Academic Skills Paper

The role of Ukrainian warlords on the separatist movement
in the Donbas region during the initial stages of the conflict.

Author:
Jeroen de Jong
s1087766

Academic Skills 1 & 2,
MAN-BIN120 & MAN-BIN121

24 June 2022

In a small city in eastern Ukraine in 2014, a rebel warlord with a big moustache and a massive Papakha (a big woollen hat) states that "*we belong to Russia and should return these lands to Russia*" (Ayres, 2014). He states that they are merely: "*defending our rights to own this territory and the riches with which our Lord and forefathers endowed us*" (Vasilyeva, 2014). This sentiment led to many different leaders and groups of battalions to cross the border into Ukraine and join the fight for the independence of the Donbas area (Rupert, 2015). During the most violent parts of the conflict in 2014 and 2015, these dispersed separatist groups were able to capture around one third of the entire Donbas area (International Crisis Group, n.d.).

In this essay I will zoom in on these non-state groups and highlight an aspect that has not received as much attention: the role and the agency of the leaders. Groups such as the *Great Don Army*, *Ghost Brigade*, and the *Sparta Battalion* each have their own leader who control and lead these groups. The importance of these groups and the people in them played a central role in the conflict as (Käihkö, 2021) points out. The leaders of these groups are important to research as Bowen A.S. also points: "*The organized crime boss of today is the insta-patriot and freedom fighter of tomorrow*" (Bowen A.S., 2019).

Groups like these in Donbas were often led by one charismatic leader who was able to recruit combatants to join his army (they are often men). They also have complex relations with their surroundings. Both with internal actors (other armed groups, citizens, and local politicians) as well as external actors (Russia, Ukraine, and the wider world). Often, they were backed by Russian money and forces (Marten, 2014). Despite this, it did not mean that they exclusively did their bidding. Certainly in the Luhansk area there were quite a few rebellious leaders. The territory these leaders occupy depends on who you ask. The rivalry between and among many of the leaders and their groups is high (Kramer, 2015). During the conflict this resulted in a lot of fighting among these various groups for power, smuggling routes, money, and other resources (Losh, 2016).

In this essay I will analyse a few of these leaders and assess their influence in the conflict. I also argue that many of these leaders should be seen as warlords as a way to explain their actions. Both Bowen A.S. (2019) & Marten (2014) have hinted that some of these men can be seen as warlords. The reality is that warlords and warlordism have been mostly ignored in research on the events in Ukraine. Käihkö (2021) also points this out: "*To date, however, little attention has been paid to the central role played by people who did not belong to armed force*". This essay will zoom in on precisely this aspect, with the main question being: "**In what way did warlords contribute to the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2016?"** This question therefore per-definition means to assess rebel paramilitary groups with an anti-government and pro-separatist stance and not the pro-Ukrainian groups.

In this essay I aim to see the developments of the Donbas conflict through the eyes of these warlord leaders. Doing so, means a clear definition of the term warlord. In practice there is a debate about the exact meaning of the term (Malejacq, 2020). Later, I will elaborate four different aspect warlords must exhibit. Despite this debate in general there is a consensus that warlords make use of at least force and patronage to gain control over a (small) piece of land (Malejacq, 2020; Marten, 2014). Warlords need violence to sustain their position. Though, as (Malejacq, 2020) also states; they are often very capable of surviving without violence for quite a while. Warlords also need patronage; If there is no (financial) support a beneficiary party can provide; it is substantially harder for a warlord to be "successful". Later I will return to the definition and attempt to define some key aspects.

Since this essay is primarily about a conflict that is not clearly defined , I want to briefly touch on the definitions of this conflict and the ambiguity around this. Katchanovski demonstrates this clearly: "*Some Western scholars characterize the war in Donbas as a Russian invasion*" (Katchanovski, 2016), and others again "*characterize the conflict as a civil war along with Russian military intervention*" (Katchanovski, 2016). Questions like whether this conflict is intra-state or inter-state, a civil war or conventional war, are not clear cut. This essay tries not to answer these questions and will therefore resort to the perhaps somewhat more neutral term "conflict".

To structure my story and arguments I will firstly talk about the historical lead up that unfolded in the Donbas conflict. Here I will also touch upon what role these paramilitary groups played in this. After this I will turn to elaborate on the idea of a warlord, what it is exactly, how to define it, and the what relation a warlord can have with the state. Then I will analyse a few leaders of paramilitary groups in the conflict. And lastly I will also explore how these warlords relate to the Russian state.

The conflict as it unfolded

This essay takes Euromaidan (or Maidan Revolution) as a point of departure. Which, as Käihkö states, can be traced back as a leading cause for the unrest in the Donbas region (Käihkö, 2021). Euromaidan started around this idea where Ukraine had been balancing ties between the west and the east. On 21 November 2013 the then president Viktor Yanukovych did not sign an association agreement with the EU (Käihkö, 2021). And instead, quite suddenly, seemed to favour stronger ties with Russia. The days and weeks that followed gave rise to growing demonstrations. At first it started out with mostly students demonstrating. This group turned out to be the "*driving force of the protest movement, which was not only afraid of changes, but also required them*" (Shveda & Park, 2016). As students kept showing up, so did other people. And, not only people in Kiev were demonstrating but started spreading to other cities as well. At this point the protests where no longer directly related to the sudden move to not sign the association agreement, but instead moved into much more: a battle corruption and poverty, demands for more alignment with the west and less with Russia, and finally also more respect for human rights (Bushak, 2014).

The protestors made their permanent residence on the Maidan square, and organised various sessions there. Massive barricades were erected to attempt to defend against the police forces. Various fights between protesters and the police commenced, with one of the fiercest battles (18 – 20 February) claiming almost 120 lives (Shveda & Park, 2016).

The turning point is when a protestor went on the stage, grabbed the microphone from the opposition leader Vitali Klitschko, and stated that the president must resign by 10:00am the following day, and otherwise would go "on an armed offensive" (*Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*, 2015). The next day the president resigned and fled to Russia. The fleeing of Yanukovych marked a victory for the maidan protests, and therefore the end of the protests.

What followed on the other side of the country however was the start of a series of protests. Among the population there was a growing discontent of the idea that there was a new wind in the capital. For the majority of people in the Donbas region, Euromaidan was seen as an extremist, far right funded and supported, coup d'état (Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018). The *Right Sector Alliance* and the *Svoboda* party were seen as the brains behind the protests (Käihkö, 2021). This feeling turned out be to commonly seen as one of the main triggers of the conflict. Initially the demand was for federalization, giving the two regions more power for self-determination. This led to the gradual formation of various paramilitary groups, as a way to fight the governmental organisations.

According to Malyarenko & Galbreath (2016) the rise of paramilitary group occurred in roughly three phases. The first stage was the formation of the '*Vostok*' and '*Oplot*' battalions. These two got their support mainly from personnel of the Security Service, policemen in the Donbas region and old Soviet-Afghan war veterans. Their collective aim was to protect

properties and help the (old) President Yanukovych. These groups also aided in and organised protest around Donbas.

As the situation in Crimea also developed, and the referendum there was organised to join Russia, it meant that "*Russia's action in Crimea … amounted to stoking of further separatism"* (Käihkö, 2021). The focal point and the discourse became dominated by wanting to form a separate country instead of just federalization. Protestors mimicked strategies employed in Euromaidan, like setting up protest camps and occupying governmental administration buildings (Käihkö, 2021). Here paramilitary groups also played an important role. Described by Malyarenko & Galbreath (2016) as stage two, Igor Girkin, a former Russian army veteran (more about him later) and his battalion entered Ukraine from Russia around April/May. He was followed by a group of Cossacks leaders. Girkin and these Cossack groups seized control over most of the Luhansk area and parts of northern Donetsk. Protestors seized the Luhansk and Donetsk governmental buildings and from there created the Donetsk Peoples Republic (*DNR* or *DPR*). Who was exactly in charge at that time is unclear, with various leaders coming and going but no clear figurehead (Bowen A.S., 2019).

The strategy to gain territory at that point can be described as 'creeping' and 'nomadic'; continuously moving and occupying new territory (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). This was the stage where the main bulk of the separatist area was created and the DNR and LNR started to ferment their power. Though, because Girkin and these Cossack leaders had much more control in the Luhansk area it also meant that the DNR and LNR differed in structure and control. For example, LNR was way less organised than was the case for the DNR (ICDS, 2015). Furthermore, the territory that the LNR claimed was a stretch at best: "*The authorities claiming to represent the "LPR" actually control only Luhansk City and its vicinity*" (ICDS, 2015). According to an interview in Yekaterinburg online and picked up by Newsweek, a former Spetsnaz officer elaborated why this might be: "*Special forces and elite go to Donetsk. Cossacks and newcomers without combat experience—to Lugansk*" (Rupert, 2015). At this moment there were "*Dozens of militias [that] declared autonomous 'people's republics' around their city or oblast in the hopes of being recognized and annexed by Moscow*" (Driscoll, 2015).

The response by the Ukrainian government was to sign a decree to take back the buildings by force through the so-called "Anti-Terrorist Operation (*ATO*)". This marked the start for the escalation of the conflict with the pro-Russian militants, led by Igor Girkin on the DNR side, and the Ukrainian army on the other side. At that time the borders of what is separatist and what is Ukrainian areas were very fluid. At the end of April there was a realisation that the separatist forces and DNR where there to stay. As a result the Luhansk People's republic (*LNR* or *LPR*) was created (Bowen A.S., 2019). Over the next period, referendums in both republics were held (and passed) to officially secede from Ukraine.

Although the violent conflict continued, Ukraine elected a new president in the name of Poroshenko. He was able to start making gains on the "lost" territories in the east. The downing of MH17 at this point meant that the ATO had even more successes. The separatist territories were about 2.5 smaller than a month earlier. The first high level cease fire talks, the Minsk agreement did not achieve much and did not halt much of the violence, Partly due to

rogue rebel groups (Katchanovski, 2016; Socor, 2015b). The second Minsk agreement was able to most halt the most of the violence, with civilian casualties in going from more than 2000 to 110 in 2016 (Statista, 2022). Although every week cease fire violations kept being recorded, it mostly remained an unresolved conflict, with either side increasingly blaming each other for not abiding by the agreement.

This moment of relative calm also gave rise to the third stage, as Malyarenko & Galbreath (2016) describe. This relative period of calm gave room for the '*consolidation [of] occupation*' (idem). The DNR and LNR power structures were given more official power. This for example meant that most rogue paramilitary groups quickly saw their demise. This was certainly true for the ones opposing the people's republics. At this moment Russian 'vacationers' started coming to Donbas and helped to defend the current territories (idem). This stage led the rebels, Russian and Ukraine to start talking about cease fires (through Minsk I and Minsk II).

Warlords and Warlordism

These various groups outlined are marked with having one, often charismatic leader. Though classifying one as warlord means more than just being charismatic. In this section I will explore the concept warlord, and in the next section I attempt to identify a few leaders of these groups as fitting these criteria.

Warlords, as Marten states: "*are individuals who control small slices of territory*" (Marten, 2014). Driscoll (2015) and Malejacq (2020) elaborates the term "*individuals*" to mean "*violent (political) entrepreneurs*". These entrepreneurs realised that: "*great powers would pay handsomely for local order*" (Driscoll, 2015). Marten states in her definition that Warlords need to control territory, however, as Malejacq (2020) also points out, territory is not the only aspect that give warlords power. In Afghanistan for example warlords, even with little to no territory, were still able to come back and play an important role in the conflict there despite being left with little or no territory to control (Malejacq, 2020). Although in details like this, the definitions between various authors differ. There also has not been a clearly adopted standard usage of the term warlord (Marten, 2007). Despite this, there are various aspect that are mostly shared among the literature.

Firstly, warlords require force; they are violent entrepreneurs. These men need violence (or the imminent threat therefore) to sustain their campaign (Marten, 2014). Malejacq (2020) however does suggest that these warlord can live without violence for a time, but will always need to return back to it to solidify their leadership. To coordinate the violence campaign, warlords need to control an army.

Which leads to a second aspect: charisma and patronage. Warlords need to maintain an active following of people that are willing to fight for him and will stay committed and loyal. Respect through charisma is a common strategy here: "*warlords are better able to husband their resources if they command the respect (or at least the obedience) of the population they control*"

(Marten, 2007). Charisma can also be used as persuasion as (Driscoll, 2015) outlines: "*A vague promise of glory and the chance to play soldier in the short term, vague promises of a good job in the security sector, and romantic hopes of social recognition.*" A second aspect to keep a loyal following is financial incentive: "*They [warlords] have a hard time maintaining … militias if their men leave when someone offers them more money*" (Marten, 2007).

Thirdly, These entrepreneurs base their actions on self-interest, and not ideology. (Marten, 2007). Warlords should be seen as rational beings with a goal of profiting of the situation at hand. They have a business model of profiting from (foreign) aid to build a state (Driscoll, 2015). In practice the difference to distinguish between ideology and greed in wartime can be difficult. It can for example be a good excuse to commit certain actions and to try and persuade men to join the cause, even though at a core a warlord does not care much about said cause. This can often be the case when warlords act as shapeshifters as (Malejacq, 2020) states: "*They reinvent themselves by shifting their sources of power*", and might opt to act as politician, to further their self-interested goals.

Fourth and finally is the influence or control of a small slice of territory. Full state-like control is not necessary, but local influence dispite state power is necessary. In Afghanistan for example warlords, even with little to no territory, were still able to come back and play an important role in the regions there influence was (Malejacq, 2020). These warlords remained influential *despite* being left with little territory.

The relationship between a state (flawed or not) and warlords is complicated as Malejacq (2020) points out. Firstly, warlords can rule as a replacement for the state, in which case they: "*undertake a 'fonction totale', exerting a monopoly over all sources of power on their territory simultaneously*" (Malejacq, 2020). In practice this means that these men "*can informally function as local judge, police chief (with self-arrogated powers to arrest), tax collector and requisition authority ("for war needs"), humanitarian aid distributor, and otherwise fill the vacuum of state power*" (Marten, 2014). This can be done either by a group of different warlords colluding together, or alone. When warlords agree to collude together, the individual agency and threat of force are still present as Driscoll outlines in her book: "*Warlords keep their armies intact so that they can, in principle, extract rents through the credible threat of a coup*" (Driscoll, 2015). Although operating as a *'fonction totale'* is usually how warlords do want to operate (Giustozzi, 2005), this is often not the reality.

A more often seen and second type or relationship with the state is a scenario where warlords collude and collaborate (out of necessity) with a state apparatus, even if the state is failed or flawed (Malejacq, 2020). This leads to warlords not overthrowing the state and instead "*cooperate and collude with weak, corrupt, or frightened state employees*" (Marten, 2014). This consequently means that it is much harder for a warlord to remain in power when there is a strong state apparatus: "*only the absence of state power in a given territory provides [someone] … with the opportunity to exert and maximize their authority*" (Malejacq, 2020).

Warlords in Donbas

To understand different warlords, who they are, what they did, and their involvement and duration in the conflict, this section will zoom in on three different warlords. Information on all non-state actors is varied for this conflict. Some actors only were active for a short time (less than one year), others were active longer and had therefore more influence and information available. The chosen figures to analyse further are ones that have the most information available through interviews, (news) articles, academic literature and in general were also longer apart of the crucial parts of the conflict (2014 - 2015). Firstly, I will discuss *Aleksey Mozgovoy*, one of the bigger and more rebellious leaders in the Luhansk region that was rebellious towards the L/DNR governments. Secondly, a perhaps somewhat less influential rebellious leader called *Nikolai Kozitsyn*, initial leader of all Cossacks in Donbas, and one of the earlier Russian groups that crossed the border to join the fight. Then, lastly, *Igor Girkin*, a self-described leader of the conflict (Dolgov, 2014), and broadly aligned with the L/DNR governments. For each warlord I will outline how he got involved in the conflict, his contribution, alliances and what makes him a warlord according to the definition outlined.

Aleksey Mozgovoy

First up is the Ukrainian born leader of the *Prizrak* brigade (Translated as the "Ghost Brigade") called Aleksey Mozgovoy (or Алексе́й Мозгово́й). He and his brigade were operating in the LNR regions, where he was also born. Mozgovoy grew up and studied in Luhansk, after which he spent seven years in the Ukrainian army. Before the conflict, Mozgovoy was a politician and leader of the "Young Guard" (Коц & Стешин, 2014). Later he moved to St Petersburg, only to return to Ukraine when the pro-Russian protests started to break out in 2014. In March, he started recruiting people for protests (Kenyon, 2014). By May, a month after the ATO began, he had been able to drum up some 100 ordinary men preparing and training for combat (Kenyon, 2014). Mozgovoy mostly recruited volunteers based on his Cossack heritage and through his charismatic reputation. These two things helped him to also recruit from abroad (Galeotti & Hook, 2019). At the height of his leadership, he was, as stated by himself, in command of some 3.000 fighters (Luhn, 2014). Though other assessed it as around 2.000 (ICDS, 2015). He and his brigade were involved in a battle in Sloviansk, but were not involved in the bigger battles with the Ukrainian forces (Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018).

After the initial fighting he turned into local leader in Alchevsk, a city of around 100.000 inhabitants. He ruled his fiefdom as he saw fit and through which he became known among the observers of the conflict. He hosted public trails about whether a man that had allegedly raped a 15-year-old girl should be killed by the firing squad. During the trial he stated that: "*if tomorrow I see even one girl in a bar or café, she will be arrested*" (Ostrovsky, 2014). Later, when interviewed by Simon Ostrovsky from Vice News he elaborated to say that it is a good idea because: "*Despite their [the accused's] behaviour, women remain women*" (Ostrovsky,

2014). At the end of the public trail, Mozgovoy asked the people what to do: most citizens put their hand up in favour of the firing squad. (Ostrovsky, 2014)

Mozgovoy was not necessarily in agreement with many of the LNR politicians. He was involved in a lot of the infighting between rebel leaders (Babiak & Mikhailov, 2015). He was also often highly critical of the LNR government, and threatened he would even partner up with the Ukrainian government "*rather than promote the flag-waving rebel commanders 'who shout the loudest'*" (Vasilyeva, 2014). During one of the meetings of LNR where they attempted to establish a general constitution, he and his brigade tried to take over the building where the meeting took place to show their discontent with the leadership (Коц & Стешин, 2014). The LNR leadership later accused him of money embezzlement (Espreso TV, 2014). In the later parts of the conflict, he also refused to merge his brigade with Luhansk People's Militia (Galeotti & Hook, 2019). Not long after, in 2015, he was assassinated. The murder of Mozgovoy has by scholars generally been attributed to The Wagner PMC group (Kramer, 2015; Marten, 2019). A Private Military Company with close roots to the Russian government, and often employed by them as a way for them to claim plausible deniability (Marten, 2019). The reasoning is that he was too rebellious. Others, mostly on the Russian side, instead claim that it was the Ukrainian side that murdered him. Either way, what is clear is that he had enough (political) influence in Luhansk to plot a well-executed murder on him.

Mozgovoy was by all accounts a warlord. His need for violence and the imminent threat thereof was clear. According to (Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018) his style of rule was: "*relying on the extortion of local entrepreneurs, kidnapping, illegal extraction of resources, and the use of slave labour*". He also exhibits a second core aspect of warlordism; charisma. He was able to mobilize a big army, and with loyal support. He has been branded as one the most charismatic brigade leader in Donbas by some news outlets (макаренков & ханарин, 2021). Even a worker's union in the UK branded him as very charismatic and wanted to follow his lead (Thorburn, 2022). During his funeral it also became visible many normal people in the town where in support of him (AP News, 2015). Although he was able to recruit volunteers on some ideological grounds, he was driven by self-interest. He was not interested in collaborating with other local leaders or the LNR government. Instead, he actively rebelled against them. Also, stories about money laundering, stealing, and looting for personal gain were common (Espreso TV, 2014). He exerted his influence and control from a small territory called Alchevsk.

Nikolai Kozitsyn

Mostly active during the same time as Mozgovoy, Nikolai Kozitsyn (or Николай Козицын) is a Russian national, that crossed the border to Ukraine during the early second stage of the conflict. Since 1991 he was the elected leader of the "Al-Mighty Don Cossacks", the biggest recognized Cossack group (Fishkoff, 2004). During the conflict he created the "Cossack National Guard" (Rettman, 2014), an offshoot of this group and is located near the Ukrainian border in the Rostov-on-don area (Socor, 2015a). He and this national guard crossed the

border to join the fight there. Kozitsyn is no stranger to war or military service: he has served as part of a Russian mission in Chechnya during the war there (Fishkoff, 2004). To recruit combatants, he used his leadership of the Cossack group to recruit many Cossacks (or half-Cossacks) from across the country. At its height, he was estimated to control around 4.000 men (Galeotti & Hook, 2019).

During the war he and his Cossack battalions were in control of most of Luhansk, self-claimed to be around 80% (Vasilyeva, 2014). He made Perevalsk and later Antratsyt his home city from where he attempted to ferment his control. His style of rule there was equally ruthless as Mozgovoy's style. He instated capital punishment, and stated that as a result of this new rule: "*We have no marauding, no burglaries or car-jacking.*" (Vasilyeva, 2014) A researcher from James Town foundation stated that: "*They [the Cossacks] hold de facto police powers; apply informal criminal justice through detention, corporal punishment, or community labour; levy taxes on business for "people's needs" or the "self-defence forces' needs"; administer food-rationing in their localities; and redistribute humanitarian assistance goods received unofficially from Russia.*" (Socor, 2015b). Acting mostly as a replacement for the state. The LNR nor the Kiev government had much influence at that time (Socor, 2015b)

Kozitsyn seemed to be driven by ideological aims to some degree. Many Cossacks view this area of Ukraine to be fundamentally belonging to the Cossacks, and some therefore wanted to create their own state: "*They were closer than ever before to realizing a long-held dream of having an independent Cossack state*" (Kramer, 2015). This Cossack state would then also be reunited with the Cossack areas on the other side of the border (Socor, 2015b). This then perhaps also explains why the Cossacks where not cooperative with the LNR; their plans did not align. Collaboration with other commanders was also not his interest, which was also confirmed by another separatist: "*The Cossacks ... did cooperate with us before, of course, but there were certain individuals that tried to create their mini-states.*" (Chernov, 2015) alluding to Kozitsyn during the interview. Despite this, his ideological aims seem to have been a way to gain recruitment, and perhaps stay in favour of Russia, and some of the other commanders. He abused his position, and got accused by rival groups for stealing and profiting from coal transactions to Ukrainian enterprises (Socor, 2015b).

His leadership role started to erode in 2015. There was for example much disagreement among the Cossacks when an armistice agreement was agreed to by the LNR and DNR regimes (Socor, 2015b). Kozitsyn did not even seen these regimes as legitimate actors (Socor, 2015b). What followed was an increasing amount of unrest among the Cossacks. In the end an associate in the battalion seceding away from the National Guard to form his own battalion: the Sparta battalion. This group was more favourable to the Russian forces as part of the LNR army than Kozitsyn (Socor, 2015b).

After that, Kozitsyn was raided by another Cossack unit, rumoured to be Spetsnaz militants and forced to move back to Russia, meaning an end to his rule (Socor, 2015b). Some of his troops continued to remain loyal, with a new commander stepping up, but soon after those troops were usurped into the wider LNR army. (idem)

Kozitsyn's warlordism perhaps is not as obvious as Mozgovoy classification was, mainly due to his shorter reign, but all evidence does suggest he ruled as a warlord. Although Kozitsyn did seem to be one of the less violent commanders, violence was still a core part of his business model. Examples of this were capital punishment, community labour and imprisonment of personnel from the OSCE (Chalupa, 2014). His charismatic nature is clear, being elected as Ataman (high rank in Cossack culture) in one of the biggest Cossack organisations shows he can lead, and people like him. Whether many of his Cossack followers in Donbas joined because of his Charisma is less clear due to lacking evidence. However, what is likely is that it was a mix between this, and the Cossack history of being "guns-for-hire" (Golts, 2018). Some scholars have alluded to that many of the Cossacks might have joined for the money (Socor, 2015a). Kozitsyn did seem to have an ideological agenda as a Cossack leader, but also abused his position, and got accused by rival groups for stealing and profiting from coal transactions to Ukrainian enterprises (Socor, 2015b). Despite his ideology, he was able to act out of self-interest and preferred that above his ideological stances. The territory he controlled differed over time, but was always of importance. Perevalsk, and later the city of Antratsyt, located on an important highway from Russia into the Donbas region. This provided him with influence and leverage over supplies pouring into the region.

Igor Girkin

Finally, I will touch upon Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov). Girkin came into the picture during the 2014 uprising. And is the self-claimed father of the uprising (Dolgov, 2014). Some academics agree with this title (Käihkö, 2021). He was initially in control over the *Slovyansk brigade*, called after the city where Girkin initially managed to consolidate his power after capturing it. At its height it supported some 2.000 men (Galeotti & Hook, 2019), and was one of the main DNR forces after it had been consolidated into the DNR army. Girkin crossed the border into Ukraine with his group of men. Katchanovski states that Girkin arrived from "*Russia via Crimea and seized police headquarters in the towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the Donetsk Region on 12 April 2014*" (Katchanovski, 2016). He recruited mostly citizens of Russia on the ideals of Novorossiya – restoring Russia's "long lost" regions. Ukrainian and US secret services identified his unit as being made up with Russian military members. Though (Katchanovski, 2016) states that although this might be the case, ignoring misidentifications, there is little evidence to suggest that these men are in active service with the military anymore. It is not uncommon for former military members to join such movements. For example, ex-Chechen, or ex-afghan militants have always been like to join other military campaigns. This is likely where Girkin gained most recruits from: ex-army member agreeing with the Novorossiya thoughts.

He himself claims to be responsible for the start and continuation of the conflict, stating that "*I was the one who pulled the trigger of this war*" (Dolgov, 2014) and that "*If our unit hadn't crossed the border, everything would have fizzled out*" (Dolgov, 2014). It is therefore clear that by his own account his importance cannot be understated.

His style of rule "*appears to have been a ruthless and competent commander*" (Galeotti & Hook, 2019). He did not shy away of violence: "*he imposed severe punishments on subordinates for failing to obey his orders — even executing some of his own men*" (Alexandrov et al., 2019). Though because Girkin has mostly been involved in the DNR, rather than the LNR which Mozgovoy and Kozitsyn was a part of, his rule and leadership was much more formalised. He took part in the founding of the republic, and was the first defence Minister of the people's republic (Foorthuis, 2019). This led to his violent outbursts becoming less prominent, since he took on a somewhat more bureaucratic function.

He has been often mentioned in literature on the conflict, partly due to his outspoken nature on his blog *istrelkov.ru* and platforms such as Twitter and Telegram. Here he did, and still does, provide details on his views, his actions, and the situation more generally. His appearances on news channels after he left Donbas also gave a good and interesting account of him. His commitment to the Novorossiya project, and his continues push for publicity about it led to a debate with one of the main opposition politician Navalny live on air (Laruelle M., 2019). This outspokenness led to a poll by Levada in 2014 that shows that 21% of the Russian population knew who he was, and by 2015 that grew to 27%. He also capitalized on this fame by starting political movements, that according to experts "*could have become a new landmark on the Russian nationalist landscape, able to unify figures from different doctrinal traditions*" (Laruelle M., 2019)

Dubbing him a warlord is straight forward and has also been done by different scholars (Käihkö, 2021; Laruelle M., 2019). All his life he has embraced violence, and Donbas was no exception. He has been able to recruit many followers, that were also loyal to him (Galeotti & Hook, 2019). His popularity among ordinary Russians was also to be taken note of. Girkin was also able to control parts of territory during the conflict but moved into a political position when needed. Although he might seem to be driven by ideological reasoning it does not explain his tendencies to change positions when the environment requires so. He is best described as a warlord shapeshifter: He has been able to move into various different position he deemed necessary to survive. At first as commander and the sustained use of violence. Though when this (temporarily) became impossible, he moved into a role of politician. Later, he was forced back to Russia, and because a businessmen. Again later he started the political party as mentioned earlier (Laruelle M., 2019). Though at the end, the goal remained the same: have influence and stay in power. This through his ever-present threat of force. This makes him a warlord.

Warlords and the state

Until now I have mostly talked about the agency and the role of some individuals, and how they got involved in the conflict. However, I have paid little attention to Russia (and the DNR & LNR). Scholars generally agree the importance of Russia's role in the conflict (Katchanovski,

2016; Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016; Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018). Though, care is also needed as Katchanovski (2016) also outlines: "*much of the evidence regarding direct Russian military intervention during this initial period was misrepresented or even fabricated.*" Russia's involvement is more complex than in a two-sided interstate conflict for example. In this conflict, the Russian government interacted with the conflict mainly through non-state actors. In particularly warlords and their paramilitary groups like the ones mentioned above, and through private military companies like Wagner. Zooming in on the relation between the state and these warlords, there are two main ways the Russian government interacted with these warlords;

Firstly, directly through weapons, people and resources, Russia was happy to provide financial, military, and logistical backing to many different groups that were happy to fight in Donbas (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). Both Mozgovoy (Kenyon, 2014) and Kozitsyn have alluded to receiving resources from Russia. Kozitsyn even "*bragged of Russian military personnel in his units, and of his own connections with the Kremlin*" (Socor, 2015b). Warlords and paramilitary groups were quickly able to mobilize military equipment such as tanks, guns, and supporting material due to Russian involvement: "*Russia initially supported separatists in Donbas by allowing volunteers and weapons to cross the border from Russia*" (Katchanovski, 2016). Russia also used this power over these men to try and keep them in check. Kozitsyn for example stopped received supplies at points where he was too insubordinate (Socor, 2015a).

A second way Russia used its influence was more indirectly through legislation and the D/LNR governments. This way is an attempt for legitimacy, though the DNR and LNR are effectively protectorate states of the Russia regime (Foorthuis, 2019). Which meant that the people's republics principally did everything with the agreement of Russia. In the third phase, as described by (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016), the D/LNR army started to absorb many of the paramilitary groups still in existence. The rebellious ones, like Mozgovoy and Kozitsyn either left back to Russia (assumingly under pressure from the government) or found their deaths through assassinations (Losh, 2016). A few years later, practically no real separate and rebellious paramilitary groupings still survived. All got absorbed into the army, or are very strongly aligned to it.

The relation a warlord has with the state is often complicated. Mozgovoy, Kozitsyn and Girkin all had different relations with the governments. Mozgovoy and Kozitsyn both to differing degrees rejected both the DNR and LNR governments. Whilst at the same time supporting and aligning with Putin and the Russian regime. Mozgovoy was also open to the Ukrainian government and was not afraid to be outspoken about collaborating with them. Whilst Girkin on the other hand was heavily colluding and collaborating with the DNR specifically. He was part of the creation and attempted to ferment control through this way.

In the end, the type of relationship did not matter that much; all three men found an end to their reign around roughly the same time frame. Around the time where the DNR and LNR structures became much more formalised, when more native Ukrainians came in power, and where the conflict had mostly become a stalemate. (Bowen A.S., 2019)

Russia's influence and power can be clearly seen in relation to these warlords. Quite simply, without the explicit (indirect) involvement of the Russian government, the conflict would most likely taken a different turn. Many of the paramilitary groups active in the region would have needed to find other backers. For the warlords more specifically, the government did not plan for these warlords to act like they did, but its actions did support their endeavour and sustained rule.

Conclusion

So, to think about influence of these three figures, one cannot leave out Russia's involvement. The successes these men have booked in the conflict, would have likely been much shorter lived. Russia's resources facilitated the campaign of these men. These violent entrepreneurs were happy to come to Ukraine and provide local order. This is exactly what Driscoll means with: "*great powers would pay handsomely for local order*" (Driscoll, 2015). Russia wants to assert control and influence over these regions and does so by "empowering" these entrepreneurs. This through weapons, money, and legislation. Some warlords were almost able to rule as *'fonction totale',* whilst others like Kozitsyn, were not, and had to collude with the D/LNR. Though what is clear is that these men had agency. They could rule broadly as they wanted, and had quite some room for rebellious, and different views like the creation a Cossack state or pursuing an ultra-social, soviet state. There was room for different views, and multiple different figures made use of this to try to look after their own interest. The level of control and agency of these warlords was not linear over time. People like Mozgovoy and Kozitsyn did have a lot of power and influence in the beginning, where the governmental bodies were not as consolidated, but it started to wither down to very little influence at the end of 2016. What this essay also shows is that although Russia has a vested interest in what happened in Donbas during the conflict, it was not in full control. These warlords had agency, and were able to obtain some level of control, not necessarily in line with Russia's ideas.

Coming back to the main question: "**In what way did warlords contribute to the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2016?"**, this essay argues that without warlords (specifically the three mentioned) and their following, most of the Donbas conflict would have taken a completely different turn. The employment of these men can be best compared to the "warlord strategy" adopted in Afghanistan by the USA. Russia did not want to engage in full combat, and instead opted to empower, and employ various local entrepreneurs ready to fight and profit in Eastern Ukraine. People like Mozgovoy, Kozitsyn and certainly also Girkin played an important role and were vital for the day-to-day business in the region. They offered some level of government, did a lot of the dirty work, kept local order, and occasionally helped fight in battles with the Ukrainian army. They acted as police, army, civil service: a temporarily replacement of the state.

References

Alexandrov, G., Kohen, H., & Rothrock, K. (2019, June 1). Where are they now? *Meduza*. https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/06/01/where-are-they-now

AP News. (2015, May 28). *Funeral held for separatist commander*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed_oBecQixc

Ayres, S. (2014, November 26). Opportunists take advantage of eastern Ukraine leadership confusion. *Aljazeera America*. http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2014/11/donetsk-ukraine-leadership.html

Babiak, M., & Mikhailov, K. (2015). Something is rotten in the Luhansk Republic. *Ukraine Policy*. https://web.archive.org/web/20191230182010/http://ukrainianpolicy.com/something-is-rotten-in-the-luhansk-republic/

Bowen A.S. (2019). Coercive diplomacy and the Donbas: Explaining Russian strategy in Eastern Ukraine. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *42*(3–4), 312–343. WorldCat.org. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1413550

Bushak, L. (2014, February 18). Kiev's Minstrel of the Street Revolution. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/2014/02/21/kievs-minstrel-street-revolution-245532.html

Chalupa, I. (2014, November 10). How Russia Sells Itself to the Long-Demoralized People of Donbas. *Atlantic Council*. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-russia-sells-itself-to-donbas/

Chernov, M. (2015, April 28). Ukraine's rebels mete out rough justice in authority vacuum. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/d2f9a40755944467bc8f80e4ea1ea489

Dolgov, A. (2014, November 21). Russia's Igor Strelkov: I Am Responsible for War in Eastern Ukraine. *The Moscow Times*. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/11/21/russias-igor-strelkov-i-am-responsible-for-war-in-eastern-ukraine-a41598

Driscoll, J. (2015). *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107478046

Espreso TV. (2014, May 16). Путін ставить на шапкових отаманів. Луганщина. *Espreso TV*. https://espreso.tv/article/2014/05/16/putin_stavyt_na_shapkovykh_atamaniv_na_donbasi

Fishkoff, S. (2004, September 1). A Cossack revival in Russia. *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. https://www.jta.org/2004/09/01/lifestyle/a-cossack-revival-in-russia

Foorthuis, M. (2019). *Defining the 'People's Republics' of the Donbas* [Leiden University]. https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2602816/view

Galeotti, M., & Hook, I. A. (2019). *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*. 65.

Giustozzi, A. (2005). The Debate on Warlordism: The Importance of Military Legitimacy. *Crisis States Research Centre Discussion Paper*, *13*.

Golts, A. (2018). Russian Cossacks to Join National Guard Units. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *15*(35). https://jamestown.org/program/russian-cossacks-join-national-guard-units/

ICDS. (2015). Armed Formations in the Secessionist 'Luhansk Republic'. *ICDS*. https://icds.ee/en/armed-formations-in-the-secessionist-luhansk-republic/

International Crisis Group. (n.d.). *Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer

Käihkö, I. (2021). A Conventional War: Escalation in the War in Donbas, Ukraine. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *34*(1), 24–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2021.1923984

Katchanovski, I. (2016). The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine? *European Politics and Society*, *17*(4), 473–489. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1154131

Kenyon, P. (2014, May 19). Ukraine crisis: Inside pro-Russia militia training camp. *BBC Panorama*. https://web.archive.org/web/20141012154552/http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27447264

Kramer, A. E. (2015, August 4). Cossacks Face Grim Reprisals From Onetime Allies in Eastern Ukraine. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/05/world/europe/cossacks-face-reprisals-as-rebel-groups-clash-in-eastern-ukraine.html

Laruelle M. (2019). Back from Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiya Russia. *Nationalities Papers*, *47*(5), 719–733. WorldCat.org. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.18

Losh, J. (2016). Is Russia Killing Off Eastern Ukraine's Warlords? *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/25/who-is-killing-eastern-ukraines-warlords-motorola-russia-putin/

Luhn, A. (2014, December 22). The People's Court of Eastern Ukraine. *The Nation*. https://web.archive.org/web/20171019093206/https://www.thenation.com/article/peoples-court-eastern-ukraine/

Malejacq, R. (2020). *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Malyarenko, T., & Galbreath, D. J. (2016). Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine: Beyond integration and abolition. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *16*(1), 113–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148414

Malyarenko, T., & Wolff, S. (2018). The logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the conflict in Donbas. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *34*(4), 191–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1425083

Marten, K. (2007). Warlordism in Comparative Perspective. *International Security*, *31*(3), 41–73. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.3.41

Marten, K. (2014). Ukraine and the problem of local warlords. *Washtington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/05/ukraine-and-the-problem-of-local-warlords/

Marten, K. (2019). Russia's use of semi-state security forces: The case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *35*(3), 181–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142

Ostrovsky, S. (2014, November 12). *Sentenced to Death by a Crowd: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 86)* (Vol. 86). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fV70uDYUqlc&list=PLw613M86o5o7DfgzuUCd_PVwbOCDO472B&index=2

Rettman, A. (2014, July 26). *EU blacklist sheds light on Putin's rag-tag Ukraine army*. https://www.parlement.com/id/vjlsr9zukvzq/nieuws/eu_blacklist_sheds_light_on_putin_s_rag

Rupert, J. (2015). How Russians Are Sent to Fight in Ukraine. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/how-russians-are-sent-fight-ukraine-296937

Shveda, Y., & Park, J. H. (2016). Ukraine's revolution of dignity: The dynamics of Euromaidan. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *7*(1), 85–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.10.007

Socor, V. (2015a). Armed Formations in the Secessionist 'Luhansk Republic' (Part Two). *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *12*(9). https://jamestown.org/program/armed-formations-in-the-secessionist-luhansk-republic-part-two/

Socor, V. (2015b). Armed Formations in the Secessionist 'Luhansk Republic' (Part Three). *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *12*(10). https://jamestown.org/program/armed-formations-in-the-secessionist-luhansk-republic-part-three

Statista. (2022). *Number of civilian deaths related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict from 2014 to 2021*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293409/civilian-deaths-related-to-russia-ukraine-conflict/

Thorburn, J. (2022, March 2). REVEALED: Militant rail union boss holding London to ransom is pictured with pro-Putin separatist as he is slammed for joining group which said Nato's anti-war efforts in Ukraine show 'disdain for Russian concerns'. *Daily Mail*. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10568941/The-Putin-apologist-rail-union-boss-criticised-NATOs-anti-war-efforts-Ukraine.html

Vasilyeva, N. (2014). Ukraine rebels: A disunited front run by warlords. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/e2dcda041fa84a7192093bfe98dea55a

Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom. (2015). Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/search?q=ukraine&jbv=80031666

Коц, А., & Стешин, Д. (2014, April 23). Мозговой штурм: Раскол в рядах луганских ополченцев. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. https://www.kp.ru/daily/26223/3106212/

макаренков, никита, & ханарин, павел. (2021, May 24). *Каким был комбриг «Призрака» Алексей Мозговой*. https://www.donetsk.kp.ru/daily/27282/4418051/