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The Donbass in 2014: Ultra-Right Threats, Working-Class Revolt, and Russian Policy Responses

Renfrey Clarke

Political Activist, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

The 2014 revolt in Ukraine's Donbass provinces had deep roots among the region's industrial workers. Key sources of the uprising included resistance to neoliberal austerity measures planned by the radical right-wing government that had come to power in Kiev, and a determination to block attacks by ultra-right militias allied with the new Kiev authorities. The inchoate nature of labour movement politics in the Donbass meant that leadership of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics fell primarily to politically ill-assorted individuals drawn from the region's socio-economic "middle layers." The Russian leadership met the Donbass uprising without enthusiasm, but under pressure from domestic opinion, provided sufficient aid to allow the revolt to survive. Meanwhile, the Kremlin used a variety of pressures to forestall any evolution of the uprising in a radical left direction. Despite the limitations of the rebellion, it defended important interests of the Donbass proletariat, and dealt a sharp, unexpected rebuff to the eastward advance of NATO military influence and of neoliberal economic policies. Important numbers of workers gained a much keener grasp of their class interests.

KEYWORDS

Ukraine; Donbass revolt; nationalism; neoliberal austerity; Russia

Introduction

In Western political commentary, ill-fitting ideological templates have largely obscured the social origins and political content of the 2014 rebellion in the Ukrainian Donbass provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. The mainstream Western press has routinely encouraged its readers to view the revolt as Russian-instigated, the result of an alleged aggressive drive by the Kremlin to assert its control over Ukrainian affairs. Echoing this account at least in part, left-wing writers have often depicted the conflict as stemming from a clash of imperial ambitions, with Russian ruling circles pitted against Western elites in seeking a "carve-up" of Ukraine (Leplat 2014). Neither version has much use for analysis of the social and political processes unfolding in the Donbass.

In reality, and as this article will demonstrate, the Donbass revolt was a local initiative that had very robust popular origins, particularly in the region's coal-mining communities. A key immediate source was a spontaneous, defensive response to the threat of armed attacks by ultra-right Ukrainian nationalist bands allied with the new Kiev government of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. At a more elemental level, the uprising rested on

CONTACT Renfrey Clarke renfreyclarke@hotmail.com

working-class resistance to a programme of neoliberal austerity being readied for implementation by the new Kiev authorities.

With its pronounced component of working-class struggle, the Donbass revolt was at odds in fundamental respects with the Russian administration—conservative, despite its populism—of President Vladimir Putin. The formidable sympathy for the rebellion among the population in Russia (Volkov 2015) nevertheless constrained Putin from joining with the new Ukrainian authorities to suppress an essentially unwelcome development. Obliged to support the revolt to the point needed to allow its survival, the Russian government exerted strong pressure on the rebels to limit their radicalism. At the same time, the Moscow authorities pursued a subtle diplomatic and military course designed to stabilise the regional situation while serving the general Russian aim of deterring any further advance by NATO to the east. The Donbass uprising and its international repercussions thus allow important insights into the nature and motivations of Russian foreign policy.

February–April 2014: The Maidan and the Donbass

Setting the scene for the Donbass revolt were the protest movement that unfolded from November 2013 on the Maidan Square in Kiev; the overthrow of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych on February 22, 2014, followed by the installing of the hard-right nationalist Yatsenyuk government; and the turmoil in Crimea that in March ended with that territory declaring itself independent of Ukraine and joining Russia.

The Maidan struggle encountered a mixed but broadly sceptical response in the Donbass. Yanukovych himself was a native of Donetsk Province, and his Party of Regions had one of its main bases of support among the Donbass population. Whatever views Donbass residents held of Yanukovych and his ministers, the reaction was cool to demands that the president for whom locals had voted in large numbers should resign.

As extreme Ukrainian-nationalist forces gained increasing sway over the protests in Kiev, the scepticism concerning the Maidan movement felt by Donbass residents—solidly Russian-speaking, and of diverse ethnic backgrounds—hardened into distaste and eventually, widespread militant opposition. In the main Donbass city of Donetsk on February 21, rumours that squads of the ultra-nationalist Right Sector movement were planning raids on the city brought activists ranging from communists to monarchists onto the streets to defend a statue of Lenin. Initially, the main political demand voiced by the protestors was that the Donetsk provincial assembly call a referendum on granting the province federal status, replacing the system under which administrative authority was tightly centralised in Kiev.

On February 23, the day after Yanukovych's ouster, the Ukrainian parliament voted to repeal a 2012 law that had allowed provinces to designate Russian as an official language. The parliament's move was reversed on March 1 through a veto by the new acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov. But by this time, the confidence of many Donbass residents that they could co-exist with the new regime had been eroded.

Alarm in the Donbass at the intentions of the new Kiev authorities increased when the government named by Prime Minister Yatsenyuk proved to include members of the fiercely anti-Russian Svoboda party, founded in the 1990s as an openly neo-Nazi organisation. Meanwhile, the new government did not conceal its plans to enact harsh neoliberal

austerity policies, with steep rises in energy charges, cuts to pensions and government jobs, and all-round reductions in state spending (Rasmus 2014). In the heavily industrialised Donbass, fears multiplied that at a time when economic conditions were already grim, reductions in state outlays—and in particular, in subsidies for the region's many loss-making state enterprises—would see mass layoffs, with living standards also collapsing for many who remained in employment.

Against this backdrop, and prompted by the demonstrators now thronging the city centre, the Donetsk City Council on March 1 passed a resolution backing the call for a referendum, demanding that the Russian language be placed on an equal footing with Ukrainian, and calling for the Russian Federation to be considered a "strategic partner" of the Donbass. The following day, thousands of protestors gathered outside the Donetsk regional administration building and acclaimed pro-autonomy activist Pavel Gubarev as "people's governor" of the province. Representatives of the demonstrators called on a session of the provincial assembly to institute a referendum on autonomy, to declare the new government in Kiev illegal, and to recognise Gubarev as head of the Donetsk region. When the legislators refused, the protestors swarmed inside, occupying the building for the next few days until expelled by special forces of the Ukrainian interior ministry.

Demonstrations continued, and on April 6 protestors again seized the building, stating that if the assembly continued refusing to discuss and vote on their demands, "the people" would take power into their own hands. When the deputies failed to convene next day, the demonstrators met in the chamber as a "people's soviet," and adopted a Declaration of Independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Drawn up by communist city councillor Boris Litvinov—later to become speaker of the republic's parliament—the declaration sought closer ties to Russia and the development of collective forms of ownership that excluded "the appropriation of the results of others' labour" (Luhn 2014).

The Donetsk republic survived and was consolidated because the declaration in the assembly chamber was simply one element within a broad, spontaneous rebellion that was already under way in numerous Donbass centres. Over four weeks in April, an American researcher records, anti-Maidan protestors "overran regional administration headquarters, city councils, prosecutors' offices, police stations, arms depots, and television towers in 32 cities, and established some 280 roadblocks" (Zhukov 2014). Near the city of Slavyansk on April 13, fire-fights took place between Ukrainian government forces and rebel irregulars, and in Kiev next day acting President Turchynov signed a decree launching an "anti-terrorist operation" against the insurgents.

In Lugansk on April 6, the provincial headquarters of the Ukrainian Security Service, full of weapons, was occupied without a fight by local militias after being abandoned by its personnel. As seizures of government buildings spread, members of the provincial legislature came over to the revolt, and on April 27 the founding of the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) was announced. On April 30, Turchynov was quoted by BBC News as admitting that government forces could no longer control the situation in the country's south-east.[1] Between the two provinces a region with six and a half million people, the most densely settled in Ukraine, was defying the new Kiev authorities. Yatsenyuk and his ministers no longer held effective power in the main centre of the country's heavy industry.

[1] See http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27222023.

Seeking to legitimise their insurrection—and undoubtedly, with an eye to forcing the Russian government to give its backing to the revolt—the leaders of the new republics called a referendum for May 11. The poll asked residents of the Donbass whether they supported the "Act of State Self-Rule of the Donetsk (Lugansk) People's Republic." Electoral officials later reported that 89% of voters had backed self-rule, with 10% against, on a turnout of nearly 75%.[2]

The referendum outcome clearly reflected popular thinking. An opinion survey conducted in mid-April by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology had found as few as 10–12% of respondents in Donetsk and Lugansk provinces content with the existing structures of the Ukrainian government. More than 70% were inclined, or convinced outright, to regard the government headed by Yatsenyuk as "illegal." Close to 90% opposed the system under which provincial governors were appointed from Kiev. Around 80% indicated their support for federalisation or some other expansion of regional autonomy.[3]

Moscow officials met the initiatives by the rebel leaders during May with a studied coolness. Following the reincorporation of Crimea to Russia, the Moscow authorities needed a dampening of international tensions, which events in the Donbass threatened once again to inflame. On May 7, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the President of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Didier Burkhalter, and expressed approval of a "road map" for resolving the Donbass crisis. As a signal that Russia had no designs on Ukrainian territory—and that Donbass militants should not count on Russian support in pursuing independence—the Russian president called on the leaders of the rebel republics to postpone their May 11 referendum.[4] Subsequent "road map" discussions, involving representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the United States and the European Union, took place in Geneva on May 13.

The "road map" by this time centred on calls for national dialogue in Ukraine and for irregular forces to be disarmed. Yatsenyuk's government rejected any mention of talks with the insurgents, and disarming rebel militias would have left the Donbass population defenceless before the fighters—now legitimised as members of Kiev's newly-created National Guard—of Ukrainian neo-fascist groups. The popularity in Russia of the Donbass cause constrained Putin and his officials from an outright repudiation of the revolt, but there was little to suggest they viewed the new republics as anything but dispensable provided Russian strategic concerns were met. With a radically pro-Western government now in power in Kiev, a key Kremlin concern was that Ukraine should not be admitted to NATO.

Undeterred, the rebels pressed ahead with attempts to legitimise their revolt and if possible, to build support for it among opponents of the new Kiev authorities in other regions of Ukraine. At a "people's congress" in Donetsk on May 24, representatives of the DPR and LPR signed an agreement stating their goal of uniting as the Union of People's Republics, or the Union of Novorossiya. Attendees from other southern and eastern provinces joined in proclaiming a "pro-federalisation Popular Front socio-political coalition." As reported by Russian television, a declaration was adopted vowing to protect civilians

[2] See http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27360146.
[3] See http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=302&page=8.
[4] See https://www.rt.com/news/157404-putin-ukraine-crisis-kiev/.

from the "terror of Nazi gangs financed by oligarchs and foreign security services," while pledging "a joint fight for people's rights to a decent life."[5]

The Donbass had risen in broad political revolt; it was unrelenting bloody-mindedness on the part of the Kiev authorities that turned the struggle into a civil war. Where restraint and dialogue might have brought compromise, the Ukrainian government set its forces to staging military assaults on rebel checkpoints. However reasonable the call for regional autonomy, Yatsenyuk and his colleagues met this demand with the rhetoric of "anti-terrorism," ruling out concessions and even direct negotiation.

Explaining the revolt: The social and economic background

Anger at Kiev's monopoly on executive power, for all its bitterness, was simply the concentrated expression of a many-sided discontent among the population of the Ukrainian south-east. To explain the uprising, we need to trace the ethno-linguistic, cultural-historical and above all, class and economic factors that set the Donbass against the new national authorities.

An initial task is to clarify what these factors did *not* include. They did not, importantly, include widespread agitation for union with Russia; evidence is lacking that protagonists of this goal were influential during the early days of the revolt. Even formal separation from Ukraine was not a widely-endorsed aim of Donbass residents at this time, as leaders of the rebellion were careful to recognise; the May 11 referendum question was deliberately ambiguous on this point. A much broader conviction that Kiev could not be lived with came only later, nourished by Ukrainian shelling of Donbass residential districts.

The idea of Russian nationalism as a crucial force motivating the revolt also has to be rejected. Western media reports in 2014 routinely noted the prevalence of the Russian language in the Donbass, and the high proportion there of "ethnic Russians." But the fact that Russian is the main language of everyday life in the Donbass, and that many locals have Russian ancestry, does not distinguish the region especially from other areas of southern and eastern Ukraine where no revolt took place. Among activists of the Donbass resistance, sympathies with an often-idealised Russia were warm, and hopes of Russian aid initially ran high. The Russian tricolour was displayed as a matter of course at resistance rallies, as was the Soviet flag. But to depict the resistance movement as gripped by Russian chauvinism is to mistake its sources completely.

Data for ethnicity tend to convey a false idea of the significance of ethnic origins in the Donbass. The truth is that there are few areas of the former USSR where ethnicity is more diffuse, or where chauvinist attitudes are less likely to arise or gain a hearing, than in this region with its population made up of descendants of industrial migrants from almost every part of the earlier Soviet expanse. Donetsk intellectual Andrey Purgin, who for a period in 2014 was Deputy Prime Minister of the DPR, was reported by a Crimean radio station in August of that year as saying: "Ethnicity here is not important. What is strong here is the regional attachment. We have 120 nationalities who are ready to defend their land."[6] Former Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine—and Donetsk native—Hrihoriy Nemyria is recorded by the World Public Library site as reflecting on the region of his

[5] See https://www.rt.com/news/161304-donetsk-lugansk-unite-state/.
[6] See http://en.voicesevas.ru/news/analytics/2750-the-man-who-devised-the-donetsk-republic.html.

upbringing: "The fact that you came from the Donbass was more important than that you were Russian or Ukrainian . . . In any case, most people here honestly couldn't say what they are ethnically, because most families, like mine, are mixed."[7]

Over many decades, the Donbass has forged a strong sense of local identity, in the face of which the Ukrainian nationalism projected by the victors of the Maidan clashes evoked little response. Long after the demise of the USSR, important numbers of people in the Donbass still think of their culture and traditions as "Soviet." A 2007 study found that in Donetsk Province 37% of residents described their cultural identity as Soviet, compared to 26% who described it as Ukrainian and 22% as Russian (Kuzio 2015, 234; citing the Razumkov Centre for Economic and Political Studies of Kiev).

Finally, the charge that the rebel ranks in the Donbass consisted mainly or largely of outsiders, particularly Russians, is plainly untrue. Encountering the fighters at close hand, Western journalists were forced to concede that they were overwhelmingly local people. In late July 2014, *New York Times* correspondent Sabrina Tavernise told an interviewer for the PBS Charlie Rose programme: "For the most part, they are indigenous people—coal miners, clerks, drivers of buses, just ordinary people living there who feel threatened by the Ukrainian government."[8] Addressing a Kiev television panel show in June 2014 after returning from the Ukrainian south-east, *Sunday Times* war correspondent Mark Franchetti met with an indignant response when he related that most of the fighters were Ukrainians from the Donbass, with little military experience, who had taken up arms to defend their homes "against fascism."[9]

To explain the Donbass revolt, a narrative quite different from that of the political mainstreams in Kiev, Western Europe and North America is therefore required. Such a narrative must have various threads, including the radically different "historical memories" in western and eastern Ukraine; the active, armed menace posed to the Donbass by the ultra-nationalist wing of the Maidan movement; serious economic distress, which the policies of the new Kiev government were guaranteed to exacerbate; and by no means least important, an impressive degree of class feeling among Donbass workers.

Observers have often noted the extreme offensiveness to many in Ukraine's east, especially to older people, of the tolerance shown in the Maidan movement for Nazi-like slogans and insignia. Particularly detested is the veneration by far-right nationalist groups of Second World War Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera (Ishchenko 2014). In the early months of 2014, Donbass residents also had good reason to expect that their region, with its mixed population and Russian *lingua franca*, would come under attack from the battalions of the Ukrainian neo-fascist movement. As early as February 20, Russian media reported that an assault force of armed irregulars from Kiev had appeared in Lugansk, trying to seize the premises of local institutions of power before being driven off by militia members.[10] Richard Sakwa records that in mid-March Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov went to Donetsk to incite football hooligans to arm themselves against opponents of the government (quoted in van der Pijl 2016, 76). Early in April, as related by the left-wing Russian site Rabkor, a spokesperson for the neo-fascist Right Sector

[7] See http://www.worldlibrary.org/articles/donets_basin.
[8] See https://www.newcoldwar.org/two-differing-views-in-the-new-york-times-on-the-war-in-eastern-ukraine/.
[9] See https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/british-italian-war-correspondent-most-of-the-fighters-are-ukrainians/.
[10] See https://www.rt.com/news/popular-uprising-eastern-ukraine-314/.

organisation declared on Ukrainian television that his group planned to send squads of fighters to Donetsk, Lugansk and Kharkov.[11] Shortly before the May 11 referendum, the massacre in Odessa of more than 40 anti-Maidan demonstrators heightened the sense of threat in the Donbass population.

At the same time, the Donbass revolt must be seen as having especially profound roots in the struggle of working-class communities to keep themselves intact amid a foundering economy. In the years before the uprising, almost half of workers in the Donbass held industrial jobs, and Russia was the largest customer for the massive proportion—as much as 70%—of local production that was exported (Zhukov 2014). In their wariness of a turn to Europe and conflict with Russia, Kiev sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko noted in an interview with *New Left Review*, Donbass workers were "simply afraid for their jobs" (Ishchenko 2014).

The first three months of 2014, before the uprising began to take hold, were already a period of economic catastrophe for the Donbass. Compared to the same period in 2013, Ukrainian data cited by Rabkor show industrial output in Donetsk Province down by 13%, and throughout the country machine-building, metallurgy and coal production were all in steep decline.[12] But it was the massive Donbass coal industry, with hundreds of thousands of workers and accounting in previous years for well over 90% of Ukrainian coal output (Ignatov 2015), that was threatened most directly by the Yatsenyuk government's neoliberal policies. Plans for the sector included massive cuts to subsidies and the closure by 2020 of as many as 50 of Ukraine's 120 operating pits (Guillory 2014).

The coal districts have strong traditions of workers' struggle. In 1993, workers from almost all the Donbass mines, and from hundreds of other industrial enterprises, staged a 10-day strike that saw miners marching to Kiev demanding work and wages. Other demands included a referendum on regional autonomy and the resignation of political leaders. The conflict of 2014 again centred on the miners and their communities. A US source observes:

> Data gathered from Ukrainian and international news agencies show disproportionately high levels of fighting in coal-mining districts. Even after adjusting for other factors (such as Russian language, policing, population density, terrain, roads, and spillover from neighboring towns), the size of the local mining labor force remains the strongest predictor of rebel activity. (Zhukov 2014)

This research bears out the conclusions in 2014 of the Borotba ("Struggle") Union, arguably the most ideologically coherent of Ukraine's left currents. In an interview in early May 2014, a leading Borotba member, Serhiy Kirichuk, set forward his organisation's view of the war: "Here in the south-east, people are fighting for their socio-economic rights. There is a very strong anti-oligarchic, anti-capitalist component in these protests" (Kirichuk 2014).

Backing for Borotba's insistence that the insurgency had important class-struggle roots is provided by evidence from the earlier-cited Kiev International Institute of Sociology opinion survey. In Donetsk Province in mid-April, the survey showed, a full 38.1% of respondents considered it necessary to nationalise all oligarchic holdings, with a further 35.1% believing that property obtained by oligarchs illegally should be taken over by the state. A conventional pro-capitalist position, maintaining that the state should respect

[11] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/04/09/east_ukraine. Accessed September 5, 2014.
[12] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/04/21/ukr_decline. Accessed September 5, 2014.

private property and ensure its defence, drew only 3.7% support. The corresponding figures for Lugansk Province were 24.6%, 48.1%, and 2.2%.[13]

The politics of the Donbass revolt

Despite its extraordinary popularity, the demand for expropriation of oligarchic property was not to act as the political cement binding the Donbass rebellion together. That cement was provided by a markedly less radical mix of anti-fascism with a desire for regional self-rule; that is, by positions that united the region's industrial workforce with a swathe of its socio-economic "middle layers."

The latter, consisting of petty entrepreneurs, managers and supervisory personnel, and also professionals and other intellectual workers, had strong reason to feel aggrieved with the new Kiev regime. Many people within these strata were threatened quite directly by the Association Agreement being negotiated by the Ukrainian government with the European Union. The pact was guaranteed to sever many of the close commercial ties that bound the Donbass economy to suppliers and customers across the Russian border (Giuliano 2015). Meanwhile, the promises of new markets in Western countries, and of an influx of EU investment, were too speculative to provide much consolation.

Arguably, only an alliance that combined industrial workers with large sections of the "middle layers" could have possessed the social weight needed for mounting a revolt capable of surviving. But within this bloc, it was the "middle layers"—confident, armed with education and ideas, and experienced in public life—that from the first held decisive political sway. Donbass industrial workers, despite their massive numbers, anti-oligarchic temper and militant traditions, had little representation among the leading cadre of the rebel movement. This paradox requires exploration.

Despite decades of industrial ferment, the Donbass workers had never constructed an independent political movement, led by people who were rooted within the local working class and who grasped clearly how workers' interests differed from those of locally based capitalist magnates. In part, this situation reflects the small size, and isolation from the worker ranks, of Ukraine's far-left currents; throughout the country organisations such as Borotba had at most a few hundred activists, and their membership was skewed heavily toward intellectuals. Lacking ideological input from such sources, the Donbass workers on their own had proved incapable—as Lenin would no doubt have observed—of moving decisively beyond "economist" trade-union perspectives rooted in immediate questions of jobs, wages, and work conditions.

To the extent that this trade-union consciousness had found political expression during the post-Soviet decades, the forms it had taken were strikingly ill-assorted. The industrial mobilisations of the perestroika period had targeted Communist Party officialdom, with the result that labour leaders were open to right-wing influences and in later times, to co-option into the political structures of the restored capitalism. In the post-Soviet Donbass, even the near-general hostility to oligarchic power did not mean necessarily that workers felt antagonism for *their* oligarchs; Soviet-era clientelist traditions still led workers to identify with their enterprises and enterprise managements, and post-Soviet industrial struggles were often aimed at pressuring Kiev to grant concessions to Donbass employers.

[13] See http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=302&page=8.

The result in 2014 was that despite the numbers of the Donbass industrial workforce, and the overall class awareness of its members, the worker activists who took part in the anti-Kiev coalitions that assembled spontaneously in Donetsk and other cities did not figure as members of a coherent working-class bloc. Instead, they acted as individuals, or as members of groups without specific relation to local workplaces.

With few exceptions, the leading figures within the revolt were people who had no direct experience of labour struggles, and who owed their prominence to the roles they had played in the informal political life of Donetsk and Lugansk—in its political parties and clubs, ideological discussion circles, small business coteries and latterly, militias. Prominent Donetsk communist Boris Litvinov was to identify the activist cadre of the Donetsk uprising as stemming from,

> the local Communist Party, the [civic organisation] Donetsk Republic . . . , a lot of women's and veterans' organisations—for instance, the Union of Soviet Officers—and in general, people of anti-fascist views . . . There was the Progressive Socialist Party . . . (Litvinov 2014)

There is no denying that the initial leadership of the rebellion included some colourful characters. Donbass-born Pavel Gubarev, proclaimed as People's Governor of Donetsk Province, was a member of Ukraine's Progressive Socialist Party and former advertising employee whose erratic past had for a time included membership in a Russian fascist group. Russian native Aleksandr Boroday, until August 2014 Prime Minister of the DPR, was a former journalist for the Moscow nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* who had also worked for an investment fund and as a "crisis management" consultant. Locally-born Denis Pushilin, chairman until July 2014 of the DPR parliament, had once worked for a Moscow pyramid scheme. Donetsk defence chief and key military commander Igor Girkin ("Strelkov"), a Moscow native and former colonel in the Russian security forces, had a history as a serial warrior in the conflicts in Transnistria, Bosnia and Chechnya.

The most meaningful characterisation to be made of these individuals is that they were petty-bourgeois adventurers. Politically, the main threads connecting them included past involvement in Russian nationalist currents. That is not sufficient cause to characterise the leaderships in Donetsk and Lugansk as reactionary. The activist core of the rebel movement also included members of left-wing parties, and to keep the support of a combative population, the Donetsk and Lugansk chiefs were obliged to voice a commitment, at least in general terms and in the longer perspective, to restoring the social guarantees that Donbass residents remembered from Soviet times (Gubarev 2014; Zakharchenko 2014). No-one in the leadership circles of the new republics could be accused credibly of espousing the neoliberal doctrines that held sway in Kiev. Meanwhile, and as Borotba militant Viktor Shapinov has explained, the form of "Russian nationalism" commonly encountered in the Donbass is not simply the obverse of the intolerant, exclusivist nationalism of the Ukrainian right:

> In the West, if you support the People's Republics, you will always encounter the argument that they are just Russian nationalists, that the conflict in Ukraine is a war between two kinds of nationalism. But if you speak with these people from Donetsk who say they are Russian nationalists, it is quite different . . . If someone in Donetsk says he is a Russian nationalist, 90 per cent of the time, he is just for more rights for the Russian-speaking population, the right to education in the Russian language, and so on . . . In economic views, he is a socialist. (Shapinov 2014)

Nevertheless, the fact that people such as Boroday and Strelkov could hold and exercise power requires closer analysis. Why did miners and other workers in the Donbass, anxious to defend their homes and families, accept the leadership of people who had little in common with them in class and social terms, and who lacked any notable record of campaigning around the popular aspirations for job security, bearable living standards and guaranteed social welfare? Here we need to take account of the effective desertion of the region's workers by the people and forces that traditionally had provided them with political leadership.

In elections in previous years, the votes of Donbass working people had, as indicated, gone largely to Viktor Yanukovych's Party of Regions, formed around capitalist factions based in Ukraine's east and south. After Yanukovych's ouster, the oligarchs who had dominated the economy of the south-east remained joined by powerful ties to the Kiev state apparatus, and quickly lined up against the Donbass rebellion. Locally, the remnants of the Party of Regions sank into insignificance.

Also benefiting from working-class support in the Donbass had been the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU). In parliamentary elections in 2012, the CPU won 25% of the vote in Lugansk Province and 19% in Donetsk Province.[14] But the CPU was in no sense a militant working-class force; its leaders in practice gave their support to the Party of Regions and to successive Kiev administrations. Interviewed in June 2014, Moscow political scientist Daniil Grigoryev noted of the CPU: "Speaking endlessly about justice and social struggle, the 'communist' leaders proved to be astonishingly opportunistic and prone to avoiding any kind of real political conflict" (Grigoryev 2014). In the Donbass, communists such as Litvinov who threw themselves into the revolt acted largely as individuals; the support for the struggle shown by the CPU's national apparatus was limited to criticising Kiev's reprisals. Only later in 2014 were party dissidents in the Donbass to begin rebuilding a local communist movement on a more principled basis.

Trade union officials, with rare exceptions, were not to provide class-conscious leadership to the Donbass workers either. The Independent Union of Miners of Ukraine, its officialdom descended from bitterly anti-communist elements in the leadership of the late 1980s strike movement, combined an "economist" approach to struggle with links to former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's right-wing Fatherland Party. The response of this union to the crisis in the south-east consisted of an aggressive endorsement of the line coming from the Yatsenyuk government. The larger Union of Metallurgical and Mining Industry Workers, with links to the Party of Regions, met the revolt in passive fashion before eventually sanctioning demonstrations against Kiev's war on the Donbass.

After their traditional leaderships had either been swept from the scene, or had turned equivocal or hostile, workers in the Donbass looked about them for potential leaders prepared to wage a fight. They found such people, by and large, only in the activists and self-proclaimed chiefs of the new republics.

The allegiance of the mass of Donbass workers to people such as Prime Minister Boroday, we may surmise, was thus conditional on the combativeness of the latter toward the Kiev authorities. Rarely, it seems, was there enthusiasm for the personalities of the new Donetsk and Lugansk officials, or for their broader policy stances as these became known. For many left-wing observers in Western countries, the lack of classically

[14] See https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/u/ukraine/ukraine-legislative-election-2012.html.

impressive outpourings of support for the new Donbass leaders was a source of confusion. But the incongruities of the situation did not signify an absence of working-class support for the insurgency.

From the early weeks of the revolt, miners were present on the barricades. On April 10, Rabkor reported that three organised detachments of miners, totalling about 200 people, had travelled to Donetsk from various regions of Donetsk Province to defend the seizure of the provincial administration building.[15] In the Lugansk Province city of Krasnodon on April 22, the site In Defence of Marxism reported, a strike and occupation broke out at six mines owned by the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov; while the dispute centred on wage claims, the miners also demanded reinstatement of 30 of their workmates who had been sacked for attending a resistance rally in Lugansk.[16]

Working-class participation in the uprising during its early weeks had a contradictory nature that reflected the differing fates of Donbass workers as the regional economy had unravelled. The revolt was at its broadest in the mining districts, their cities ringed with checkpoints and barricades. But the people at the checkpoints were less often employees of major mine enterprises than laid-off miners, or miners from small, lethally dangerous illegal pits, or workers, often only semi-employed, from a diverse range of other formal or informal enterprises. Those with more stable employment were understandably cautious about risking their jobs in a period when economic circumstances were dire.

Among the more organised, "core" sections of the workforce, active support for the struggle was to emerge on an important scale during May and June, and will be addressed later. The discussion now needs to turn to the political strategies of the new Donbass governments, and in particular, to their relations with Moscow.

Leadership strategies

Behind the setting up of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics had been a calculation that a determined push to seize and exert power, especially if backed by a successful referendum, would prompt large-scale Russian support. Strelkov in a November 2014 *Zavtra* interview recalled that anti-Kiev activists with whom he had conferred in Crimea before setting off for Donetsk Province in April had all been convinced that if an uprising broke out in the Donbass, Russia would come quickly to its aid (Strelkov 2014). The Putin administration, however, was always an improbable ally for a worker-based insurrection in a neighbouring country. And the narratives of the Western media notwithstanding, armed forays outside the national territory have been rare in modern Russia's history compared to the record of leading Western powers. The re-joining of Crimea to Russia in March 2014 in part reflected acute Russian security concerns surrounding the future of the strategically vital Sevastopol naval base, leased by Russia from Ukraine. The Donbass had no such importance for Russia's defence, and with numerous decayed industrial regions draining Russian government budgets already, the Moscow leadership had no need to seize another.

When the Donbass rebels' May 11 referendum had passed, and no hint had followed from Moscow of readiness to provide extensive backing to the revolt, the leaders of the new republics found themselves compelled to think seriously about questions of political

[15] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/04/10/Donetsk_defense. Accessed September 5, 2014.
[16] See http://www.marxist.com/ukraine-lugansk-strike.htm.

strategy. The dependence of the region on Russia left the insurrection in a "cleft stick." If the Donetsk and Lugansk republics were to obtain help from Moscow, one line of thinking proceeded, they could not afford to diverge far from the general political inspiration of the Russian government. With Putin heading an oligarchic capitalist state, and securing his electoral base through a right-wing populism steeped in religion and social conservatism, left-wing initiatives in the Donbass might have seemed to be ruled out.

But if, on the other hand, alignment with Russian perspectives failed to win significant support from the Kremlin, the revolt could count on surviving only if it inspired large-scale rebellion in regions well beyond its home provinces. Initial hopes of such a development proved false, with the "Union of Novorossiya" failing to draw notable backing outside Donetsk and Lugansk. If the uprising were ever to spread to other regions of Ukraine, bold popular initiatives by the rebel leaders would be indispensable. In this scenario, expounded in particular by Pavel Gubarev (Gubarev 2014), the Donbass republics could endure only if they implemented radical left-wing measures, breaking down the power of the business magnates and using the resources gained to benefit the population. This more radical thinking surfaced only occasionally among the Donbass leaders, but its logic was sufficiently potent that it remained present as an ideological undercurrent, manifesting itself from time to time as contradictory notes in leadership statements.

An early victory for conservative tendencies occurred in May 2014 when the question arose of a constitution for the Donetsk Republic. A number of drafts were circulated. One, described as a "red variant," envisaged no private property except on a small scale. The draft that was adopted, however, reflected continuing hopes among rebel leaders that large-scale Russian intervention would rescue them if their loyalty to Russian government perspectives was demonstrative and unswerving. To the outrage of Borotba, reported on the Rabkor site, the Donetsk constitution established the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as the republic's state religion.[17]

The work of policy formulation saw bursts of radicalism flaring among officials of the rebel republics, but soon being isolated and doused. At least sporadically, the demand was raised for taking the fight to business chiefs who had thrown in their lot with Kiev; by May, it was clear that oligarchs with interests in the Donetsk Republic would not agree to pay taxes to the local treasury, prompting hints that assets would be seized in retaliation.[18] But before long, Prime Minister Boroday let it be known that businesses owned by Rinat Akhmetov would not be nationalised.[19]

In June, the Donetsk and Lugansk governments released their political programmes, with Rabkor noting that "substantial space was devoted to bringing local legislation, and the legal, economic and social systems, into line with those operating in Russia."[20] Elections would be held, industry would undergo full modernisation, and an ill-defined "allied state" would be established in league with Russia. The question of nationalisation received a new twist. Enterprises belonging to the Ukrainian state and to Ukrainian oligarchs were now subject to expropriation, reversing the pledge made to Akhmetov shortly

[17] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/05/16/dnr-constitution. Accessed September 5, 2014.
[18] See https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/donetsk-peoples-republic-to-nationalise-akhmetovs-enterprises/.
[19] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/06/11/lnr_nationalization. Accessed September 5, 2014.
[20] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/06/16/develop_donbass. Accessed September 8, 2014.

before. But an unspecified portion of the expropriated assets would subsequently be re-privatised, with Russian business allowed to take part in the privatisation process.[21]

Leaders of the Donbass republics no doubt congratulated themselves on having dealt deftly with a vexing question. Popular sentiment for action against hostile oligarchs would be appeased, without affronting supporters in Moscow. But to the extent that re-privatisation occurred, the rebel Donbass would come to resemble the region in preceding years—only with Russian oligarchs instead of Ukrainian ones. There was no way such an outcome could help stir workers across Ukraine to join with the Donbass in resisting the Kiev government.

Organised workers mobilise

During May 2014, the involvement in the struggle of better-organised workers, and especially of miners, gained momentum. Early in the month workers in two mines in the city of Ugledar near Donetsk went on strike, took partial control over production, and demonstrated against Kiev's military attacks. On May 26, workers at the Oktyabrsky mine near Donetsk Airport began a spontaneous stoppage in response to the dangers posed by the Kiev government's "anti-terrorist operations" in the vicinity. The strike spread rapidly, with miners demanding an end to military operations in the south-east and withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Donetsk Province.

A Reuters report on May 28 spoke of "up to a thousand" miners rallying in Donetsk to demand an end to the Kiev government's attacks (Baczynska 2014). As reported on the Ukrainian left website Liva, the miners involved in the strikes of late May were all employed nominally by the Ukrainian state through its Donetsk Coal Energy Company. Meanwhile, workers at mines owned by Akhmetov were forced to go underground despite the dangers posed by fighting that was going on nearby. "Miners in privately-owned pits," the site reported,

> have so far not decided to take strike action in whole brigades, as those in the state enterprises are doing. But on their own initiative they keep guard at checkpoints, and have taken part in antiwar demonstrations called by supporters of the republic. (Retynskyi 2014)

On June 18, the miners' resistance movement reached its peak, with workers from 16 mines in five cities rallying in Donetsk and chanting slogans that included "No to war!" "Fascism won't get past!" "Donbass!" and "Slavyansk is a hero city!" Placards stated "No to NATO!" As related by the Ukraine Antifascist Solidarity site, protesters continued arriving until their numbers reached an estimated 10,000. The miners gave Kiev a two-day ultimatum to stop the war, indicating that if this were not done they would "take up arms to defend their land, wives and children."[22]

From that point, the miners' protests largely ceased. Various reasons can be surmised, but most crucially, the political mobilisation of miners and other industrial workers in the Donbass was simply overtaken by the war. By mid-June, Kiev's troops were making steady

[21] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/06/16/develop_donbass. Accessed September 8, 2014.
[22] See https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/miners-march-in-donetsk-against-anti-terrorist-operation/ and https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/19/donetsk-miners-give-kiev-48h-ultimatum-stop-war-or-we-will-take-up-arms/.

advances. As production in numerous pits was curtailed by the fighting or forced to shut down entirely, significant numbers of the more politically motivated miners enlisted in the armed struggle, forming several all-miner battalions.

In a region with many hundreds of thousands of industrial workers, at most a few tens of thousands took part directly in political protests during 2014. That is not to say that the Donbass rebellion lacked a strong core of class-struggle impulses. But as a spontaneous and defensive struggle, it did not rest on an advanced, militant political culture among the mass of workers in the region. Instilling an advanced political understanding in large numbers of workers, and forging the organisation and leadership that corresponded to it, would require far more than radical demands voiced by a few left militants. Nor could these goals be achieved in the space of a few months amid the pressures of war. In such circumstances, the hope was far-fetched that Donbass workers could outmanoeuvre oligarchs and government officials in Kiev and Moscow through radicalising the process in the rebel republics. Even if such a radicalisation had occurred, its survival and further progress would have depended on igniting a militant response among workers in Russia and in other regions of Ukraine—where in each case, the deficit of working-class organisation and political education was much more severe than in the industrially experienced Donbass.

Despite such caveats, the situation contained no guarantees for the Kiev and Moscow authorities in the longer term. Moreover, the "conscious factor" of militant class leadership was not entirely absent from the Donbass in the spring and summer of 2014, as a variety of documents attest. An "Appeal of the Donetsk People's Republic," distributed as a leaflet in the city of Slavyansk on April 25, called for "banning the imposition of sectarian ideology, banning . . . nationalist parties and movements," while demanding "people's control over the distribution of funds that were created by the people of the Donbass."[23] On July 14, the small Independent Union of Donbass Miners issued an "appeal to the workers of Europe." The document was signed by the union's leader Mikhail Krylov, who during the huge miners' strikes of the 1990s had been co-chair of the Donetsk City Strike Committee.

"From the outset," the appeal stated, "'Euromaidan' has been under the control of the big bourgeoisie . . . In Donbass . . . the war is between the people and a handful of oligarchs with the support of the EU and US authorities." "We appeal to you, the workers of the European countries . . . Help us break the stronghold of fascism in Ukraine. This will be our common victory."[24]

Within the Donbass militias as well, class-based dissatisfaction with the leaders of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics increased in the course of the summer. On July 17, rank and file militia fighters drafted a text that was circulated among resistance activists and sent to higher officials. When no reply came from the authorities, the text was posted on the internet on August 1:

Appeal by rank and file militia fighters to the leaders of the DPR and LPR

Deputies, ministers and leading figures of the DPR, LPR and Novorossiya—Comrades!

[23] See https://twitter.com/GonzaloWancha/status/459658995348025344 and http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1s1haev.

[24] See https://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/07/14/donetsk-miners-to-the-workers-of-europe-help-us-break-the-stronghold-of-fascism-in-ukraine/.

> Addressing you are rank and file volunteer militia members. We appeal to you as comrades, since we . . . do not want to see another redistribution of property take place that amounts simply to a new DPR elite . . . replacing the Ukrainian business elite.
>
> Business interests are making every effort to install themselves in the new structures of power . . . Meanwhile we, rank and file volunteer members of the militia, who have come to defend our homeland in hopes of building a new state and a more just society, find ourselves in a complete information vacuum. . . . Thoughts are beginning to be voiced of throwing away our weapons or in some cases, of turning them 180 degrees against the internal enemy. . . . For the present we are sitting in the trenches, but once we defeat the enemy, believe us, we will have the boldness and strength to put these questions to you directly.
>
> What will be the economic, political and social system in the future state of Novorossiya and in the DPR? . . .
>
> What will be the form of ownership of the main assets, of our industrial plants, factories, mines, agricultural land, transport infrastructure and housing? . . .
>
> We urge:
>
> That the political, economic and social basis of the DPR and Novorossiya be determined promptly, and that the people be told of the decision.
>
> That people who earlier were part of the structures of authority be . . . banned, with no exceptions, from . . . occupying leading posts . . . .
>
> That there be no highly-paid contracts for the services of people who joined up not from conviction, but for big salaries . . . The army must be a genuine PEOPLE's army!
>
> P.S. If anything here is incorrect, then that is due to the absence of information and to the lack of an answer to the key question: WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR? (Novorossiya 2014)

The appeal was at first widely dismissed as a forgery. But some days later a video was circulated in which a spokesperson for the authors made clear the text was genuine, and went on to pose its political content still more bluntly:

> Ascertaining what we are fighting for, for whose property . . . we shall sooner or later come to understand that we, yesterday's workers and peasants, have class interests and class enemies, and that the events occurring in our land are nothing other than a revolution.[25]

While stressing that no putsch was contemplated, the speaker went on to warn:

> This revolution can be subverted by alien values, ideas and goals. Ultimately, we could simply be deceived. . . . What is involved is an internal enemy, a so-called fifth column that is maturing behind our backs as we face the external enemy.[26]

Always pre-eminently a movement *of* working people, the Donbass revolt in the course of the summer began, at least in some instances, to take on the characteristics of a movement *for* working people. Rank and file militants were sensing and articulating the class antagonisms that set them irreconcilably against the Kiev regime, but which at the same time kept them in an ambivalent, episodically hostile relationship with their own political leaders.

[25] See https://www.rabkor.ru/news/2014/08/08/militia. Accessed September 8, 2014.
[26] See http://tass.ru/en/world/745065.

Personnel changes, military offensives, and Russian policy

Lightly-armed insurgent movements do not usually prevail over regular armies, even ones as shambolic as the Ukrainian armed forces, unless the latter are already collapsing as a result of insoluble political crises in the states they defend. This point had not been reached by the Ukrainian military in June 2014, and with the rebel forces acutely short of heavy weapons (Litvinov 2014), Kiev's army made steady advances. By the first week of July, a Ukrainian offensive against insurgents led by Strelkov in Slavyansk, in the north of Donetsk Province, was close to success. The rebel forces had been surrounded, and were running out of ammunition. Defying orders from Donetsk, Strelkov on July 4–5 attempted a breakout, and despite losing his few armoured vehicles, was able to extract almost all his troops unscathed.

Retreating to Donetsk, Strelkov began preparing the defence of the insurgent capital. He found a city with its social fabric deeply degraded. DPR Prime Minister Boroday was soon to complain that business was being subjected to "extortion from many sides, amid continuous shooting in the city" (Socor 2014). Increasing the demoralisation in the rebel republics was a perception, clearly shared in Moscow, that the leaders of the DPR and LPR were disastrous administrators.

During the second week of August, the line-up of senior figures in the republics was abruptly transformed. After returning from a visit to Moscow, Boroday at a press conference on August 7 announced his resignation as Donetsk prime minister. As his successor he named Aleksandr Zakharchenko, who since May had been military commandant of Donetsk. A native of the city, Zakharchenko had worked as a mine electrician before quitting in 2011 to manage the Donetsk branch of the martial arts club—and eventually, pan-Slavic nationalist current and militia organisation—Oplot.

On August 14, leadership changed hands in Lugansk as well, as skirmishes took place inside the city limits between rebels and Ukrainian army units. Again after a visit to Moscow, "head of the republic" Valery Bolotov resigned citing war injuries. His replacement was former Defence Minister Igor Plotnitsky. Locally born, the 50-year-old Plotnitsky had served as an officer in the Soviet armed forces before becoming a dealer in fuel and lubricants in Lugansk during the 1990s, and later, a consumer rights inspector for the provincial administration.

Another to lose his job on August 14 was Strelkov. As reported by TASS, the DPR Council of Ministers avowed that the defence chief was leaving his post "at his own request," and would take up another position.[27] Strelkov, however, vanished from the Donbass, to reappear in Russia a few weeks later. His replacement as defence minister was Vladimir Kononov, a Donetsk-born judo instructor and mid-ranking militia commander described by the Interpretermag site as having "a firm political position and organisational skills."[28]

The replacement of Russian citizens Boroday and Strelkov with Donbass locals served to counter accusations of outside control, making it easier to claim legitimacy for the rebel republics. Closer study, however, suggests that the changes were aimed more at enhancing Russian control than at diminishing it. The goal was evidently to install leaders in the

[27] See http://tass.ru/en/world/745065.
[28] See http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-178-russian-aid-convoy-on-the-move-again/.

republics who were both more predictable, and more attuned to the ways of Moscow officialdom than those they replaced. Unlike Strelkov and Boroday, the new Donbass leaders were in no sense romantic nationalists. The profile that emerges of them is of experienced military veterans who were energetic and decisive, but not particularly imaginative, and certainly not intellectuals. They would not be prone either to fantasises of a triumphant march on Kiev, or to ruminating on the need to speak to workers in the language of social and economic justice.

Zakharchenko, Plotnitsky and Kononov, in short, were the kind of people whom Putin and his strategists needed in office in the rebel republics at the point where Russian military intervention in the Donbass, until then almost inconsequential, was about to become an important reality. Just 10 days after Plotnitsky and Kononov took up their posts, significant numbers of serving Russian soldiers were to begin taking part in a rebel counter-offensive that, as will be explained, was to transform the face of the war.

Russian policy on the Donbass in 2014 never deviated from an insistence that the region should remain formally part of Ukraine, and throughout the spring and early summer military aid to the insurgents was exceedingly sparing. Moscow's goal remained a diplomatic settlement of the conflict, if necessary on terms that the Donbass fighters found highly unpalatable. By August, however, the limits the Moscow authorities had placed on assistance to the revolt had won them no real benefits. Moves had been under way for a dramatic tightening of US and EU sanctions against Russia even before a Malaysian airliner was shot down over the Donbass on July 17; despite a now-notorious lack of evidence, responsibility for the tragedy was ascribed almost universally in Western countries to "Russian-backed rebels," and media denunciations of Russia reached a new intensity. In the West, the assumption was rarely challenged that combat units of the Russian army were mounting offensive operations in Ukraine.

In the type and degree of its assistance to the revolt, the Kremlin now had little to lose from a carefully calibrated loosening of its earlier restraint. Putin needed to reassure Russian popular opinion that the Donbass republics would not be abandoned, and on the international level, there was a need for a demonstration of Russian resolve. It was necessary to impress on the Ukrainian government—and still more, on Washington—that a military victory for Kiev was unattainable, and that serious negotiations, addressing the real grievances of the Donbass, were the only option.

On August 24, rebel units unleashed a major offensive to the east and south of Donetsk. Questions as to the forces involved had been anticipated by new Donetsk rebel leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko on August 15, when he reported that 1200 new fighters were about to go into combat after four months of training in Russia. Zakharchenko also spoke of having 150 armoured vehicles at his disposal, including about 30 tanks (Walker 2014a). He was later to state that between 3000 and 4000 Russian citizens had fought as volunteers; among these, he said, were Russian servicemen on leave, said to have given up their vacations to "join their brothers in the fight for freedom" (Gorst 2014).

The Ukrainian advance had, in fact, run its course by mid-August. An ill-judged plan to use some of the government's best units to seize a corridor along the Russian border southeast of Donetsk, cutting off rebel supply routes, had ended in failure when the Ukrainian troops were shelled heavily from Russian territory. The fiasco was then compounded by a politically-driven refusal to order a retreat. Subsequently, thousands of Ukrainian troops, some 40 tanks and more than 100 infantry fighting vehicles became trapped in a

"cauldron" centred on the town of Ilovaysk, east of Donetsk. An attempt to break out resulted in heavy casualties, and large quantities of armaments and equipment were lost to the rebels.

From the last week of August, the insurgent forces made stunning gains. By September 1, the months-long siege of Lugansk had been broken. Further south, a notable feature of the rebel offensive was a push toward the port city of Mariupol. Contrary to the general pattern, Strelkov later revealed, the advance on Mariupol was carried out mainly by Russian *otpuskniki*, military personnel technically on leave. Encountering virtually no resistance, the *otpuskniki* were in a position to take the city with little fighting, since Ukrainian troops had been withdrawn. "But there was an order not to occupy it," Strelkov stated. "Not just an order to stop, but an order not to occupy it under any circumstances" (Strelkov 2014).

On September 3, a lengthy telephone conversation between Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko readied the way for cease-fire discussions, which began two days later in the Belarus capital, Minsk. In a major climb-down, the Ukrainian authorities were forced to negotiate directly with representatives of the Donbass rebels. Also taking part in the talks were the Russian ambassador to Kiev and a representative of the OSCE. On September 5, a truce agreement was signed and entered into force.

The terms of the cease-fire clearly did not please the insurgents. Alongside provisions for a border buffer zone and for exchange of prisoners were others, reminiscent of the May "road map," stipulating that irregular military formations were to be disbanded. The Kiev authorities promised to "decentralise" power to the region, but there were no specific or detailed provisions for local self-rule.

The Russian side had not pushed the Ukrainians hard in the talks. The fundamental concern of the Putin administration, we may conclude, was not with ensuring regional rights for the Donbass population, but with winning guarantees that Ukraine would not obtain membership in NATO. As the Russian negotiators would have seen it, the success of the rebel offensive meant that Moscow had made a crucial point: with a still relatively small outlay of armaments and other resources, the Russian authorities could keep the Ukrainian government beset by the crippling problem of a popular revolt that could not readily be defeated. The cost to Kiev of maintaining an aggressive posture toward the Donbass would be to make impossible the economic stabilisation required for meaningful integration with the West. If the Ukrainian government wanted to "join Europe," it could do so only while assuaging Russian security concerns. Membership in the Western military alliance could not be part of the package.

For existing NATO members, Russian actions had also served as a warning: it would be folly to admit Ukraine to the alliance, and thus to make an unconditional commitment to the country's military defence. In the given geopolitical setting, Ukraine's internal rifts had the potential to explode into a regional conflict. If Ukrainian membership in NATO meant that European powers were drawn into such a conflict, the likely costs to them would bear no relation to the interests they had at stake.

Russia's specific, confined goal had thus been achieved. If NATO membership for Ukraine was not off the table completely, the lesson had nonetheless been impressed both on Ukraine and on the main European powers that the costs of pursuing this aim were scarcely to be contemplated.

Elections

Within days of the signing of the September 5 cease-fire, the agreement had begun to be violated on a serious scale. Rebel fighters were angry at the enforced halt to their offensive at a time when important objectives, such as retaking the Donetsk airport, had seemed within easy reach. Ukrainian forces persisted in shelling residential districts of Donbass cities.

While the fighting had not ended, a relative military stasis nonetheless applied. Neither the rebels nor the Kiev forces were in a condition to mount new offensives, and both camps faced other, pressing tasks. In areas that finished up on both sides of the cease-fire line, infrastructure had been shattered. Numerous centres lacked electricity or heating, and large amounts of housing had been made uninhabitable. Russia sent humanitarian aid via road convoys, but as *The Guardian* reported on November 4, showed little sign of being prepared to prop the Donbass up financially, forwarding only small sums to help cover pensions (Walker and Luhn 2014).

Nevertheless, the Donetsk and Lugansk republics were now fixtures of the region's state make-up, and their leaders required legitimation. Over protests from Kiev, elections for heads of government of the rebel republics and for the two parliaments were scheduled for November 2.

In giving their consent to the new status quo, voters in the republics were not permitted the distraction of real political debates, and the results of the balloting were kept proof against surprises. During the months of the insurrection, only one authentic party-type formation, the re-founded Communist Party of the DPR (members of which are referred to as "Communists" hereafter) headed by Boris Litvinov, had emerged in the republics. The Communists' hopes of running in the elections were given short shrift, as electoral officials disqualified the party on the grounds of "excessive errors" in its registration documents.

Also banished from the electoral race was Donetsk "People's Governor" Pavel Gubarev. On October 12, Gubarev announced plans to run against Zakharchenko for the post of head of the Donetsk Republic, and was due to submit candidacy documents the following day. But late on October 12, Gubarev's car came under fire in an assassination attempt, and crashed. Seriously injured, Gubarev quit the Donbass.

Zakharchenko was left to run against two little-known rivals who allowed him a monopoly of the campaigning. As related by *The Guardian*, the Donetsk chief presented "a vague platform promising independence, peace and economic prosperity" (Walker 2014b). In the parliamentary race, the barring of the Communists was matched by the exclusion, also professedly for technical reasons, of Gubarev's "public organisation" Novorossiya. The parliamentary election finally saw Zakharchenko's Donetsk Republic bloc running solely against the hastily assembled Free Donbass list. As reported by the Moscow press, the programmes of the two groups "effectively repeated one another," calling for the restoring of the region after the war and for the development of relations with Russia.[29]

Zakharchenko was duly elected on November 2 with 79% of the vote, while in the parliamentary elections his Donetsk Republic bloc gained 68%.[30] Allowed places on the Free Donbass list, individual Communists and Gubarev supporters were able to win

[29] See http://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/30/dadut-li-novorossii-sdelat-vybor.html.
[30] See http://dnr.today/news/cik-dnr-oglasil-togovye-cifry-resultatov-vyborov-2-noyabrya, and https://www.rt.com/news/201711-donetsk-lugansk-republics-elections/.

parliamentary seats. In Lugansk, incumbent head of the republic Igor Plotnitsky won 63% of the vote against three opponents, while his Peace to Lugansk movement gained a clear majority in the parliament.[31]

A survey of voter intentions in the Donetsk Republic during the days before the elections suggested that even if the government's best-known opponents had been able to run unobstructed, Zakharchenko and his parliamentary list would have won easily.[32] Meanwhile, the readiness of voters to approve the incumbents may have had less to do with support for their programmes—which were unspecific to the point of incoherence—than with a wish to make unmistakeable the broad opposition felt in the Donbass for any return to Ukraine.

A vindication of struggle

The situation in the DPR and LPR at the end of 2014 contained much to disappoint the international left—or at least, those of its members whose concept of advances for the working class was framed strictly in maximalist terms. The revolt had not acted as the spark for major worker unrest in other areas of Ukraine. Self-rule in the Donbass republics applied only to the extent that citizens were prepared to be administered by leaders who had the approval of Moscow ministries, and who implemented policies those ministries deemed acceptable. Confronting the rebel-held territories were years of poverty, subject to dependence on a Russian government that was grudging in its material support.

In crucial ways, nevertheless, the decision by the Donbass population to defy Kiev had been vindicated. At least outside the range of Ukrainian artillery, the people of the DPR and LPR were protected from ultra-right violence. In geopolitical terms, the eastward expansion of NATO military influence and of neoliberal economic doctrines had met with a sharp, unexpected rebuff. The working people of the rebel territories, while poor, were unlikely in years to come to be as poor as the policies of the Ukrainian government were quickly making the broad population in areas under Kiev's control. Nor were the democratic victories of the revolt inconsiderable. Communist organisations in the DPR and LPR were blocked from running candidates in elections, but in other respects they went generally unmolested. Elsewhere in Ukraine they had been driven into clandestinity.

A further key vindication of the revolt must be seen in the experience of struggle it provided to workers in the Donbass, and also in the lessons it furnished to their observant peers in adjacent regions. The uprising was a defensive upsurge whose political character only episodically surpassed that of a very early stage of worker rebellion. Meanwhile, its liberating potential was circumscribed by a broader social and political setting whose nature was generally unpromising. But to condemn the uprising for its rudimentary political nature and limited prospects is to deny workers the right to pass through the process of testing ideas and leaderships in active struggle—something indispensable if their class is to develop a militant understanding, find dedicated and insightful leaders, and in general build its strength for further battles.

The fact that the initial leadership thrown up by the revolt was of motley social background and ideological character was both to be expected, and in the longer scheme of the

[31] See https://www.rt.com/news/201711-donetsk-lugansk-republics-elections/.
[32] See http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1537981, and http://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/30/dadut-li-novorossii-sdelat-vybor.html.

development of mass working-class consciousness in the Donbass, not in the least decisive. In the context of the early months of 2014, the crucial point was that these leaders were prepared to head a struggle around certain vital needs of the region's working people. Established popular leaders, with only the rarest exceptions, were not.

None of this is to imply that an advanced and comprehensive grasp of working-class interests was, or remains, unnecessary. To the contrary, such an injection of developed class-struggle ideas is essential for moving the fight into new forms and phases, and onto higher political planes. But whatever the ideological shortcomings of the Donbass fighters, and whatever their mistakes, the international left cannot make its support for the oppressed conditional on the thinking of the latter matching that of wiser souls in Paris or London. Working people who come under attack must be defended as they are, not as we might wish them to be. For the world left, solidarity with struggles such as those of the Donbass rebels is an elementary duty.

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Notes on contributor

Renfrey Clarke is an Australian writer, translator and political activist. From 1990 to 1999, he was Moscow correspondent for *Green Left Weekly* of Sydney. He holds a PhD on aspects of Soviet-Latin American relations, and is among the editors of the New Cold War website (www.newcoldwar.org).

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