

# Industrial Heritage and Identity Politics: Structural Roots of the Separatist Mobilizations in the Donbas

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**Abstract.** The Donbas, which includes Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine, has been the epicenter of the battle between separatists, starting from 2014 to the full-scale invasion in 2022. This paper goes beyond such oversimplified geopolitical narratives, which exaggerate Russian interference, and explores both the structural conditionings and the historical foundations of such separatist tendencies. It explores the impact of differing patterns of Soviet-era industrialization, ethnic Russian demographic predominance, and post-Soviet oligarchic control of the economy on creating a regional identity different from what much of Ukraine sought through nation-building. Based on historical sources, commentaries, and comparative perspectives, the paper contends that the industrial past of Donbas promoted a worker hero mentality linked to Russian cultural traditions, which stood the test of time despite the economic crisis. This legacy, combined with hybrid identities that mix Soviet nostalgia with regional pride, provided fertile soil for separatist mobilization. These dynamics were exploited by oligarchs to maintain their power, and also led to some economic dependence on Russia, driving anti-Kyiv sentiments. As such, as something that challenges essentialist ethnic conflict models, the research shows the persistence of civic Ukrainian identities together with pro-Russian ones. Post-Soviet regions have lessons to learn from its vision of post-conflict policies using industrial heritage to support inclusive development. Knowledge of these structural roots are key to sustainable peace and reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Industrial Heritage, Identity Politics, Structural Roots of the Separatist Mobilizations.

## 1. Introduction

The eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas has become a chilling emblem of the fragility of post-Soviet statehood, with separatist ambitions sparking a decades-long cycle of violence. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donetsk and Luhansk led to a break in the peace that culminated with the beginning of a wider Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Traditional narratives tend to blame these conflicts on outside aggressors or ethnic divisions but in fact, such explanations fail to take into account the structural conditions that rendered separatism a viable option. This paper explores these endogenous drivers, with attention to how industrial history, demographic change and the shifting locus of economic power have created a regional identity counterposed to the state-level nation-building project of Ukraine. This brings us to the two questions anchoring this inquiry: Why did Donbas show greater desire for separatism than any other region of Ukraine? How did economic, cultural, and historical particularities cultivate these tendencies? Utilising a historical-political economy perspective, the paper mobilises archival data, survey and comparative materials. This fits with simultaneous developments noting that such conflicted areas as Donbas show rapidly changing identities with ethnic and civil identities crossing rather than separating [1]. Under Soviet industrialization, Donbas became an industrial centre, a magnet for Russian migrants, and the cradle of a Russophone culture different from that of Ukraine's agrarian west. The end of USSR in 1991 brought about a deindustrialization that ignited identity crises, which have been exacerbated by the oligarchs and the deep economic ties to Russia.

In this regard, the analysis highlights the local agency, describing Donbas as an instance of 'endogenous de-peripheralization', where locals strove for centrality through secession [2]. These dynamics echo conflicts in Moldova's Transnistria or in Georgia's Abkhazia, providing wider implications for regionalism in the post-Soviet area. Following this introduction, the paper continues

with a literature review, historical formation, population, economy, politics, and future outlook, and ends with peacebuilding implications.

## **2. Overview**

The earliest scholarship on Donbas separatism tended to frame it as a Russian-backed proxy war [3], but newer studies emphasize domestic factors. Despite this rhetoric, surveys indicate that war has reinforced hybrid identities, and that a significant number of Russian-speakers maintain ties to an identifiably Ukrainian civic political community [1]. This is an important finding that challenges models which define nations in an essentialist way [4]. In this context, industrial heritage is essential: researchers examine how it has transitioned from Soviet labor celebration to political arena in the post-Soviet, representing progress and plurality [5]. Economic subjugation of Ukraine [5] in the context of Stalinism is well-documented, along with a unique “borderland” amalgamation of Ukrainian and Russian identity forced into existence by Stalinist policies [6].

## **3. Demographic Analyses underscore Russification’s Legacy**

Policies in the Soviet Union encouraged Russian settlement to industrial centers, and with it, establishment of Russian language superiority [7]. In connection with urban growth, Ukrainian language was gradually marginalized in cities, while Russian literacy became necessary in urban environments [8]. That antagonism over the “Ukrainianness” or “Russianness” of Donbas was exacerbated by competing historical narratives [9]. Oligarchic interests emerged in post-Soviet economics, where Soviet nostalgia was a manipulation to create anti-Kyiv identities by elites [10]. Pridnestrovia comparisons link separatism to transnational elite interests and external backer [11], while the separatist narratives invoked Novorossiya myths to lend legitimacy to their claims [12-15].

## **4. Conflict Dynamics and Future Complexity**

A key trait of rebel governance was that, prior to 2022, both surveys and the style of rebel governance suggested that much of their legitimacy derived from an economic dependency relationship with the state, operating along a system of autonomy rather than secession [15]. Frontline Russian identities were Militarized patriotism [15], whereas Rejecting Kyiv marginalisation embraced separatism [2]. Nation-building industrial legacies are discussed in comparative studies of Eurasian de facto states [16]; while frozen conflicts are analysed through a Russian lens [17]. Resolution paths have been proposed for hybrid autonomy models [18]. The metamorphosis of Donbas from the empty steppe into a massive industrial center started with coal exploration in the 1870s, but Soviet policies actually kicked its fast rise to might. As Stalin’s Five-Year Plans turned Donbas into the USSR’s “energy heart,” coal production grew from 25 million tons in 1928 to 83 million by 1940 [6]. It attracted Russian immigrants which, in turn, shifted the demographics [9]. Emerging cities such as Donetsk were set up as Russian cultural bastions, where policies pushed Russian as the dominant language of administration and in schools. The 1958 reform in education system reinforced this policy which made Russian attainment necessary for career progression [8]. It created a different “industrial core” away from Ukraine’s rural periphery, fostering an alienation [7].

Soviet narratives cast Donbas workers as heroes, promoting the industrial identity of a region grounded more in proletarian internationalism than Ukrainian nationalism. This mobilization was widely celebrated in monuments and museums, evoking a sense of exceptionalism [5]. Agrarian and anti-Soviet traditions of much of western Ukraine asserted an identity based on labor and modernization that this contradicted.

## **5. Deindustrialization and Identity Crisis in Post-Soviet Space**

Donbas opened up to market shocks with Ukraine's 1991 independence. Investments in privatisation, hyperinflation and coal production halving by 2000, led factories to close [15]. It chipped away at the worker-hero, triggering a longing for some of the stability of the Soviet period. Donbas perceived USSR as a modernizer and western Ukraine experienced it as an oppressor [12]. Separatists evoked victories from WWII and anti-fascist rhetoric by depicting Kyiv as a Banderite menace. The two competing histories underneath Yanukovich suppressed identification with the region which exploded post-Maidan when Ukraine pro-Western pivot collided with Donbas Russophone orientation [11].

Donbas has the largest ethnic Russian population in Ukraine – fully 38-44% – a product of Soviet migrations. Russian continues to be the language of everyday life, with 75 per cent speaking it at home as of 2001. Grievances were exacerbated by language laws after 2014, framed as de-Russification [14]. But identities are a hybrid: surveys show that many Russian-speakers in Ukraine identify themselves as Ukrainian citizens, dissociating language from ethnicity [1]. The co-existence of civic pride and regional loyalty makes it hard to assign ethnic narratives into binaries [13].

Soviet legacies and local pride mix in Donbas identities. Multiculturalism Myths survive the Tsar of Russia [11]. Cultural current cross-border ties — family, trade, media — strengthen Russian affinities [17]. In the wake of this, separatists moved away from Novorossiia to focus on a notion of a “Donbas people” who were industrially distinct [12]. It demonstrates a strategic rearticulation of identity to justify efficacy, born in the uniqueness of the region in terms of history and socioeconomics.

## **6. Privatization and Elite Consolidation**

Mass privatization in the post-Soviet space tended to concentrate assets in the hands of oligarchs such as Rinat Akhmetov, whose SCM Holdings was a leader in coal and steel. These became networks of patronage that weakened democracy [10]. As discussed, elites promoted pro-Russian narratives which they used to validate elite rule, playing on both Soviet nostalgia and regional identity [16].

During the presidency of Yanukovich (2010–2014), the clans of Donbas became his allies in the Party of Regions and the media was used to expose separatist sentiments [18]. Heritage was used politically: oligarchs were financing Soviet-style monuments to gather support [5]. By portraying the central government in one way or another anti-Donbas, such manipulation increased the ante against ‘Kyiv’.

Before 2014, 70% of the steel produced in Donbas was exported to Russia - so EU trade deals were a threat [2]. Russia was also a major supplier of imports of energy, leading to an eastward orientation of politics. The 2014 Maidan revolution and subsequent alignment with the EU were interpreted as economic sabotage and reinforced the momentum for separatism [15]. This grounded reality manifests in the way economies constructed political loyalties.

## **7. The Political Forces and Prospects in Eastern Ukraine**

In Donbas, there are three factions: (i) pro-Russian groups exploiting cultural and economic connections to Russia, (ii) pro-Western elites who want EU integration on an anti-Russian agenda, and (iii) autonomists who want to control local affairs without being pro-Russia or pro-West [1]. To that end, few residents report having changed their identity during the war—35% stated that their identity remained the same [14] (the other 10% stating they don't know)—which points towards a possibility for a reintegration process. An asset for peacebuilding – the coexistence of civic Ukrainian and regional identities.

An idea based on Minsk accords could be autonomy under international oversight, which would meet the popular grievance with radically different governance in the region, while at the same time preserving the sovereignty of Ukraine [18]. Policies that seek to embrace civic identities instead of ethnic divisions are more likely to succeed [1]. Industrial heritage might be reused to create economic opportunity, like heritage tourism or green energy, for shared growth [5]. This indicates that autonomous capacities specifically designed to effectively address separatist aspirations could work, as comparatives such as Bosnia's decentralized governance forcible.

## 8. Conclusion

Donbas separatism is rooted in overlapping structural factors: the legacy of Soviet industrialization, the predominance of Russian ethnicity, and oligarchic political economy. This fostered regional identity that opposed Ukraine's nation-building, further driven by economic dependencies and elite instruments. In sort of post-conflict reconciliation context militarisation of industrial heritage should be used to spare gated local development through unmediated civic identities [1]. Ukraine can pave the road to unity by dealing with these roots — something that can be a lesson for all other post-Soviet conflicts. We encourage further work around how development connecting communities with their heritage can disrupt separatist discourse and facilitate enduring peace.

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