups, which led to a challenge to the nascent

institutions of the Luhansk de facto state. However, the latter easily foiled. From this, it can be concluded that if the separatists' actions were dictated and organized by Moscow, there would be no such controversy among them, let alone an attempt to establish parallel power institutions.

In fact, initially the separatist groups consisted mainly of locals, according to Kudelia (2016, 10). He also cites extensive data regarding the initial period of separatist life. Most of the newly elected deputies to the local councils (which were already under the control of the LPR) were chosen by activists who had participated in the pro-Russian protests. Characteristically, the first separatist leaders in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts were the locals, Alexandr Kharitonov and Pavel Gubarev, respectively. In the city of Donetsk itself, there was no centralized control of the disparate armed groups until May 2014, when they were consolidated by DPR Prime Minister Borodai and the Vostok battalion in May 2014. The same battalion, according to Ukrainian media reports, consisted of locals and incoming Caucasians, including those from unrecognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

There was a great deal of debate concerning the identity of Igor Strelkov, perhaps the most famous of the separatist commanders at the initial stage of confrontation. Many considered him to be a Russian agent or to have acted under instructions from Moscow. In 2013, he resigned from the Russian Federal Security Service. However, the mere fact that he had served in the Russian special services is not proof that a person from Moscow coordinated his actions. In his statements, after his departure from Donbas in August 2014, Strelkov criticized the leadership of the People's Republics, accused the LDPR authorities of killing dissenting field commanders, and was an active critic of the Russian strategy toward Ukraine – criticism that continued even after a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 (Kovalev, 2022). Among other things, Strelkov actively began to criticize Moscow while he was still Minister

of Defense of the DPR. When separatist troops forced to retreat in July 2014, he publicly called Moscow refusal to introduce regular Russian troops into Donbas territory.

The situation changed dramatically in August 2014. The separatists were then in retreat, communications between the LPR and DPR were disrupted by Ukrainian forces, and the Ukrainian Armed Forces had cut the border with Russia. In this context, reports of regular Russian forces entering the Donbas began to appear unexpectedly in August.

At the same time, the situation on the front began to change dramatically. Separatist forces went on the offensive, organizing several "cauldrons" for the Ukrainian army. By early September 2014, the territory controlled by LDPR had more than doubled. Although Russia formally denied that its servicemen took part in the fighting, Russian special forces had been captured during heavy fighting near Ilovaisk (Solopov, 2014). At the same time, media published reports about the participation of regular Russian army units in battles in Donbas (BBC Russian, 2014). The annual statistics on "non-combat losses" of the Russian Armed Forces for 2014 year was four time greater than previous years (Lenta.ru, 2017). This also indirectly confirms the participation of the Russian Armed Forces. The rapid offensive of Russian and separatist forces resulted in a significant expansion of territories outside the control of Ukrainian forces. Thus, it can be argued that Moscow's direct military intervention saved the separatists from defeat and created political cover to strengthen and streamline the political institutions of Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics. Consequently, Moscow's direct intervention preserved the Donbas de facto states.

## **Minsk agreements and rebels' politics**

The first Minsk agreements signed in September 2014 enabled Moscow and the separatists to strengthen the military and political structures of the LDPR. The absence of large-scale hostilities at this time provided an opportunity for consolidation of the de facto state of LDPR. Among the distinguishing features of the formations at the time was the change in leadership of both separatist polities. The original political leadership of the LDPR left office back in August 2014, right around the time of the Russian intervention in Donbas. Later, most of the original leaders were removed from top decision-making positions. In the DPR, Andrey Purgin, who had been chairman of parliament since the fall of 2014 and was also one of the ideological inspirers of the Donetsk separatists, was removed from office in September 2015. Although there were differing opinions among both separatists and their Russian supporters as to the reasons for the conflict between Purgin and Pushilin, it can clearly be said that the purging of the DPR leadership from the separatists' first leaders was a fact. Alexander Khodakovsky, the former organizer and commander of the Vostok battalion (one of the first organized separatist combat formations), went into opposition in 2016, although he did not leave the republic (Lenta.ru, 2016). He accused the DPR leadership of corruption and the desire to establish control over money flows, and creation of obstacles due to which he was not allowed to register as a candidate for the republic's leadership in 2018. Prominent field commanders from the initial war period either left Donbas in the summer and fall of 2014 (e.g., Strelkov, Bezler, and Kozitsyn) or were killed under strange circumstances, such as Dremov, Bednov, and Mozgovoy.

In 2016, after Gennady Tsypkalov, a former LPR minister, was killed in a Luhansk detention center, Alexei Karyakin, a Russian who had been an active political functionary in the LPR for the first time, stated that the LPR was progressively purging all those who had

created the de facto state (Barabanov, 2016), by the republic's leadership. In other words, from the fall of 2014 through 2016, there was a gradual removal of virtually all of the original leaders of the Donbas separatists, both politically and militarily.

After the signing of the Minsk agreements, certain political institutions were gradually built in the DPR. For example, the "Donetsk Republic" was transformed from a public association into a political party, which after the autumn 2014 local elections became the ruling party in the DPR. In addition, the "Free Donbas" party also took part in the parliamentary elections, while other parties, including the Communist party, were not even registered. Prior to the elections, the parliament functioned rather chaotically and included representatives of various local councils, parties and public organizations. A similar situation was observed in the LPR, where two parties were also represented in the parliament - "Mir Luganschine" (Eng. "Peace to Luhansk region") (which became the ruling party) and "Luhansk Economic Union". Head of state elections resulted in Alexander Zakharchenko (DPR) and Igor Plotnitsky (LPR) becoming heads of the republics. So, after Russian armed intervention and concluded under the latter's pressure Minsk agreement, political procedures and management in LDPR began to centralize by establishing the work of local government institutions. In addition, in autumn 2014 unified armies ("people's militias") were created by assembling all autonomous regiments under the hierarchical command. In other words, after the conclusion of the Minsk agreements there was an alignment of political life, at least imitating ordinary state-building, with elections of representative authorities. The consequence was consolidation of political control over separatist groups and building a clear hierarchy within the people's republics, which was not the case in the spring and summer of 2014.

Kin state was vital for LDPR functioning. When it comes to economic management, the LDPR relied heavily on Russian economic aid. Fischer (2019, 25) says that after 2017 economic embargo imposed by Kyiv, LDPR are completely dependent on Russia, especially “economically weaker Luhansk People’s Republic”. She says that Russia supplies raw materials, energy and other products through humanitarian aid programs. At the same time, although the economy of the controlled regions had collapsed by 2/3 relative to its pre-war level, it produced a variety of industrial products (Polovyan et al, 2018, 73-74). Some of the products were exported to Russia, Turkey and the Middle East through not entirely legal schemes, and banking links between companies subordinated to the LDPR and Russia took place through South Ossetia (Chernysh and Voronina, 2020). This is an interesting point, since South Ossetia, on the one hand, is recognized by the Russian Federation as an independent state, and on the other hand, unlike Abkhazia, which is similar in status, recognized the LDPR. Thus, in terms of the legislation of the Russian Federation, there were legal mutual settlements between Russia and de facto states.

The 2018 election of the head of the DPR after the assassination of Oleksandr Zakharchenko shows that there was competition among the Donetsk separatists in the struggle for supreme power. Available information does not allow to say with certainty what was behind the assassination. However, some analysts believed that it was organized by Moscow in order to replace the leadership of the republic with a more convenient one for a stronger negotiating position (Bushuev and Butyrsky, 2018). At this point, one can see the extremely strong influence of Moscow's position in these territories. Some reports notice that Pushilin's appointment as head of the DPR and his subsequent election after the elections was dictated by Moscow, which was much more comfortable with Pushilin's candidacy. For example, Krivosheev (2018) states that after Zakharchenko's murder, Denis Pushilin went to Moscow to meet with Vladislav Surkov and Federal Service of Security investigators arrived to investigate



the murder. Krivosheev also notes that Zakharchenko was one of the last representatives of the early leaders of the 2014 protests and was quite belligerent in his rhetoric towards Kyiv. Meanwhile, Pushilin was a controlled technocrat manager who would behave as his handlers from Moscow wanted him to. It is important to note that Surkov was for a long time the curator of relations with Ukraine in the Russian presidential administration, and, in particular, regulating life in the LDPR (Khmelnitskaya, 2022). This suggests that the Kremlin did not try very hard to hide its active interference in political processes in the Donbas de facto states.

A year earlier, there had been a coup d'état in the LPR when the Interior Ministry, led by Igor Kornet, overthrew Igor Plotnitsky and replaced him with Leonid Pasechnik, a member of the LPR special services. Moscow reportedly supported Kornet and Pasechnik in this conflict (Dynnichenko, 2017). This signifies that Moscow had enough control over powerful elites in LPR to change the senior leadership.

Russian involvement was also apparent in the LDPR economy. In 2017, the LPR nationalized Rinat Akhmetov's enterprises, following the imposition of an economic blockade by the Ukrainian authorities. Akhmetov was a Ukrainian oligarch who had a substantial amount of assets in Luhansk and Donetsk regions. They were put under the management of Vneshtorgservis (abbreviation "External trade service"), a company registered in South Ossetia, which various journalists linked to the fugitive Ukrainian oligarch Kurchenko. Skorkin (2021) says that Kurchenko had extracted the most profitable parts of the Donbas economies, squeezing out maximum profits at the expense of long-term strategy. However, at the turn of 2020-21, after disgruntled miners appealed to Putin, the enterprises of Vneshtorgservis were transferred "to the balance sheet" of the people's republics, and the Russian Central Bank revoked the license of the bank through which Kurchenko was making money through South Ossetia. This indicates that Russia was directly involved in the change of the governance of

Donbas economic assets. Almost immediately, Russian oligarch Yurchenko was put in charge. The replacement of Yanukovich's Ukrainian oligarch associate with a Russian demonstrates that the kin state by then had enormous control over LDPR and was able to change key figures in the Donbas republics' lives as it saw fit. Also, as some reports suggest, this was a step by Moscow to normalize the management of considerable parts of LDPR's economy to preserve local social stability.

In Donbas, local identity clashes played an important role in the creation of the separatist movement in 2014 and subsequent secession. Although Russian special services provided some support to the separatists, there was significant support for separatist and pro-Russian actions in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, a substantial part of which manifested itself without Russian intervention. The fighting began without Moscow's direct military involvement, although politically it declared serious sympathies for the separatists and pressed Ukraine and the West to accept the "demands of the people of Donbas." After the separatist forces began a rapid retreat, the Russian army entered the territory of Donbas and saved the "people's republics" from destruction. Further, using the Minsk Agreements, Russia has streamlined the management of the LDPR, establishing considerable external control over the de facto state. It reflected in unification of political hierarchy, and interference in local political and economic management.

## CHAPTER 4. COMPARISON BETWEEN SERBIAN KRAJINA AND LDPR.

As stated in Chapter 1, this study uses Most Different Systems Analysis. Identity and kin state actions are used to explain the patterns in different historical and political contexts. Referring to the periodization stated in Chapter 1, and analysis in Chapters 2 and 3, the following process tracing can be made.

### *Serbian Krajina:*

De facto and kin states role

Local minority protests - active propaganda by kin state - armed intervention by kin state - creation of de facto state and kin state formal withdrawal - considerable support by kin state but significant autonomy of the separatists - failure of kin state to protect and destruction of the de facto state

Kin state control over de facto state:

August 1990 – December 1991: covert support, full-scale invasion, creation basis for de facto state creation. December 1991 – February 1992: full military considerable control. February 1992 – August 1995: covert support, weak control.

### *LDPR:*

De facto and kin states role

Protests by local minority - active propaganda by kin state - some military support by special services and initiation of hostilities, proclamation of de facto state - armed intervention

by kin state to protect de facto state from destruction - creation of functional de facto state and substantial control by kin state - annexation by kin state (but unable to preserve?)

Kin state control over de facto state

March/April 2014 – August 2014: covert support, insignificant control. August 2014 – February 2022: military intervention to preserve de facto state, considerable control. February 2022 – September 2022: full-scale invasion of Ukraine, full control and annexation

## **How did the separatists maintain a level of autonomy?**

In general: separatist autonomy was generally possible because of: 1) the struggle of different factions within the separatists' political and military elite with different views (e.g., what strategies should the leadership choose), 2) opportunity to wage military actions without direct intervention of a kin state. The difference in the degree of separatist autonomy explained in the Serbian Krajina case direct military involvement of the kin state decreased after creating a relatively functional de facto state, while in Donbas case Russian military involvement and political protection were key to forming (relatively) effective and consolidated de facto states' institutions.

## **Another kin state tool. Serbian and Russian domestic politics and propaganda**

Both Serbia and Russia used propaganda as a tool which stimulated separatism and eventually contributed to the establishment of respective de facto states. Milosevic became Serbia's authoritarian leader and in late 80s-early 90s used nationalist discourse to stay in power

(Gagnon, 2004, 112 – 113). In addition, he and his associates controlled the state media. Despite his use of nationalist rhetoric and substantial popular support, Milosevic faced serious opposition to himself. For example, as early as March 1991, major demonstrations against him were held in Belgrade, organized by Vuk Drašković, who was later involved in the Krajina affairs. Gagnon (2004, p. 100 – 110) writes that fomenting the military conflict in Croatia by convincing local Serb leaders that Belgrade would support them in every way and using massive propaganda of fear of the fledgling Croatian state was a deliberate strategy of Milosevic to demobilize the population within Serbia itself by diverting attention to the war and problems of ethnic brothers' suffering in neighboring countries. Demobilization was necessary to reduce internal political tensions and to minimize the likelihood of losing power. Overlaying this was a widespread sympathy among Serbs for the concept of a Greater Serbia - that is, the creation of a state that would unite the entire territory of the Serbian population. Milosevic used aggressive rhetoric and the threat of Serbian invasion, which led to a rise in nationalism in other Yugoslav republics, including Croatia. This intensified already existing ethnic tensions. It could be therefore argued that the origin of Krajina's conflict was not only identity-driven by Croatian Serbs, but also kin state-driven by the specific political calculation made by the Serbian leadership.

Russia had also become an authoritarian regime by 2014. Putin and the government had established complete control over the mainstream media, especially the federal television channels. Although the opposition had its own voices, their influence on society was relatively limited. This has implications not only for public mobilization within Russia, but also for influencing the population of Donbas. Quite a few people from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were regular viewers of Russian TV channels and pro-government experts. (Giuliano, 2018, 6) writes that the influence of Russian propaganda on the Donbas population should not be overestimated. She shows that the majority of residents of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts did

not support the idea of secession from Ukraine and accession to Russia, and less than 50 percent were concerned about Ukrainian nationalist activities and the country's potential accession to NATO and the EU. Nevertheless, propaganda was able to reinforce the rejection of the new Kyiv authorities and the separatist sentiments among those who were already pro-Russian and set on seceding. Russia appealed to memories about the Great Patriotic War, while inflating the threat to Russian-speaking and ethnic Russians from nationalist organizations such as Right Sector, the Svoboda Party, and supporters of the UIA (Ukraine Insurgency Army) (De Cordier, 2017, 2 – 4). In this way, the image of Banderites and Ukrainian collaborators, who collaborated with German troops during World War II and defenders of historical memory - Russia and pro-Russian movements - was formed.

Thus, an intensification of nationalist rhetoric, as well as threat inflation, in both cases exacerbated an already existing identity clash. Hence, kin-state propaganda was a very important tool that preceded the creation of de facto statehood, helped in collective mobilization of separatists', including the local public support for pro-kin state public figures.

## **International Relations theory and de facto states**

It should be noted that the kin state does not act in the vacuum. The kin state lives in a certain system of international relations, and the dynamics that take place within the latter affect what countermeasures may follow in response to certain actions of the state. Serbia and Russia supported their separatists at a time when other actors expressed opposing preferences concerning the ethno-territorial conflicts. In both cases, the West reacted extremely negatively to the violation of Croatia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity. International sanctions were imposed on Serbia and Russia for supporting separatists, and the West, including the strongest player among this community - the U.S. - tried to pressure Belgrade and Moscow for their

actions in neighboring states. The West was directly involved in negotiation processes trying to resolve the ethno-territorial conflicts. Serbia and Russia thus organized support for the separatists in response to these pressures. Due to their constraints, support for them was, in a sense, limited. There observed three variables that influenced the degree of support from the kin state in separatist conflicts: 1) the strength of the host state, 2) relative power of the kin state compared to the supporters of the host state (it can be called international pressure), and, 3) the kin state's own strategic choice in regard to separatist conflict.

Neoclassical realism can give a satisfactory explanation of kin states action in both conflicts. This strain of international relations stresses the importance of states' and leaders' perception of political events, domestic political variables such as views of elite or state institutions which provides an opportunity for a state to act in a certain way (Rose, 1998, 147). Also, ideas can have a considerable effect of a country's foreign policy (Meibauer, 2020, 22; Rathburn, 2008, 307) This has substantial significance alongside with neorealist concepts as international anarchy and interstate competition. Domestic factors can distort foreign policy decision-making from the "ideal" point, that is, to make a state to act in a way that can harm its own position.

Discourse of nationalism which was used by Milosevic during Yugoslavia collapse can be fit into the neoclassical realism paradigm. Firstly, He used Serbian nationalist discourse to mobilize Serbians in Yugoslavia against independence movements in various countries, like in Croatia, to preserve united Yugoslavia, while simultaneously demobilizing opposition forces to his policies to sustain his authoritarian regime. Secondly, he used power to help separatists in establishing de facto state of Serbian Krajina and assisting to sustain its existence. Later, when it became obvious that Serbia could not struggle effectively against international system

pressure (i.e., development of Croatian state and sanction pressure from the West), Milosevic changed his approach to Krajina and wanted to reintegrate it but with compromise solution.

Speaking of Putin, he used annexation of Crimea and supported separatists in Donbas to receive a leverage over Ukraine to block its integration into Western institutions like NATO by creating territorial problems for Ukraine. Putin perceived the success of Euromaidan as negative event for Russia, as new Ukrainian government was pro-Western and openly declared its intension to join NATO and the EU, what could be seen as “loss of Ukraine” by Putin. Russian actions in Ukraine fit the paradigm of Russia-West geopolitical competition, as Putin *perceived* Ukraine as Russian undisputable sphere of influence (Mearsheimer, 2014, 79). So, by using anti-Kyiv propaganda, special forces in spring and since August 2014 regular army, he helped in establishing de facto states of LDPR. Later, when the negotiation process concerning the block status of Ukraine and LDPR experienced a long gridlock, Putin decided to invade Ukraine and inflict a crushing defeat. While unable to defeat Ukraine totally, he still hopes that Russia will save occupied territories, including LDPR, and this will be a sing of victory.

## **Serbian power, strategy and the Western response**

Both Croatia and Ukraine were in a political crisis at the time the conflicts began, which produced a crisis of state governance. Under these conditions, the separatists and their kin states were given the opportunity to produce a de facto state. Croatia as a nearly independent state was still in the process of creation. There were no regular armed forces yet, and the quality of state institutions left a lot to be desired. Also, separatism was on the rise before Croatia became an independent state. Belgrade had more opportunities to put pressure on Croatia than vice versa, so separatist success was more significant than in the Donbas case, as the Serbs had



already taken control of certain areas with predominantly Croatian population, that where the local separatism should be less strong than pro-host state sentiments due to ethnic composition. Still, overall, the kin state in both cases took advantage of its neighbor's political crisis and used the favorable environment for intervention and support of the separatists and to offer a critical support to de facto states, dominated by their ethnic kin.

However, the aforementioned leverage was short-lived. International sanctions were imposed against Belgrade for its actions in neighboring Bosnia and Croatia. Throughout 1991-1993, Milosevic and his government attempted to provide sufficient assistance to Croatian Serbs to achieve his political goals - ideally the successful secession of Krajina from Croatia. However, Milosevic was responding to the incentives given to him by the international community. Sanctions pressure was making itself felt and the Serbian economy was being damaged. Western economic and political pressure was already intense by 1992, leading Milosevic to withdraw regular units of the Serbian army from Croatian territory. Despite continued support of Serbian Krajina, it became clear that it would not be possible to achieve decisive victories in Croatia, so Milosevic did not oppose attempts to negotiate a compromise (for example, by ceding some territory to Krajina Serbs in exchange for autonomy within Croatia). In addition, in 1994 Croats and Bosniaks had concluded a peace deal which stopped Croatia-Bosnian conflict. It was made under US pressure and intermediary. Washington united Croats and Bosnian Muslims against Serbs in Bosnia and Croatia. Washington also trained and supplied Croatian army, with continued economic and political pressure on Belgrade and Serbs separatists in Bosnia and Croatia. It resulted in successful offensive of Bosnian-Croatian and Croatian forces against separatists and, in particular, destruction of Krajina.

Serbia lacked the military-political and economic capabilities to dictate its conditions and 1) to preserve the de facto state, and 2) to provide RSK “the best ending”, e.g., integration

to Serbia/federation with Republika Srpska. Also, in this case, the kin state lacked control over the de facto state/separatists to ensure the best possible outcome for Krajina. As Chapter 2 of this study shows, Milosevic was ready to make peace arrangements with Tudjman and encouraged the Krajina Serb leaders to negotiate. However, the political leadership of the latter refused and maintained the course of secession. Apparently, Serbia understood that the best outcome of the conflict in Croatia was the reintegration of Krajina as an autonomous entity. However, as has been shown, Milosevic and his government were not capable of taking full control of the Serbian Krajina. From this, one can say not only that Serbia, as a kin state, lacked the strength to ensure the existence of Serbian Krajina in the long run, but it also lacked sufficient control over the de facto state to ensure a satisfactory ending for the latter (autonomy instead of total destruction).

## **Russian power, strategy and Western response**

Russian actions in Ukraine were also strongly criticized by the West. Initially, sanctions were imposed for annexation of Crimea in March, 2014. Later, as open war in Donbas escalated, the West imposed more sanctions, and in 2015, supported political, military and economic reforms in Ukraine. The West also favored reincorporation of Donbas into Ukraine, and engaged in negotiations with Russia on this issue. Russia's strategic goal was to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO due to territorial conflicts. It also saw an opportunity to reintegrate the LDPR into Ukraine on its own terms. According to Haines (2015, 4), the reintegrated territory along with substantial autonomy would receive a constitutional provision to veto crucial state decisions. Russia unambiguously perceived the LDPR as a lever of pressure on Kyiv. However, attempts at reintegration failed, and Russia began to integrate the life of the separatist-

controlled Donbas with itself in order to manage the territories more effectively. Thus, the conflict remained frozen for seven long years.

In 2022, Vladimir Putin, as a result of the lack of a compromise on Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO, the future status of the LDPR and geopolitical claims, decided on a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. One can argue over the main motive for such a decision. However, the most important thing is the following. The Russian-Ukrainian confrontation that began in 2014 was not just a conflict between the two countries. Russia began its actions in response to the success of the Ukrainian revolution and Ukraine's abrupt withdrawal from the Russian sphere of influence. Ukraine began to look toward the West, and its integration into Western military and economic institutions increased. The Ukrainian crisis should also be seen as a confrontation between Putin's Russia and the West. Throughout the conflict, the West supported Ukraine, as it did Croatia. While in the early years, its stance tended toward negotiation and the search for compromise, as the crisis dragged on, arms began to be supplied to strengthen Ukraine's statehood and defense capabilities. Russia supported the existence of the LDPR, while the vision of the long-term future of these entities was unclear. From a certain moment, Russia began to integrate the life of the population of the republics with Russia. Since 2017, a program for issuing Russian passports and other Russian documents was launched (Surendher, 2021, 1034). As was shown in Chapter 3, with Russia's substantial involvement in the internal affairs of the separatists, the power in the LDPR moved from the initial leaders, often military ones, to the "technocratic managers" under the control of Moscow. This indicates that LDPR became Russian protectorates, which Moscow kept afloat. Many experts expressed the opinion that the most obvious future of the Donbas conflict is becoming a Transnistria-type "frozen conflict", in which case the LDPR would continue to be supported by Russia without formal diplomatic recognition. From this, we can conclude that if Putin had not started a full-scale war in 2022, then LDPR might have had much greater chance to be preserved as de facto

states, albeit weak and dependent on Russia. However, during Russo-Ukrainian war these republics were annexed by Moscow. This is important not only in the sense that de facto states ceased their existence because of irredentist policies of a kin state. The future of these territories is still uncertain. If Ukraine manages to liberate these territories, then LDPR will become an example of “forceful reintegration” story (to use Florea’s (2014) terms), and thus failure of both irredentist annexation and de facto state preservation.

Russia's decision to invade Ukraine was perhaps the key downfall for LDPR in terms of their future preservation. When Russian military force proved far from formidable in the first months of the full-scale invasion, the West began actively supply weapons to Ukraine, as well as providing substantial economic support to defeat Russia. Formally, Russia annexed the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (incorporating the LDPR, which it recognized, into its own composition) on September 30, 2022. Strictly speaking, these de facto states no longer exist - formally, they were absorbed by their kin state. However, it can hardly be said that the LDPR suffered a “better” fate than that of the Serbian Krajina. As long as war is going on, the future of these territories is in question. At the time of this writing, Ukraine is preparing its large-scale offensive, and victory for one side or the other is not yet a foregone conclusion. Obviously, Russia has proven unable to quickly and decisively expand the territory of the LDPR and incorporate them into its own territory.

## Conclusion

Both Serbia and Russia were acting in the international system with other actors which limited their abilities to influence the host state that experienced territorial problems. Thus, it can be claimed that both Serbia and (supposedly) Russia lacked material capabilities for eventual sustaining supported de facto states. Therefore, the relative power of a kin state, its strategic choice, and in some cases level of control over separatist de facto state are vital variables in a de facto state's life.

If to speak about similarities, in both cases identity mattered considerably as a popular basis for creation of de facto states, and its significance should not be underestimated. Simultaneously, in both cases kin states involvement mattered a lot, as it provided military support and needed supply for de facto states to survive. What is more, in both cases kin state-led propaganda and strategy played a vital role. It exacerbated identity-related tensions which led to open military clashes. When it comes to differences, although Russia helped separatists by the secret services, the direct involvement of kin state in the early stage of conflict was less in LDPR case. Still, the latter was not able to ensure its existence by military tools that is why Russia eventually launched an attack on Ukrainian forces to save de facto states from destruction. On the one hand, Serbia did not have power to provide the same support to Krajina in 1995 to save it from Croatian attack. On the other hand, Serbia directly invaded Croatia during in the beginning of military hostilities and after withdrawal supported Krajina. While autonomy of Serbian Krajina was considerable, LDPR after August 2014 became protectorates of Russia. The power of a kin state was eventually vital for de facto states preservation. The result of Russo-Ukrainian war will show whether Russia is powerful enough to keep control over former LDPR.

Finally, propaganda is overlooked tool of kin state involvement during the initial phase of identity clashed (before war) which thus increases chances for creation of a new de facto state. Although identity is often downplayed in its significance as a basis for separatist war and secession, without kin state involvement, both propagandist and military, potential separatists would have been unable to establish their de facto state.

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