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Deindustrialization and its political and social implications: decline of the left-wing parties in Ukraine and secessionist insurgency in Donbas[1]

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Abstract. After 1991 the vulnerability of the working class staring at the loss of their livelihood and increasing precarity has been addressed less and less by the left parties and unions in Ukraine. Consequently, working-class discontent with neoliberal capitalism increasingly became channelled into the support of far-right political forces. The left parties established in Ukraine in the early 1990s failed to speak on behalf of the wage workers. In the 2000s some of them disappeared from politics (SPU and SDPU), turned into minor allies of mainstream neoliberal parties (CPU), or were marginalized and instrumentalized by Russian intelligence service (PSPU). An absence of the left alternative in the post-socialist state captured by the oligarchs and corrupted officials led to the growing resentment in the industrial regions accompanied by the fears of further deindustrialization. Russia masterly used these fears and resentment to fuel the secessionist insurgency in Donbas in spring 2014. Collapse of the ruling Party of the Regions in spring 2014 created political vacuum in Donbas which was filled by Russian nationalists, the Don Cossacks and their local supporters – not numerous but quite aggressive to fuel the insurgency in Donbas. Local members of the quasi-left CPU and PSPU – particularly in Luhansk region – actively supported the right-wing insurgents in spring-summer 2014. Since then, Donbas came through accelerated decline of its industries and final deindustrialization due to the Russian invasion of 2022.

Die politischen und sozialen Folgen der Deindustrialisierung: Zum Niedergang der linksgerichteten Parteien in der Ukraine vor dem Hintergrund des separatistischen Aufstands im Donbas

In der Ukraine wurde die Frustration der Arbeiterklasse angesichts des Verlustes ihrer Lebenswelt und anwachsenden Prekarität nach 1991 immer weniger von linken Parteien und Gewerkschaften aufgefangen. Folglich profitierte stattdessen die extreme Rechte zunehmend von der Unzufriedenheit vieler Menschen mit den Konsequenzen des neoliberalen

1 Parts of the paper have been originally presented at the *Dmytro Shtohryn International Ukrainian Studies Conference* at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2-4 October 2025.

Kapitalismus. Die in den 90er Jahren gegründeten linken Parteien haben als Sprachrohr der Lohnarbeiter versagt. In den Nuller Jahren verschwanden einige von ihnen, andere verwandelten sich in Verbündete des neoliberalen Mainstreams, wurden marginalisiert oder vom russischen Geheimdienst unterwandert. Die Abwesenheit einer linken Alternative in dem von Oligarchen und korrupten Funktionären gekaperten postsowjetischen Staat führte zu Ressentiments und Ängsten vor einer Deindustrialisierung in den Industrieregionen. Im Frühjahr 2014 nutzte Russland diese Ängste und Ressentiments meisterhaft als Antrieb für den separatistischen Aufstand im Donbas aus. Der Zusammenbruch der *Partei der Regionen* hinterließ ein politisches Vakuum, das von russischen Nationalisten, ‚Don Kosaken' und ihren lokalen Anhängern gefüllt wurde – kleinen, aber sehr aggressiven Akteuren der extremen Rechten, die in ihrem Kampf besonders in Luhansk auch von Mitgliedern der pseudo-linken Parteien unterstützt wurden. Seither hat sich der Abstieg der Industrieregion jedoch stark beschleunigt, die infolge des russischen Angriffskrieges seit Februar 2022 nun wirklich vor der Deindustrialisierung steht.

Keywords: deindustrialization, precarity, decline of the left, populist mobilization, separist insurgency | Deindustrialisierung, Prekariat, Niedergang der Linken, Populismus, separatistischer Aufstand

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has become one of the most significant geopolitical developments since the end of Cold War. In his speeches president Putin tried to justify the invasion as Russia's obligation to defend the "people of Donbas."[2] In spring 2014 – after annexation of Crimea – Russia instigated an insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Russia's main aim was to establish its political control over south-eastern Ukraine defined by Russian political establishment and mass-media as "Novorossiya."[3]

2 Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21.2.2022; http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828 [access: 30.3.2022]. Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 14.2.2022; http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843 [access:17.4.2022]. Meeting on socioeconomic support for regions. The President held a meeting, via video conference, on socioeconomic support for the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, 16.3.2022; http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996 [access: 17.4.2022].

3 For more details on the reinvention of "Novorossiya" in Russian foreign policy see: A. Grigas (2015): *Beyond Crimea: Russia's New Imperialism*. New Haven, Ct. A. Härtel (2016): Where Putin's Russia Ends: 'Novorossija' and the Development of National Consciousness in Ukraine, in: *International Reports of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* 2 (2016), p. 107-125. J. O'Loughlin/G. Ó Tuathail/Vl. Kolossov (2016): The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, 2 (2016), p.1-21. M. Suslov (2017): The Production of 'Novorossiya': A Territorial Brand in Public Debates, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, 2 (2017), p. 202-221; A. Osipian (2025): Political justification of territorial expansion from Catherine II to Putin: inventing Novorossiya in imperial and in post-imperial context. In: S. Fahner et al (eds.), *Politics of pasts and futures in (post-)imperial contexts*. Berlin, p. 165-195.

There was no separatist movement in the Donbas prior to spring 2014. However, at least initially, many locals passively supported the secessionist idea. In the USSR the Donbas was considered as the "stronghold of the proletariat." For decades the regional identity in Donbas was based on the sense of non-ethnic belonging to the "industrial avantgarde" of the USSR. Communist authorities stimulated the labour migrations in the USSR, and Donbas was a "melting pot" where new supranational "Soviet" identity was forged.[4]

What happen to the residents of the Donbas coalfields in the post-Soviet years between 1991 and 2022? – In recent decades a growing number of the working-class voters became disappointed with traditional left parties which lost their profile – rather a global phenomenon.[5] But the decline and degradation of the left parties in Ukraine has received only slight and fragmentary scholarly attention until now.[6]

Populist support is strongest in communities that experienced long-term economic and social decline. Painful transition from socialist economics to the neoliberal model in the 1990s[7] had prepared the ground to the growth of populist expectations in the disillusioned society. The old industrial regions were particularly vulnerable. Decline of Donbas core industries, urban infrastructure, and living conditions continued in the post-transition decades. Nonetheless, socio-political

4 A. Wilson (2016): The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, 4 (2016), P. 631-652. A. Osipian (2025): Der Donbass, 1991–2014. Politik, Identität und der Weg zum Aufstand, in: *Osteuropa* 75, 5 (2025), p. 95-114.

5 H.-G. Betz/S. Meret (2012): Right-wing populist parties and the working class vote: what have you done for us lately? In: J. Rydgren (ed.), *Class politics and the radical right*. London, p. 107-121. T. Abou-Chadi/R. Mitteregger/C. Mudde (2021): *Left Behind by the Working Class? Social Democracy's Electoral Crisis and the Rise of the Radical Right*. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Regarding populist movements in Germany see the contribution of Ph. Manow in this volume. R. A. Huber/Chr. H. Schimpf (2017): On the Distinct Effects of Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism on Democratic Quality, in: *Politics and Governance* 5, 4 (2017), p. 146-165. G. Katsambekis/A. Kioupkiolis (2019): *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*. London. St. High (2020): Right-Wing Populism and the Realignment of Working-Class Politics in Canada, in: *Canadian Dimension* (November 2020); https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/right-wing-populism-and-the-realignment-of-working-class-politics-in-canada?fbclid=IwARojilzLvykkVkx-22RcR23s9yACiRQRDKM1Hotcr67_1XwLZTXISZMD3RAk

6 T. Kuzio (2008): Comparative Perspectives on Communist Successor Parties in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia, in: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41, 4 (December 2008), P. 1-23. V. Ishchenko (2016): *The Ukrainian Left during and after the Maidan Protests. Study requested by the DIE LINKE delegation in the GUE/NGL*. January 2016 (particularly, p. 13-26).

7 J. Sachs/A. Pivovarsky (1997): Ukraine's Painful Economic Transition, in: *Analysis of Current Events* 9, 8 (1997), p. 3-6.

developments in post-Soviet Ukraine have never been examined in the context of globalization and one of its destructive outcomes – deindustrialization.[8]

This paper provides a novel framework for the analysis of political unrest and insurgency in Ukrainian Donbas and a short concluding glance on the end of its history as an industrial region after February 2022.

Actors and Agencies of the conflict in Donbas

Nikolay Mitrokhin identifies the instigators of the secessionist movement as "numerous small, non-influential and disparate groups with diverse ideological and cultural orientations, including Cossacks, paratroopers (*desantniki*), Orthodox activists, neo-Nazi-neo-pagans, and supporters of neofascist publicist Aleksandr Dugin." He says these were then pushed out of the political arena by the "militia" (*opolchentsy*), "primarily made up of gangs of minor criminals" and hooligans "known colloquially as *gopniki*".[9] But Mitrokhin does not explain why, at the initial stage of the insurgency, all these groups received support from many locals, who did not take up arms, but did provide the fighters with the background noise necessary for Russian news coverage.

Marlene Laruelle[10] analyses the process of "Novorossiya" mythmaking through the prism of various discourses among Russian nationalists. She divides these nationalist readings of "Novorossiya" into three currents – red, white, and brown. "Red Novorossiya" is a leftist project of "Novorossiya" as an oligarchy-free part of "greater Russia," with strong nostalgia for the USSR as a superpower. "White Novorossiya" is based on ultraconservative political Orthodoxy, with strong nostalgia for the Romanov Empire and a perception of Ukraine as "an artificial construct sponsored by the Bolsheviks to weaken Russia." "Brown Novorossiya" is

8 A. Alderson (1999): Explaining Deindustrialization: Globalization, Failure, or Success? in: *American Sociological Review* 64, 5 (1999), P. 701-721. L. J. Broz/J. Frieden/St.Weymouth (2021): Populism in Place: The Economic Geography of the Globalization Backlash, in: *International Organization* 75, 2 (2021), p. 1-31. St. High (2018): Everything is Made Somewhere: General Motors and the Shifting Politics of Plant Closings, in: *Our Times Magazine*, December 2018, P.17-28. A. Chakrabortty (2011): Why Doesn't Britain Make Things Anymore? in: *The Guardian*, 16 November 2011; https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/nov/16/why-britain-doesnt-make-things-manufacturing [access: 1.5.2020]

9 N. Mitrokhin (2015): Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass, in: *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 1, 1 (April 2015), p. 219-249, here pp. 221 f, 228 f.

10 M. Laruelle (2016): The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs,* 32, 1 (2016), p. 55-74.

defined by Laruelle as an openly anti-regime project of Russian neo-fascists whose goal is to export "national revolution" (*Russkaya vesna*) from Eastern Ukraine to Russia. Such nostalgic rightwing support is surprising, given that the Donbas has traditionally been considered a stronghold of the industrial proletariat and communist/egalitarian sentiment.

Dominique Arel recognizes that the rebels "were complete unknowns on the Donbas political scene until recently. The Party of Regions was the only party in Eastern Ukraine – with the exception of the small Communist satellite – and brooked no opposition."[11] He leaves open the question of the insurrectional movement's popularity, stating that by "staying home, the majority leaves the field to the active minority."[12]

It has to be mentioned that populist mobilization in no way can be seen as a special feature of the Donbas residents. Volodymyr Zelensky (born 1979) – a comedian with no political experience – won a landslide victory in Ukraine's presidential elections in April 2019 by taking 73% of the vote. Zelensky's victory could be seen as a good example of the populist mobilization.[13] However, his populism was neither right nor left – just expression of the nation-wide anti-establishment mood. Zelensky's team successfully used the populist communication techniques in order to win the votes of those Ukrainians disillusioned with old post-Soviet establishment, actually rooted in the late Soviet epoch of 1970s and 1980s.

11 D. Arel (2014): The Donbas Insurrection, in: *The Ukraine List*, 470, 6 June 2014, available at: http://socialsciences.uottawa.ca/ukraine/sites/socialsciences.uottawa.ca.ukraine/files/ukl470.pdf [access: June 8th, 2014]. French original: L'insurrection du Donbas, on: *Sciences Po*, Paris, 14 mai 2014, available at: http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/l-insurrection-du-donbas, quotes from p. 6.

12 ibid., p. 7.

13 For more details see: O. Mashtaler (2020): The 2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: Populism, the Influence of the Media, and the Victory of the Virtual Candidate. In: Chr. Kohl et al (eds), *The Politics of Authenticity and Populist Discourses: Media and Education in Brazil, India and Ukraine*. London, p. 127-160. M. Prokop/K. Maisuradze (2020): Specifics of 'Ukrainian Populism.' A Case Study of the Servant of the People Party's Campaign 2019. In: R. Zajęcki (ed.), *Contemporary International Challenges*. Kielce, Łódź, p. 119-131. A. Umland. Андреас Умланд (2019): Неожиданные результаты украинских президентских выборов 2019 года в их историческом контексте: парадоксы и причины поражения Петра Порошенко [Unexpected results of presidential elections in Ukraine in 2019 in their historical context: paradoxes and reasons of Petro Poroshenko's failure], in: *Oriens Aliter. Časopis pro kulturu a dějiny střední a východní Evropy* 2 (2019), p. 52-65.

30 years of destitution and disillusionment: 1991–2021

On 1 December 1991, more than 90% of Ukrainian voters voted for the country's independence, with turnout exceeding 84%. However, in south-eastern parts of Ukraine – particularly in Crimea and in Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) as well as in Kharkiv region and Odesa region – the vote in support of the Act of Ukraine's independence was much less enthusiastic. For instance, turnout in Donetsk region was 76.73% of whom 83.9% said "yes" to the independence. In Luhansk region turnout was 80.65% of whom 83.86% voted in support of the independence.[14] Thirty years after, on 8-9 June 2021 the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (KIIS) conducted an opinion poll, how Ukrainians will reply to the same question if it would be asked now. According to the opinion poll, the residents of South and East of Ukraine are much less enthusiastic then in 1991. In support of independence will vote 85.8% in West, 73.6% in Center, 59.2% in South, and 53% in East.[15] This survey was not administered in the annexed Crimea. In eastern Ukraine the survey was conducted in Kharkiv region and in those parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions under government control. Therefore, in case if the opinion poll would be conducted in Donetsk and Luhansk agglomerations which are from 2014 under the separatists' control, the support for Ukraine's independence would have turned out to be much less than 50%.

One can suppose that in big cities and in industrial agglomerations in south-east of Ukraine the voters supported independence in 1991 for different reasons then their compatriots in western and central parts of Ukraine.

According to a survey conducted by the Gallup in June-August 2013, 56% of respondents in Ukraine declared that the breakup of the USSR did harm to their country, and only 23% believe that Ukraine benefitted from it. Interestingly, that the pessimistic opinion in Ukraine corresponds with Russia's figures – 55%,[16] despite the fact that it was Russia which lost its Soviet empire while Ukraine got its independence. According to opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center

14 1991 Ukrainian independence referendum; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Ukrainian_independence_referendum [access: 17.4.2022]

15 Ольга Черьомухіна. Ставлення жителів України до незалежності України (червень 2021 р.) [Attitudes of the residents of Ukraine to the independence of Ukraine (June 2021)]. Київський міжнародний інститут соціології (КМІС) [Kyiv International Institute of Sociology].. https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1058&page=1 [access: 17.4.2022]

16 N. Esipova /J. Ray (2013): Former Soviet Countries See More Harm From Breakup. December 9, 2013. https://news.gallup.com/poll/166538/former-soviet-countries-harm-breakup.aspx [access: 17.4.2022]

in 2019, more than half in Russia, Ukraine and Bulgaria said things are worse for most people now than during the communist era. Only 14% in Ukraine agreed that the economic situation in their country is good, while 35% in Russia, 52% in Hungary, 61% in Lithuania, and 74% in Poland. Among all post-communist nations, the Ukrainians are the most frustrated with political elite. 80% per cent of respondents in Ukraine disagree with point that elected officials care about what ordinary people think, while 71% in Hungary, 64% in Lithuania, 58% in Russia, and 48% in Poland.[17]

Economic decline and social inequality became a structural issue in the post-Soviet Ukraine. According to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology in April 2020, 11.5% of Ukraine's population struggled to afford food, 33.8% could afford little beyond food, and 29.6% could afford only a little beyond food and clothes. Only 4% of respondents stated they could afford anything they want.[18] The phenomenon of working poor – that is, employed person living in poverty – spread all over Ukraine.

Economic model: oligarchs, deindustrialization, labour migration

After dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and painful transition from state-regulated to market economy in the early 1990s, the export-oriented model of economy was developed in Ukraine under the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004). Ukraine found it economic niche in the global market as supplier of black and colour metals, weapons, machine-building equipment, and chemical production – mostly azoth fertilizers.[19]

Most of these industries are concentrated in South-Eastern Ukraine and owned by the Ukrainian oligarchs[20] – Renat Akhmetov (SCM: metal industry and coal mining; DTEK: electricity production and distribution; Ukrtelecom and

17 European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism. October 9, 2019 https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/ [access: 17.4.2022]

18 Y. Yurchenko/P. Kutuev/M. Yenin/H. Korzhov (2021): Class Divisions and Social Inequality in Independent Ukraine. In: Mykhailo Minakov (et al, eds.): *From "The Ukraine" to Ukraine*. Stuttgart, p. 95-136.

19 S. Sardak/S. Radziyevska (2019): Ukraine's Exports as a Global Challenge for Its Future, in: *SHS Web of Conferences* 65 (2019), p. 84-99.

20 H. Pleines (2019): The Political Role of Business Magnates in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes: A Comparative Analysis, in: *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte / Economic History Yearbook* 60, 2 (2019), p. 299-334. (particularly, p. 324/25)

mobile operator Life; Media Group Ukraine), Viktor Pinchuk (Interpipe: metal industry; StarLightMedia: TV channels ICTV, Novyi, STB), Ihor Kolomoisky and Gennadiy Bogolyubov (Privat: Privatbank, metal and chemical industry, Ukrainian International Airlines, DniproAvia, Aerosvit, TV channels 1+1 and 2+2), Oleksandr Yaroslavsky (DCH: chemical industry, KharkivAvia), Dmytro Firtash (Group DF: chemical industry; RosUkrEnergo AG: gas transit and distribution), Vadim Novinsky (shipbuilding and agricultural holding HarvEast), Serhiy Taruta (ISD: metal industry), Konstantyn Zhevago (Ferrexpo; "Finances and Credit" Group includes enterprises in the fields of metallurgy, ferrous deposits and ferromagnetic ore, engineering, transport, pharmaceutics, shipbuilding, energetics).

Metal and chemical industry plants use big quantities of natural gas exported from Russia. It makes the plants – and the oligarchs – dependent from gas prices and Russian *Gazprom*. Most of the oligarchs never invested their profits into modernization of the industries in Ukraine. At the same time, almost all Ukrainian oligarchs invested into metal, chemical, and ship-building industry abroad – mostly in the new member-states of the EU.[21]

In order to safe their revenues from taxation, the oligarchs registered their companies offshore – mainly in Cyprus.[22] It led to the dramatical outflow of capital from Ukraine. Competition with growing Chinese industry and growth of gas prices in recent years made metal and chemical industries in Ukraine less profitable than they were before the economic crisis of 2008.

The growth of the prices on the global food market makes agriculture more attractive for investment. The world food price crisis of 2007/08 contributed to the rise of Ukrainian agrarian oligarchs – Yuriy Kosyuk (MHP Mironivsky Hliboproduct) and Oleg Bakhmatyuk (UkrLandFarming). The same trend promoted new oligarch on Ukrainian political scene – Petro Poroshenko (Roshen Ltd; TV channels "5 Kanal" and "Priamyi") – who was among the leaders of the "Orange

21 For instance, Serhii Taruta, Ukrainian businessman based in Mariupol and Donetsk, a chairman of the board of the ISD corporation – the largest steel producer in Eastern Europe, in 2008-2018 was an owner of the bankrupted Gdansk Shipyard Group. Lee Hong Liang (2013): Gdansk Shipyard seeking aid to avert bankruptcy, on: *Sea Trade Maritime*, October 4, 2013; https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/shipyards/gdansk-shipyard-seeking-aid-to-avert-bankruptcy [access: 22.12.2025]; see also: State takes full control over Gdańsk Shipyard and GSG Towers, on: *Poland at Sea*, 20 July 2018, https://www.polandatsea.com/state-takes-full-control-over-gdansk-shipyard-and-gsg-towers/ (access: 22.12.2025)

22 H. Pleines, (2017): The international links of Ukrainian oligarchs. Business expansion and transnational offshore networks. In: T. Beichelt/S. Worschech (eds.), *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine.* Stuttgart, p. 161-178.

revolution" in 2004 and EuroMaidan in 2014. On 26 May 2014 Poroshenko was elected a president of Ukraine (2014-2019).

As an outcome of economic crisis of 2008 and political-military crisis of 2014/15, most of industrial plants – except metal, chemical, and military – reduced their production outcome. The high level of unemployment in all provinces of Ukraine forced around 5 millions of Ukrainians to emigrate abroad – to the EU and also to Russia.[23] Moreover, it made millions of Ukrainians dependent from economic, cultural, and political impact from abroad.

State capture

After the initial transitional chaos under presidency of Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994), the Ukrainian political system stabilized itself on rather pre-modern pattern characterized by such features as patron-client networks, corruption and nepotism. This model was elaborated under presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004) and could be defined as "patronal politics."[24] In this model the direct personal connections are absolutely vital to succeeding in politics and business.

23 Ukrainian migrant workers in Russia are mostly employed in Moscow and Tumen' provinces, where they work in building industry and oil-gas industry, respectively. Many of them were seasonal workers commuting between two countries. Some of them were able to obtain Russian citizenship but not many because of the legal restrictions in Russian Federation. For this reason, the estimation of the number of Ukrainians in Russia is rather ambivalent. Before 2014 the number of Ukrainian labor migrants in Russia was estimated as 1.6 million. Ирина Ивахнюк. Перспективы миграции населения из Украины в Россию в свете украинского политического кризиса [Prospects of population migration from Ukraine to Russia in the context of Ukrainian political crisis], Российский совет по международным делам, 15 апреля 2014, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/perspektivy-migratsii-naseleniya-iz-ukrainy-v-rossiyu-v-svet/ [access: 5.2.2026] In 2014-2015 about 1.2 million Ukrainians migrated to Russia from those areas in Donbas under control of the pro-Russian insurgents. Соня Савина. Почему при Путине сокращается украинское население, 24 января 2023, https://istories.media/stories/2023/01/24/pochemu-pri-putine-sokrashchaetsya-ukrainskoe-naselenie/ [access: 5.2.2026]. In 2019 Putin signed a decree nr. 183 easing citizenship rules for the actual residents in Russian-occupied parts of Donbas as well as to the former residents of the annexed Crimea and Donetsk and Luhansk regions now residing in Russia. Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 24.04.2019 г. № 183 [Decree nr. 183 by the president of the Russian Federation from 24.04.2019], Kremlin.ru, http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/44190 [access: 5.2.2026]. In the next two years 530 000 of them were granted Russian citizenship. Почти 530 тыс. жителей Донбасса получили российское гражданство в упрощенном порядке [Almost 530 thousand residents of Donbas obtained Russian citizenship in accordance with eased rules], ТАСС, 2 мая 2021, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/11296643 [access: 5.2.2026]

24 H. Hale (2015): *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. New York, NY.

Political regime established in Ukraine by president Kuchma can be qualified as "competitive authoritarianism."[25] After Kuchma's presidency, the Ukrainian statehood had suffered from the fundamental institutional weaknesses. Under presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) patronal politics further developed from unipolar to multipolar model. And the oligarchs became the key players and main beneficiaries of the new model. Through the back-room deals with corrupted bureaucracy the oligarchs turned the state into their tool. This phenomenon is defined as "state capture."[26] Oligarchs became able to shape the underlying rules of the game by "purchasing" decrees, legislation, and influence in the parliament, ministries, and the national bank.

What strategies of influence do Ukrainian oligarch use to influence politics?

Oligarchs exert their political influence through various tools – supporting their own "political projects" of which only few were actually elected to the parliament or bribing the parliamentary factions for lobbying oligarchs' interests. However, the most effective tool is control over mass-media – primarily TV channels but also newspapers and, later, on-line media.[27] An oligarch and his media-management take decision what politician might be invited to political talk-show on TV channel owned by the oligarch. Mainstream mass-media are owned by the core oligarchs who made their fortune on the metal industry – Renat Akhmetov, Viktor Pinchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky – accompanied by Petro Poroshenko.

In Ukraine competitive authoritarianism was characterized by rivalry between elites of two industrial strongholds in south-eastern Ukraine – Dnipropetrovsk (plus Zaporizhzhya as a minor partner) and Donetsk (plus Luhansk as a minor partner).

Following the partial privatization of state-owned industries the Communist Party lost its dominant position in South-Eastern Ukraine in 1999 presidential elections and 2002 parliamentary elections. Then the Party of Regions – founded

25 L. A. Way (2004): The sources and dynamics of competitive authoritarianism in Ukraine, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 20, 1 (March 2004), p. 143-161.

26 J. S. Hellman/ G. Jones /D. Kaufmann/ M. Schankerman (2000): Measuring Governance, Corruption, and State Capture: How Firms and Bureaucrats Shape the Business Environment in Transition Economies, in: *Policy Research Working Paper* no. 2312. World Bank, Washington, DC.

27 For more details see: D. Dutsyk/M. Dyczok (2021): Ukraine's Media: A Field Where Power is Contested. In: Minakov (et al, eds.), *From 'the Ukraine' to Ukraine: A Contemporary History 1991-2021*. Stuttgart. p. 169-206. E. Somfalvy/H. Pleines (2021): The agency of journalists in competitive authoritarian regimes. A case study of Ukraine during the Yanukovich presidency, in: *Media and Communication* 9, 4 (2021), p. 82-92.

in Donetsk in the late 1990s and backed by the tycoons – took dominant position in the region. Thus, the mono-party political system continues to exist in South-Eastern Ukraine as if nothing changed since times of the USSR. In the Donbas – the Donetsk coal basin – which includes Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, dominance of the Party of Regions became almost total. These two provinces turned into stronghold of the Party of Regions lead by Viktor Yanukovych, appointed by president Kuchma as a governor of Donetsk province in 1997, and as a prime-minister of Ukraine in 2002.[28]

By the late 1990s the parties in Ukraine turned into political lobby of oligarchs, whose main purpose was and is to control and abuse state budget and state-owned property. It is impossible to find parties in contemporary Ukraine which could be qualified as left or right, liberal or conservative, in accordance with conventional criteria of political science. All the parties are structured around a leader with strong – as rule covered – support from a tycoon or group of tycoons. All the parties use populist rhetoric. All the parties could not identify themselves with a certain social group, but rather with regional one.

Ground for elite contestation was already prepared in the Soviet epoch, despite the official rhetoric of egalitarianism. In the USSR the Communist Party leadership, Soviet bureaucrats, directors of industrial plants as well as leadership of the Soviet Army, police and secret police (KGB) – altogether constituted the ruling elite – *nomenklatura*.[29] Criticism of the Communist *nomenklatura* and its privileges was in the centre of public discussions in the time of *Perestroika* in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, *nomenklatura* survived the collapse of the USSR and took power in the most of former Soviet republics – that had become new independent states. Many representatives of *nomenklatura* became successful businessmen, politicians, and high rank officials in the independent Ukraine.

28 A. Osipian/A. Osipian (2006): Why Donbas votes for Yanukovych: confronting the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, in: *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, 4 (2006), p. 495-517.

29 Коржихина Татьяна. П./ Фигантер Ю. Ю. (1993): Советская номенклатура: становление, механизмы действия [The Soviet nomenclature: development, mechanisms of action], in: *Вопросы истории* [Voprosy Istorii] 7 (1993), S. 25-38. Муравьева (2002): Военный коммунизм: теория и практика [Military communism: theory and practice], in: Финансы и кредит [Finansy i kredit] 97, 7 (2002), p. 52-60. Сергей Земляной (2004): Невидимая рука Учраспреда [Invisible hand of Uchraspred], in: *Отечественные записки* [Otechestvennye zapiski] 2, 17 (2004). Y. Slezkine (2017): *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*. Princeton.

Re-emergence of the Left in post-Soviet Ukraine in 1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Marxist idea and the communist project were totally discredited and lost any popular support in the USSR. Nevertheless, many new parties declaring their belonging to the left idea were founded in Ukraine in 1990s. These parties came through incredible metamorphosis reflecting the meandrous evolution of political culture in Ukraine.

When the parliament of Ukraine declared its independence on 24 August 1991, 80% of the parliament members were communists. However, the Communist party was dissolved on August 30th 1991 by Leonid Kravchuk (1935–2022) – its former leader then the head of the parliament, elected first president of Ukraine on 1 December same year. Nevertheless, the communists maintained the majority in the parliament in 1990–1994 holding 239 places out of 450 in total. Their faction was called "Group 239" and led by Oleksandr Moroz (born 1944). On October 26th 1991 Moroz founded the Socialist Party of Ukraine. Most of the new party members were former communists disappointed with the Communist party dissolution. Consequently, the Socialist party leadership declared its intention to follow the 'social-democratic' model – quite popular at that time.[30]

The Social-democratic party of Ukraine had been founded already on May 25th 1990. The Party's only leader Yuriy Buzdugan (born 1962) was an astronomer. The Party's only electoral success was the election of Buzdugan to the parliament in the term 1994–1998. Then the Party became rather kind of "phantom party." In 2020 Ministry of justice cancelled registration of the Social-democratic party among other 48 parties which did not take part in the elections during the last ten years.

Yet another Social democratic party of Ukraine (united) was founded in 1996 and had totally different trajectory. It was founded by the top officials and big businessmen who only used the social democratic brand (actually, this brand was stolen from Buzdugan's party). The Party always acted in support of president Leonid Kuchma (born 1938). The Party never got popular support being considered as party of corrupted bureaucrats and new-rich. In the parliamentary elections the Party received 4 per cent in 1998, 6.27 per cent in 2002, and 1 per cent in 2006.[31]

30 Програма Соціалістичної Партії України [Programme of the Socialist Party of Ukraine], http://www.spu.in.ua/uk/about/programa_spu [access: 5.2.2026]

31 Вибори народних депутатів України 26 березня 2006 року. Протокол Центральної виборчої комісії про результати виборів народних депутатів України [Elections of the people's deputies of Ukraine on 26 March 2006. Minutes of the Central electoral commission on the results of the elections of the people's deputies of Ukraine], p. 8, https://www.cvk.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/protokol_cvk_2006.pdf [access: 17.4.2022]

The Party lost the elections of 2006 because it lost its protector – president Kuchma who had resigned in 2004. While new president Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) considered the Party among his enemies. Then the Party collapsed since its leaders (and their money) left the Party for other political projects. The only interesting fact about the Party is that its leader during 1997–2006, Viktor Medvedchuk (born 1954), turned out to be a close friend of Russia's president. Vladimir Putin became a god father of Medvedchuk's daughter in 2004. Medvedchuk always promoted Russia's agenda in Ukraine. In 2019 he returned to Ukrainian politics and became the leader of pro-Russian parliamentary faction "Oppositional Platform – For Life." On 8 October 2021 Medvedchuk was charged with high treason and kept under house arrest. A few days after Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 27 February 2022 Medvedchuk escaped house arrest. On 12 April 2022 he was detained. On 21 September 2022 Ukraine handed over Medvedchuk along with Russian prisoners-of-war to Russia as part of a prisoner swap.[32]

The Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU) got restored, because the old-new elite tried to benefit of the economic decline and rise of social tension in the early 1990s this way. The founding congress was hold in Donetsk on 19 June 1993. Petro Symonenko (born 1952), a native of Donetsk, was elected as the party's leader. He is the only leader of the CPU until today.

During 1994–2004 the Communist Party became one of the leading parties in the parliament because many wage workers believed that this "reinvented" party was different from the Communist *nomenklatura* in the USSR. In the parliamentary election on March 27th 1994, the party gained 13.6% of the vote. In the parliamentary election on March 29th 1998, the party gained 24.65% of the vote and 123 seats, becoming the largest party in Parliament. On March 30th 2002, the party won 19.98% of the popular vote and 66 out of 450 seats. The communist faction in the parliament was always in the opposition to the government.

Initially the CPU cooperated with the Socialist Party (SPU) and supported the latter's candidate Moroz on presidential elections in 1994. However, later the socialists and communists became fierce competitors for the left electorate. Further evolution demonstrated the regional diversity of electoral base of the CPU and SPU. The CPU enjoyed the strong support in the industrial cities in south-east Ukraine, particularly among the older generation considering the state-owned

32 Pro-Kremlin politician Viktor Medvedchuk handed over to Russia in exchange for 200 POWs, in: The Kyiv Independent, 22 September 2022, https://kyivindependent.com/pro-kremlin-lawmaker-viktor-medvedchuk-reportedly-handed-over-to-russia-as-part-of-prisoner-exchange/ [access: 27.1.2026].

economy in the late USSR as a pattern to follow. The SPU was mainly supported in the countryside and small towns of central and south-eastern Ukraine by agrarian workers as well as some professionals and emerging middle class who refused the rigid neo-liberal economic course of the Kuchma's corrupted regime. Socialists made close partnership with Agrarian party. CPU and SPU have different attitudes to the national identity issues and priorities in foreign politics. Because of their electoral base – predominantly Russian-speaking residents of the industrial cities in south-eastern Ukraine – communists were in support of Russian language as the second official language in Ukraine, for the Soviet historical narrative, and close economic and cultural ties with Russia. While socialists acted in support of Ukrainian cultural revival, condemned the atrocities of Stalinism, and favoured cooperation with the EU and Russia.

Inside the SPU it was Natalia Vitrenko (born 1951) who fiercely criticized Moroz for "revisionism". In October 1995 Vitrenko and her supporters left the Socialist Party, and in April 1996 they founded the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (PSPU). In the 1998 parliamentary elections the party won 4 percent of the vote and entered the parliament.

The fraction of the left-wing spectre was a handicap. In the presidential elections of 1999 president Kuchma used all legal and illegal tools to crackdown a socialist Moroz as his main competitor. All together three leftist candidates got 44.5% of votes. Thus, the political technologists employed by Kuchma masterly divided the left electorate Thereby, Ukraine continued to follow the oligarchic neo-liberal model. The left parties gradually lost their profile being instrumentalized by Ukrainian neo-liberal elite or by Russian intelligence service (FSB).

The decline of the Left in 2000s

In 2000s political life became very much commercialized in Ukraine. Programs of economic reforms, door-to-door campaigning were replaced with political advertisement on TV and newspapers. Therefore, party leaders as well as individual politicians looked for sponsors in order to pay for political advertisement in mass media. Mercantilist approach to the politics became the dominant trend. Many businessmen and corrupted officials donated their money and influence to the parties in order to be elected to the parliament. And the left parties were no exception in this rule:

Ihor Kaletnik (born 1972) did his career as top-official of the Custom Service of Ukraine – infamous as one of the most corrupted state institutions. Although

not being member of the Communist Party, Kaletnik was set onto the party list and elected to the parliament twice – in 2007 and 2012.

The businessman Vasyl Volha (born 1968) had joined Vitrenko's Progressive Socialist Party in order to be elected to the parliament. When the party lost elections in 2006, Volha got sent to the parliament by the Socialist Party instead. When in 2007 the socialists lost the elections as well, Volha founded his own party – the Union of Leftists which received no electoral support. In 2010 Volha joined the government of president Yanukovych.[33]

These and other well-established beneficiaries of the neo-liberal course who became strange fellow-travellers of the left, in turn greatly contributed into the growing disappointment of ordinary voters with the unscrupulous leadership of the left parties.

In August 2006 both, the Socialist and the Communist Party joined the coalition with the Party of Regions. The coalition was dominated by the Party of Regions – the party of big capital – while communists and socialists as minor partners helped their neo-liberal patron to safe a majority in the parliament.

In the extraordinary elections of 2007, the Socialist Party failed to secure parliamentary representation, having received 2.86% of the total national vote of the required minimum 3% representation threshold. In the presidential elections in 2010 the Party's leader Moroz won 0.38% of votes. Since then, the party and its leader disappeared from political scene.

However, the party's brand was used by political adventurers. In 1998 the SPU was joined by adventurous businessman Mykola Rudkovsky (born 1967). He was elected as a deputy of Ukrainian parliament from the SPU's electoral list in the 2002 and 2006 parliamentary elections. Rudkovsky was a minister of transportation (2006-2007) in the government of Viktor Yanukovych. In the 2012 Ukrainian parliamentary election, Rudkovsky was elected as self-nominated candidate and subsequently sat in the Party of Region's parliamentary faction. In 2013 Rudkovsky was elected a chairman of the SPU. In 2014 he fled Ukraine because of the criminal investigation – he was charged in kidnapping of his business partner Oleh Seminsky, Ukrainian businessman and top-official.[34] In April 2018 Rudkovsky was

33 Розпорядження від 22 березня 2010 р. N 577-р. Про призначення Волги В.О. Головою Державної комісії з регулювання ринків фінансових послуг України [Order from 22 March 2010 no. 577-r. On the appointment of Volha V.O. a Head of the State commission for regulating the financial markets of Ukraine], https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/577-2010-%D1%80#-Text [access: 17.4.2022]

34 Рудьковський Микола Миколайович [Rudkovsky Mykola Mykolaiovych], https://lb.ua/file/person/440_rudkovskiy_mikola_mikolayovich.html [access: 8.2.2026]

detained in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, for crossing border with fabricated Iraqi passport, and arrested in September 2018 after landing in Moscow. He was released from prison in April 2020. In 2021 he was under home arrest in Moscow.

In July 2017 an adventurous populist Illya Kyva (1977-2023) declared himself a new leader of the Socialist Party. In January 2018 the Central Committee of the SPU declared Kyva an impostor and excluded him from the party ranks. Originally Kyva was employed in the transportation sector and not engaged in politics. In 2014 Kyva was appointed a commander of the Ukrainian volunteer battalion "Poltavshchyna" to fight the insurgents in Donbas. In the next three years Kyva made skyrocketing career in the Ministry of Interior. His efforts to lead the SPU caused the party's final collapse. In March 2019 as the self-declared leader of the SPU, Kyva took part in the presidential elections and won 5,869 votes.[35] In August 2019 Kyva was elected to the parliament from the pro-Russian party the "Opposition Platform – For Life" co-chaired by Viktor Medvedchuk. In 2021 Kyva made pro-Russian statements and led the militarized group "Patriots – For Life" engaged in political provocations. On 30 January 2022 Kyva left Ukraine for Spain. On 23 February 2022, on the eve of Russia's invasion, Kyva called upon Russia to invade Ukraine and free the country from the Nazism and enslavement by the West.[36] On 6 March 2022 Kyva was charged in the high treason by the general prosecutor of Ukraine. On 15 March 2022 Kyva was deprived of his status of the parliament deputy. On 21 April 2022, in an open letter to Russian president Vladimir Putin, Kyva applied for Russian citizenship and political asylum. On November 13th 2023, Kyva was given a 14-year jail sentence in absentia by the court in Lviv. In Russia, Kyva frequently criticised Ukrainian authorities online and on Russian state television talk-shows. He was shot and died in the suburbs of Moscow on 6 December 2023.[37] On 22 October 2022 the Socialist Party was banned by a court decision along with other pro-Russian parties.

The decline of the Communist Party took longer time. Since 2006 the electoral support of the CPU reduced to the aged residents of south-eastern Ukraine with

35 Вибори Президента України 31 березня 2019 року [Presidential elections in Ukraine, 31 March 2019], Центральна виборча комісія [access: 08.02.2026]

36 Депутат Верховной рады призвал Россию освободить Украину – опубликовано видео [A deputy of Verkhovna Rada asked Russia to liberate Ukraine – a video was published], Новоросинформ, 23 февраля 2022, https://novorosinform.org/deputat-verhovnoj-rady-prizval-rossiyu-osvobodit-ukrainu--opublikovano-video-90444.html [access: 7.2.2026]

37 Міліціонер, борець з наркотиками, кандидат у президенти, нардеп, зрадник, засуджений. Як жив і помер Ілля Кива [A policeman, an anti-drug activist, a candidate on presidential elections, a deputy of parliament, a traitor, a criminal. How lived and how died Illya Kyva], LB.ua, 6 грудня 2023, https://lb.ua/society/2023/12/06/587804_militsioner_borets_z_narkotikami.html (access: 8.2.2026)

nostalgic view of the socialist past in the USSR. In the 2006 parliamentary election, the party won 3.66% and 21 seats. In the parliamentary election on September 30th 2007, the party won 5.39%.

In 2010 the Communist Party again joined the coalition with the Party of Regions, even though the communists received no ministries in the coalition government. As a minor partner of the Party of Regions the CPU enjoyed with political and financial support from its neo-liberal patron. Instead of criticising the neo-liberal course of the Party of Regions, the communist campaigning was built on the juxtaposition between "then" and "now" that is between socialism in the USSR and capitalism in the present-day Ukraine. Despite the fact, that the Communist Party was member of the ruling coalition this rhetoric still had some success. The absence of competitors on the left flank – the Socialist Party of Moroz and the PSPU of Vitrenko were already marginalized – also contributed to the communists' temporary electoral success. In the 2012 Ukrainian parliamentary election, the Communist party won 13.18% of the national votes and no constituencies and thus 32 seats. Party's leader Symonenko appreciated the economic partnership with China and called to use Communist Party of China as an example, despite the fact that the CPC introduced neo-liberal capitalist model in China.

It is of no surprise that many voters of the CPU were finally disappointed with the party's cynical flexibility. In 2014 many local communists supported the insurgents of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's republic. In turn, due to the annexation of Crimea and insurgency in Donbas – the last strongholds of the CPU's – its electoral support dropped dramatically.[38] The October 2014 parliamentary elections further marginalized the Communist Party as it won no constituency seats and came 1,12% short of reaching the 5% election threshold. On December 16th 2015, the District Administrative Court in Kyiv satisfied the claim of the Ministry of Justice and banned the activities of the Communist Party. On March 4th 2022, in course of the Russian invasion, Symonenko and his family were evacuated by Russian commandos from Kyiv region to Russia. Since August 11th 2023 Symonenko is under investigation by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).[39]

38 D. Gorbach (2016): After the ban: a short history of Ukraine's Communist Party, in: *Open Democracy*, 8 January 2016, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/after-ban-short-history-of-ukraine-s-communist-party/ [access: 27.1.2026]

39 Гринченко, Дмитрий (2023): Симоненко получил подозрение СБУ. Его вывез спецназ россиян во время боев под Киевом [Symonenko is under investigation by the SSU. He was evacuated by Russian commandos in time of the battle for Kyiv], LIGA.net, 11 августа 2023; https://news.liga.net/politics/news/simonenko-poluchil-podozrenie-sbu-ego-vyvez-spetsnaz-rossiyan-vo-vremya-boev-pod-kievom [access: 25.12.2025]

Despite the name of her "Progressive Socialist Party," Natalia Vitrenko turned into right wing populist on the service of Russian intelligence. In her public speeches she turned to the populist, clerical, xenophobic, anti-western and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. On the meetings and demonstrations Vitrenko appeared with Orthodox icons in her hands. She openly supported the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. In 2010 Vitrenko became head of the "Congress of the Orthodox Women of Ukraine," and in 2011 she founded the "Eurasian People's Union" of Ukraine. Along with the right-wing "Brotherhood" the members of Vitrenko's party clashed against other (pro-western) right-wing demonstrators in Kyiv on October 14th 2005. In 2006–08 Vitrenko collaborated with Alexander Dugin (born 1962),[40] a Russian neofascist philosopher, who openly rejects Ukrainian statehood. Dugin is believed to have provided Putin's playbook on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[41] When Natalia Vitrenko once again lost the parliamentary elections in October 2014, she blamed them for being "a justification of Nazism and militarism."[42] Thus, for the first time in public discourse she used exactly those terms instrumentalized eight years later by Putin to justify Russia's "special military operation for denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine."

40 В день визита Ющенко в Москву Витренко и Дугин организовали видеомост [Vitrenko and Dugin set video-bridge in the same day when Yushchenko visited Moscow]. Корреспондент.net, 13 февраля 2008. https://censor.net/ru/resonance/2128/kiev_krasnyyi_den_kalendarya_versii [access: 17.4.2022]; Умланд Андрес. Фашистский друг Витренко: странный союз между украинским «прогрессивным социализмом» и российским «неоевразийством» [Fascist friend of Vitrenko: strange alliance between Ukrainian "progressive socialism" and Russian "neoeurasianism"], Украинская правда [Ukrainska pravda]. 26 октября 2006. http://pravda.com.ua/ru/news/2006/9/27/46953.htm [access: 17.4.2022]; Умланд Андреас. Александр Дугин, европейский фашизм и Витренко: что общего? [Alexander Dugin, European fascism and Vitrenko: what is common?], Украинская правда [Ukrainska pravda]. 20 июля 2007. http://pravda.com.ua/ news/2007/7/20/61687.htm [access: 17.4.2022]

41 Amit Varshizky (2022): To Understand Putin, You First Need to Get Inside Aleksandr Dugin's Head, in: *Haaretz*. 17. 03. 2022. https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT.MAGAZINE-to-understand-putin-you-first-need-to-get-inside-aleksandr-dugin-s-head-1.10682008 [access: 17.4.2022]

42 Витренко, Наталья (2014): Признание парламентских «выборов» на Украине – это легимитизация нацизма и милитаризма, это ответственность за будущие катастрофы [Recognition of the parliamentary "elections" in Ukraine – is a legitimization of Nazism and militarism. It is responsibility for the future catastrophes], 24 October 2014. http://vitrenko.org/article/22346 [access: 17.4.2022]

Political monopoly of the Party of Regions, fears of deindustrialization, and populist mobilization in Donbas

Why Donbas which for decades was considered as "proletarian," "internationalist," "red," "atheist," suddenly welcomed Russian nationalists, monarchists and Don Cossacks who were considered as the main enemies of the Donbas workers in time of the Civil war of 1918–20 and in the Soviet historical narrative on it?

At the core of local Donbas identity there is a myth that industrialization – actually several waves of industrialization in the 1860s, 1930s, and 1950s – was the golden age of this highly industrialized and densely urbanized region. The dramatic economic decline after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and gradual deindustrialization during the 1990s generated fears that were used successfully by the local elite, eventually institutionalised as the Party of Regions, to portray itself as an advocate of the Donbas vis-à-vis the Ukrainian government in Kyiv. These myths and fears were deployed during presidential and parliamentary elections to manipulate the electorate in the Donbas, and later by the pro-Russian separatists in their propaganda.

The Donbas was seen by many as the industrial heart of the USSR. Soviet mass media, literature and cinematography produced images of the Donbas industrial proletariat as an embodiment of the best qualities of "Soviet people – builders of Communism." It made the locals proud of their region and occupation, and further promoted their local – Donbas – and supranational – Soviet – identities. The very name Donbas was seen by its residents as a sign of prestige and was used by local elites to promote local identity.

At a local level, in cities and towns with multiethnic populations, people identified themselves with industrial plants connected to the great projects of socialist modernization. These industrial giants provided workers and their families with apartments, sport clubs, healthcare, and summer camps for children, recreational activities by the sea or in the mountains, and many other opportunities. Many people spent their whole life working at the same plant and even after retirement they maintained ties with its "working collective."

The economic and political importance of Donbas was amply represented in the Soviet historical narrative of the Ukrainian SSR, but the situation gradually changed after Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991. Then, the struggle to build an independent nation-state became the mainstream Ukrainian historical master-narrative. The heroes and events of the western and central provinces, and the cities of Lviv and Kyiv, dominated this master-narrative. Many important phenomena from

the history of Western Ukraine which had been marginalized or silenced in Soviet historiography were inducted into the normative charter of historical narratives after 1991 as important components of the Ukrainian national myth.[43] In independent Ukraine, the collective memory of the Donbas and South-Eastern Ukraine in general were quickly marginalized, completely vanishing from the official politics of memory as well as from new historical narratives created on the basis of pre-revolutionary historiography and narratives written by the Ukrainian Diaspora during the Cold War era. Industrial heritage of Donbas found no place in the reinvented mainstream historical narrative.[44] Consequently, many residents of Donbas felt themselves alienated from the nation-building in the post-Soviet Ukraine.[45]

In the years 2005–2010 President Yushchenko pursued the politics of memory which challenged the Donbas myth-memory of socialist industrialization as the golden age of Eastern Ukraine through commemorations of the *Holodomor* (Great Famine) of 1933. Efforts were made to turn a positive image of the Soviet past into a negative one promoted mostly by politicians based in Western Ukraine.[46] Consequently, residents of Donbas gradually adopted the Russian narrative of the "alien West" responsible for the collapse of the USSR and the decline of living standards in post-Soviet countries.

Meanwhile, if the new bourgeoisie and corrupt bureaucracy were on the "winning" side, coal miners and industrial workers generally lost out from the transition. In their case, the deficit of goods was replaced by a deficit of money. Their occupations also lost the social prestige they had enjoyed in the USSR.

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the people of Donbas felt deceived – in the 1990s their region transformed from the industrial hub of a superpower into the periphery of a second-class country ravaged by a corrupt elite. Their disappointment,

43 D. R. Marples (2007): *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*. Budapest; J.-P. Himka (2012): Interventions: Challenging the Myths of Twentieth-Century Ukrainian History, in: A. Miller/M. Lipman (eds.), *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*. Budapest, p. 211-238.

44 On the importance of industrial heritage in the identity making see St. Berger (ed., 2019): *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*. New York.

45 A. Osipian (2015): Historical Myths, Enemy Images and Regional Identity in the Donbass Insurgency (Spring 2014), in: *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, 1 (2015): 109-140. A. Osipian (2020): World War II Memory Politics in Russia and Ukraine, and Their Uses During the Conflict in the Donbas (Spring–Summer 2014). In: K. Amacher et al (eds.), *Official History in Eastern Europe*. Osnabrück, p. 267-290.

46 A. Osipian/A. Osipian (2012): Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 26, 3 (2012), p. 616-642.

despair and fears were used by the local elite – the Party of Regions – to represent itself as the only advocate of the Donbas. In various ways the Party of Regions skilfully promoted a framework of local myths and fears, which became internalised by many residents as part of their collective identity. Many locals considered any alternative view as external and imposed from outside because of the mono-party (or one-party) system (regime) reintroduced by the Party of Regions in the Donbas.[47]

The Party's leadership masterly replaced the issues of social injustice with cultural protectionism – endless debates on the official status of Russian language and "memory wars" – representing itself as the only "true defender of Donbas" against "corrupted bureaucrats of Kyiv."

The phobias of deindustrialization and unemployment were cultivated for many years by the ruling elite of the Donbas – mostly owners of the biggest industrial plants and former state-appointed directors in the time of the late USSR. Their main aim in encouraging these phobias was to discourage investments from abroad, and, by doing so, to preserve their economic (and political) domination. The workers and miners who were economically and mentally dependent on their plants and mines saw their owners in quite a paternalistic way – as family providers. "The cognitive lock-in has been frozen into an ideology that regards the region not as a hostage of its own power elite and of the powerlessness of society, but as a victim of global forces that either show an interest in the region or stay away, and are criticised whatever they do."[48]

On the other hand, in the popular mind the phobias of deindustrialization and unemployment were firmly attached by Russian propaganda to the US led globalisation. Thus, when in 2013 president Yanukovych campaigned for signing the Association agreement with the EU, he was finally seen by his disillusioned voters on the wrong side – as a partisan of disastrous globalisation. Their expectations of economic recovery after the global crisis of 2008 collapsed as well. For almost 15 years the Party of Regions dominated the political landscape of the Donbas. When its influence dramatically shrunk in winter-spring 2014, the long-oppressed triggers of populist mobilization came out of shadow.

Thus, the Donbas – in particular, unemployed workers – became the main electoral base of Vitrenko's PSPU. In the parliamentary elections of 2006, the PSPU

47 A. Osipian/A. Osipian (2006): Why Donbass Votes for Yanukovych: Confronting the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, in: *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, (4/2006), p. 495-517.

48 K. Zimmer (2007): Trapped in Past Glory: Self-Identification and Self-Symbolisation in the Donbas. In: A. Swain (ed), *Re-Constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region: The Donbas in Transition*. London, p. 114.

won 6.8 and 5.2 percent of votes in Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively – more than in other regions. One of the PSPU members, Pavel Gubarev, on March 1st 2014 proclaimed himself the *narodnyi gubernator* ("people's governor") of Donetsk and commander of the *Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa* ("People's Militia of Donbas"). Interestingly, from 2000–2004 Gubarev was a member of the Russian far-right organization "Russian National Unity" (*Russkoe natsional'noe yedinstvo*) and later he joined the pseudo-leftist PSPU. In 2006/07, as a representative of the PSPU, Gubarev was a member of the Kuibyshev district council of Donetsk.

Accelerated deindustrialization after 2014

Secessionist insurgency brought the economic chaos along with military actions. The insurgent gangs – many with criminal background – looted banks, car shops, and wealthy families. Most of the big business as well as high-rank and middle-rank officials, many professionals and middle-class fled the Donbas in summer 2014 for Kyiv. Their property was plundered. Self-proclaimed secessionist leaders had no experience of economic management and competed each other in robbing still available assets. In 2015 the Ukrainian currency Hryvnia was replaced with Russian Ruble. Russia supported the insurgents financially – paying salary to the military, officials and others employed in the budget institutions – teachers, medical staff, pension to retired persons, and so on, of much lesser size than in proper Russia. However, the burden of the Donetsk and Luhansk "republics" with at least 2.5 million residents was much heavier than South Ossetia with its 30 thousand population. Payments from Russia to the budgets of secessionist republics were transferred through bank of the "fraternal republic" of South Ossetia which recognized the "independence" of Donetsk and Luhansk. A custom border was established between Russia and the "republics" along with police cordon sanitaire to prevent insurgents from entering proper Russia. It made Russian goods – particularly food – much more expensive in the "republics" than in proper Russia. The living standards in the de facto states declined dramatically which in turn caused mass migration to Russia and, partly, to Ukraine.[49]

In 2017 – due to the internal politic competition in Ukraine – the railways and roads between proper Ukraine and the areas controlled by insurgents had been blocked by Ukrainian volunteers. Direct economic ties got interrupted, and

49 V. Mykhnenko (2020): Causes and Consequences of the War in Eastern Ukraine: An Economic Geography Perspective, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, 3, p. 548-551.

it made the perspectives of reintegration of the insurgent areas with Ukraine even more questionable than before. The same year the insurgents nationalized the property of those businessmen who fled to Kyiv and did not register their assets in the de facto states. On the other hand, registering business simultaneously in Kyiv and in the DPR and LPR means to pay double taxes.

Despite the economic blockade the "republics" continued to export their coal to Ukraine under Russian brand because Ukraine was the only market available for their coal. However, without subsidies from Ukrainian budget most of the coal mines one by one bankrupted and were closed. Without investments – either Ukrainian or Russian – the secessionist economies shrank significantly. In a few years the export of metal taken off the abandoned factories and mines became the most profitable business there. Russian banks and companies did not enter the "republics" in order to avoid the western sanctions. In eight years between 2014 and 2022 the DPR and LPR turned into areas of economic and social disaster following the way of other secessionist statelets backed by Russia – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.[50]

Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 finally terminated the history of Donbas as an old industrial region. The most painful loss for Donbas industries – the huge metal plants of "Azovstal" and Illicha in Mariupol along with coking plant in Avdiivka – the main assets of Renat Akhmetov's business in Donbas – were destroyed to the ground in spring 2022 and by February 2024 respectively. The industrial cities of Lisichansk, Severodonetsk, Kreminna, Rubizhne, Bakhmut, Mariinka, Vuhledar/Ugledar, Toretsk, Pokrovsk, and Myrnohrad were more or less erased.[51] Industrial plants in Kramatorsk, Slovyansk, Kostyantynivka, and Druzhkivka stopped their activities in late February – early March 2022. Most of their management and workers fled either abroad or to the safer parts of Ukraine. Few portable manufacturing businesses were removed to the West Ukraine.

Even the leaders of the secessionists – now governors on Russian service – meanwhile recognize openly that renovation of the heavy industry in Mariupol is

50 ibid., p. 548-551; I. Marandici/A. Leşanu (2021): The Political Economy of the Post-Soviet De Facto States: A Paired Comparison of Transnistria and the Donetsk People's Republic, in: *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, 4, p. 339-351.

51 Города, которых не стало. Что осталось от населенных пунктов на востоке Украины после "освобождения" российской армией [The cities which no longer exist. What happen to the human settlements in Eastern Ukraine after their "liberation" by the Russian army], Настоящее Время [Nastoyashchee Vremya], 7 июня 2023, https://www.currenttime.tv/a/goroda-kotoryh-ne-stalo-chto-ostalos-ot-naselennyh-punktov-na-vostoke-ukrainy/32445615.html [access: 07.01.2026]

impossible.[52] Instead, they are saying optimistically that Mariupol will be turned into the post-industrial transportation hub[53] and sea resort.[54] Mariupol is the only place were active reconstruction of the destroyed residential houses and construction of new housing is going on. Salaries in Mariupol are even higher than in Donetsk – mainly due to the construction workers who came there from the different parts of Russia and Central Asia, and Russian officials mainly serving in Mariupol for 100 days and then going back to their offices in proper Russia.[55] Russian mass-media openly state that Mariupol will be turned into "façade of the new Russia's regions"[56] thus bringing to the mind of readers the image of "Potemkin's village."

According to Russian propaganda, the half-million population of Mariupol which reduced in 2022 to 120 thousand by the end of 2025 reached 300 thousand residents and shall reach one million in 2030. However, this 'optimistic' forecast is rather questionable. The Sea of Azov was never a popular destination as compared to the famous resorts on the Black Sea – Sochi and the Crimea. Beautiful architectural monuments, museums, hiking in the mountains, and Mediterranean climate make the Crimea and Sochi invincible rivals to the Sea of Azov. Pollut-

52 "Станет транспортным хабом": Пушилин рассказал о светлом будущем Мариуполя ["The city will become a transportation hub:" Pushilin told about bright future for Mariupol], Moskovskii Komsomolets, 23.06.2025, https://www.mk.ru/economics/2025/06/23/stanet-transportnym-khabom-pushilin-rasskazal-o-svetlom-budushhem-mariupolya.html [access: 07.01.2026]

53 Анастасия Сутормина (2025:): Пушилин предрек грандиозное будущее Мариуполю: особое значение имеет расположение города. Пушилин: Мариуполь станет крупным транспортным хабом [Pushilin predicted gorgeous future for Mariupol: the city's location is of particular importance. Pushilin: Mariupol will turn into a big transportation hub], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 23.06.2025, https://www.kp.ru/online/news/6435404/ [access: 07.01.2026]

54 Александр Мащенко (2024): Новые курортные регионы России: плюсы и минусы. Уже в этом году на Азовском побережье Новороссии отдохнут полмиллиона человек [New resort regions of Russia: positive and negative. Already this year on the Sea of Azov littoral of Novorossiya half a million people will spend their holidays], *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, 21.07.2024, https://www.pnp.ru/social/novye-kurortnye-regiony-rossii-plyusy-i-minusy.html [access: 07.01.2026]

55 Андрей Киор (2025): Мариуполь 2025: город-призрак или рабочий рай? Шокирующая правда о трудоустройстве [Mariupol 2025: a ghost-town or workers' paradise? Shocking truth on employment], *Ukraina.ru*, 04.06.2025, https://ukraina.ru/20250604/mariupol-2025-gorod-prizrak-ili-rabochiy-ray-shokiruyuschaya-pravda-o-trudoustroystve-1063619859.html [access: 07.01.2026]

56 Александр Мащенко (2024): Мариуполь возрождают всей Россией. В городе построят и восстановят 7,5 миллиона квадратных метров жилья [The whole Russia is working to reconstruct Mariupol. There will be built and renovated 7,5 million square meters of housing], Парламентская газета [Parlamentskaya Gazeta], 25.07.2024, https://www.pnp.ru/politics/mariupol-vozrozhdayut-vsey-rossiey.html [access: 07.01.2026]

ed for decades by its heavy industry Mariupol can't compete even with nearby Berdyansk – traditional destination for those looking for budget summer holidays on the shores of the Sea of Azov. Even in Berdyansk which escaped the military destruction – tourists will find no other attractions beyond the beach – only the arid steppe around. Furthermore, before the war of 2014-2025, resorts on the Sea of Azov were predominantly destination for the residents of Donbas. But the destroyed, deindustrialized, and depopulated Donbas will not provide any significant number of its residents to the beaches of the Azov Sea. Thus, even if the dreams will come true and some risky businesses will build hotels along "Mariupol's riviera" – they will probably stay empty for most of the year.

Another example is the town of Popasna. It was an important railway hub in Donbas prior to the insurgency of 2014. In 2018 the population of the town was estimated as 20,600 residents. After fierce battle in February-May 2022 Popasna was occupied by Russian troops on May 8th 2022. In 2023, the estimated population was 250 residents. On August 9th 2022 the Russia's appointed head of the Luhansk People's Republic Leonid Pasechnik said "There is no sense to reconstruct Popasna. The town is really devastated."[57]

Request for any online news in Russian about other industrial towns occupied by Russia between 2022 and 2025 brings no news. Even no promises about their reconstruction in future. Nothing. We are witnessing the end of industrial history of Donbas.

Conclusion

In the socialist countries the industrial development was strongly attached to the idea of progress, particularly to the space programme in the USSR. In this narrative the industrial workers, engineers, and scientists were represented in the avant-garde of the human progress.

Transition to the market economy in the 1990s led to decline and bankruptcy of many industrial plants, particularly of high-tech industries. In the post-socialist countries, the narratives of progress were replaced with the narratives of oppression and victimhood under the communist regime, then final liberation and establishment of the independent nation-state. In these new narratives the

57 Власти ЛНР склоняются к тому, что не будут восстанавливать Попасную [The LPR authorities will not reconstruct Popasnaya], ТАСС [TASS], 09 августа 2022, https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/15434097 [access: 7.1.2026]

industrial heritage is considered as integral part of oppressive communist regime and, thereby, marginalized.

The political elite in Ukraine, members of the former *nomenklatura*, used their position to illicitly convert state ownership into private property, while abusing electoral democracy as a façade.

The left parties established in the early 1990s, failed to speak on behalf of the wage workers. In the 2000s some of them more or less disappeared from politics (SPU and SDPU) or turned into minor allies of mainstream neo-liberal parties (CPU) – or they got marginalized and instrumentalized by Russian intelligence (PSPU). Why did they fail? All these parties shifted their focus from social issues to a cultural and geopolitical agenda – memory and language status debates, choice between the West and Russia. Why it occurred? Because all these parties lacked permanent cooperation with trade unions. The Soviet-style trade unions were totally dependent on the factory management, and failed to became independent under new conditions. Few independent trade unions of early 1990s were quickly subordinated by oligarchs and started to act in behalf of them.[58] Thus, it reflected the paternalist model when an owner of a factory or mine was perceived by workers as defender of their interests at the face of the "bureaucrats in Kyiv."

As a result of economic decline and ethical tensions political leaders often used populist narratives based on binary opposition between the "corrupt elite" and "common people." This narrative was used to attract voters and discredit political opponents as they were accused of being "corrupt elites." Consequently, fertile ground for populism developed in Ukraine, which is demonstrated by the dominance of catch-all parties that embody both right and left ideological messages appealing to a wide range of social groups.

The vulnerability of the working class staring at the loss of their livelihood and growing precarity was less and less addressed by the left parties and unions. Thus, they seemingly created a political vacuum that provides a playing field for the now powerful right-wing forces to mobilize and fragment labor into its identity categories and become a strong support base for their operation. Consequently, working-class discontent with neoliberal capitalism increasingly became channelled into the support of far-right political forces.

58 Михаил Волынец: «Скоро в Украине некому будет работать» [Mikhail Volynets: "In a few time no one will work in Ukraine"], GMK Center, 6.9.2019, https://gmk.center/interview/mihail-volynec-skoro-v-ukraine-nekomu-budet-rabotat/ [access: 25.1.2026]