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ARTICLE

## The Korsun Incident. Political provocation as a tool of Russian special services

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**Abstract**

Describing the outbreak of the conflict in eastern and southern Ukraine in 2014, the author puts forward a hypothesis that the social protests, which then turned into a severe phase of civil war secretly supported by the Russian Federation, were provoked by the Russian special services. According to the author, the so-called Korsun pogrom, repeal of the so-called language act and the threat of forceful pacification of the east by one of the leaders of the Right Sector were the logical links of a political provocation aimed at maximum social polarisation along political and linguistic lines. The social upheaval was then reinforced by the structures led by the Russian special services, which brought about losing Crimea and part of Donbas by Ukraine.

**Keywords**

Ukrainian-Russian conflict, separatism, provocation, FSB, Donbas, annexation of Crimea

*When we saw the outbreak of the most extreme nationalism, it became clear that very difficult times could come for the people of Crimea. And it was only then, I want to emphasise, that the conviction arose that in this situation people cannot simply be left in the lurch.*

Vladimir Putin<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Provocation<sup>2</sup> is included in the semantic field of pernicious lying, defined by St Thomas as *mendacium perniciosum*<sup>3</sup>, and defined by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz as the deliberate emission of false signals intended to benefit the sender and harm the recipient<sup>4</sup>. The provocateur – by means of false signals – induces the provoked subject to behave in a certain way, which is desirable for the provocateur and harmful for the provoked subject. The concept of provocation is historically associated with police methods (the term *agent provocateur* was in use from the 18th century onwards<sup>5</sup>).

In relation to political phenomena, Professor Marek Ziółkowski defined provocation as follows: (...) *in political life, it consists in orchestrating such a situation whereby, while remaining hidden ourselves, we lead our adversary to actions that compromise him in the eyes of public opinion, thus lowering his prestige and, consequently, his influence*<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Крым Путь на Родину Документальный фильм Андрея Кондрашова (Krym Put' na Rodinu Dokumental'nyyfilm Andreya Kondrashova)*, A. Kandrashov interview with V. Putin conducted in 2015, YouTube, 4 X 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGGNXIQXlcU> [accessed: 2 III 2023].

<sup>2</sup> 'Provocation (...) an action judged negatively, intended to provoke an expected reaction in someone, often fatal to them in its consequences'. See: *Słownik języka polskiego* (Eng. Dictionary of the Polish language), Warszawa 2005, p. 765. 'Provocation: 1. a deceitful act intended to induce someone to behave in a certain way, usually fatal to that person and those associated with him or her. 2. the underhanded activities of secret agents in some organisation'. See: *Słownik wyrazów obcych* (Eng. Dictionary of foreign words), Warszawa 1997, p. 913.

<sup>3</sup> See in more detail: Thomas Aquinas, *Suma teologiczna. Cnoty społeczne. Pokrewne sprawiedliwości* (Eng. Summa theologiae. Social virtues. The justice related), vol. 20, <https://www.katedra.uksw.edu.pl/suma/suma20.htm> [accessed: 2 III 2023].

<sup>4</sup> K. Lorenz, *Regres człowieczeństwa* (Eng. The Waning of Humaneness), Warszawa 1986, pp. 185–186.

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Andersen, *Agent Provocateur. Et etisk og juridisk problem*, Aarhus 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from: P. Gajdziński, *Prowokacja. Dyktatorzy, politycy, agenci* (Eng. Provocation. Dictators, politicians, agents), Warszawa 2002, p. 22.

The above definitions tend to refer to the actions of individual politicians or criminals<sup>7</sup>. There is, however, a specific category of provocation that is sometimes used on the international political scene to justify specific actions taken by the provoking state against the provoked state. The aim of such provocation may be to provoke a political conflict of varying magnitude, from the mass expulsion of diplomats or the imposition of economic sanctions, to the creation of situations to justify military action<sup>8</sup>.

Examples of such provocations in areas of strategic decisions were the Gliwice provocation and the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The Gliwice provocation occurred at 8 p.m. on 31 August 1939, when a commando led by SS-Sturmbannführer Alfred Naujocks seized a German radio station in Gliwice, located about 10 km from the then border with the Republic of Poland. The attackers, who pretended to be Silesian insurgents, were in civilian clothes. After overpowering the station staff, their task was to broadcast a call for an uprising of the Silesian population in the areas belonging to the Reich<sup>9</sup>. This was to be accompanied by alleged attacks by Polish soldiers on German border posts. To this end, battlefields were staged using the bodies of German criminals, who were killed by injections, then dressed in WP uniforms and shot at<sup>10</sup>. This provocation was intended to serve as a political justification for an attack on Poland. The German authorities hoped that the portrayal of Poland as the aggressor would prevent England and France from helping it, thus localising the conflict and eliminating the risk of a two-front war. For this reason, in spite of the only partial success of the operation (due to technical problems, the call to arms was not able to be broadcast), it was used in an extensive propaganda campaign. As early as 11 p.m., German radio reported border incidents. On 1 September, the newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* carried an article accusing Poland of starting the war. The information was repeated in local newspapers.

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<sup>7</sup> That is, people against whom provocation is the most effective tool, as it is relatively easy to tailor provocation to the publicly proclaimed values of the politician in question.

<sup>8</sup> The Hague Conventions (since 1899) introduced the principle of diplomatic arbitration instead of war and the requirement to justify war or ultimatums. In other words, it was already recognised in Europe before World War I that war had to be the final solution and not merely one of the instruments of policy. The Treaties of Versailles (1919), Locarno (1925) and Briand-Kellogg (1928) spoke in the same vein. See in more detail: P. Robinson, *Just War in Comparative Perspective*, London 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See Naujocks' post-war testimony, in: W. Hofer, *Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, Frankfurt 1967, p. 327f. See in more detail: F. Altenhöner, *Człowiek, który rozpętał II wojnę światową: Alfred Naujocks – falszercz, morderca, terrorysta* (Eng. The man who unleashed World War II: Alfred Naujocks – forger, murderer, terrorist), Poznań 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The attackers left the body of the murdered former Silesian insurgent Franciszek Honiok at the Gliwice radio station. See: E. Fuhr, *Schlesien bleibt munter*, Welt, 16 IX 2005, <https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article165170/Schlesien-bleibt-munter.html> [accessed: 1 III 2023].

On the same day, during a speech in the Reichstag, Adolf Hitler announced that there had been dozens of attacks on German posts in recent days, including 14 on the night of 31 August – 1 September, which was forcing Germany to respond militarily<sup>11</sup>. The provocation proved ineffective, as the Allies formally declared war on 3 September, but at the same time pursued the long-term war strategy adopted in May 1939, which did not provide for direct military aid to Poland<sup>12</sup>.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident in turn served to justify US involvement in the Vietnam War. The US administration considered it strategically necessary as a North Vietnamese victory could have triggered – according to the domino theory – a communist offensive in the entire region<sup>13</sup>. On 2 August 1964, the USS Maddox was involved in an exchange of fire with three North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attempting to attack it in international waters. Two days later, the navy fired on further floating objects detected by radar. Although the Maddox was in fact in Vietnamese territorial waters (carrying out a spy mission in the process), the Vietnamese boats did not fire torpedoes, and on 4 August the US Navy fired on whales<sup>14</sup>, the incident served as justification for full-scale US intervention in Indochina<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘These incidents were repeated tonight. After one day there were 21 border incidents in one night, tonight there were 14, including three very serious ones. (...) Tonight was the first time that Poland fired on its own territory. Since 5:45 we have been responding with fire. And from now on, bombs will be rewarded with bombs.’ Quoted from: A. Hitler, *Erklärung der Reichsregierung vor dem Deutschen Reichstag*, 1. September 1939, [https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument\\_de&dokument=0209\\_pol&object=translation&st=&l=de](https://www.1000dokumente.de/index.html?c=dokument_de&dokument=0209_pol&object=translation&st=&l=de) [accessed: 2 III 2023].

<sup>12</sup> In May 1939, during talks between the General Staffs of France and Britain, it was decided that no direct military aid would be given to Poland, its ultimate fate depending instead on the outcome of a prolonged war to ‘starve’ Germany, as had been the case during the World War I. ‘(...) the fate of Poland would depend on the final outcome of the war, and this in turn would depend on our ability to bring about the final defeat of Germany, not on our ability to relieve the pressure exerted on Poland at the outset.’ Quoted from: J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy. Volume II. September 1939 – June 1941*, London 1957, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The Domino Theory*, GlobalSecurity.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/vietnam2-domino-theory.htm> [accessed: 3 III 2023]; J.L.S. Girling, *Vietnam and the domino theory*, “Australian Outlook” 1967, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357716708444262>.

<sup>14</sup> At least that is what President Lyndon B. Johnson claimed. See: A. Glass, *Congress approves Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: Aug. 7, 1964*, Politico, 8 VII 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/congress-approves-gulf-of-tonkin-resolution-aug-7-1964-226732> [accessed: 2 III 2023].

<sup>15</sup> See in more detail: R.J. Hanyok, *Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish. The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2–4 August 1964*, Naval History and Heritage Command, 2 XI 2017, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/skunks-bogies-silent-hounds-flying-fish.html> [accessed: 2 III 2023]; S. Shane, *Vietnam War Intelligence “Deliberately Skewed”*, *Secret Study Says*, “New York Times”, 2 XII 2005; H. Zinn, *Ludowa historia Stanów Zjednoczonych. Od roku 1492 do dziś* (Eng. A People’s History of the United States. From 1492 to the present), Warszawa 2016; J. Prados, *The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 40 Years Later. Flawed Intelligence and*

Provocations were intended to justify aggressive actions both before world public opinion and one's own society, which needed to be mentally prepared for war. The alleged aggression on the part of the state that was the victim of the provocation was de facto an action to justify the aggressor, who, according to the narrative led by the provocateur, was acting in self-defence<sup>16</sup>. The right to self-defence and the concept of just war have been rooted in Judeo-Christian Western culture since ancient times<sup>17</sup>, and are based on elementary principals of human nature<sup>18</sup>. Consequently, the staging of events that allow recourse to the right of self-defence makes it possible to construct a narrative according to which war - in fact an aggression - is merely a legitimate defensive action.

The Russian Federation (RF) also used a series of political provocations, including referring to the outlined pattern, when in 2014 it launched the first phase of its confrontation with the West and hybrid war in Ukraine.

## Revolution of dignity as a strategic challenge for the Russian Federation

For the Russian Federation, the departure of President Viktor Yanukovich from Ukraine<sup>19</sup> and the seizure of power by opposition parties<sup>20</sup> calling for accession

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*the Decision for War in Vietnam*, The National Security Archive, 4 VIII 2004, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/index.htm> [accessed: 19 II 2023].

<sup>16</sup> The Germans used an identical scheme during the Bloody Sunday of Bydgoszcz of 3-4 September 1939, when a fight against German saboteurs turned into a mass anti-German riot involving the civilian population. German propaganda used these events to justify the brutal repression of the Poles, as well as to make them despised in the eyes of the West. Reports of these events appeared in the press and cinema, and the German propagandists also commissioned the writer Edwin Dwinger to write a book on the subject. The publication, lavishly illustrated with awe-inspiring photographs, was published in Berlin in 1940. See the same: *Der Tod in Polen. Die volksdeutsche Passion*, Jena 1940.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. W.J. Ziółkowski, *Wojna sprawiedliwa u św. Tomasza z Akwinu* (Eng. Just war in St Thomas Aquinas), "Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk" 2011, no. 1, pp. 22-27.

<sup>18</sup> See in more detail: L. Strauss, *Prawo naturalne w świetle historii* (Eng. Natural right and history), Warszawa 1969. Even the most pacifist religious-social systems, such as Christianity and Buddhism, accept the individual's right to self-defence, including the non-criminalisation of the murder of an attacker.

<sup>19</sup> According to Putin, Yanukovich on 22 II 2014 (i.e. four days after the situation in Maidan Nezalezhnosti escalated due to sniper attacks) asked him for an urgent meeting. Although Yanukovich was supposed to be in Kharkiv at the time, he did not cross the close border with Russia at the level of Belgorod, but started moving towards Crimea. However, according to information from Russian special services, an ambush was to be prepared for him on the way. For this reason, a Russian helicopter was to evacuate Yanukovich to Crimea and, when the situation was completely out of control, to Moscow. From: *Крым Путь на Родину...*

<sup>20</sup> They were supported by oligarchs in conflict with Yanukovich and his entourage, who financed Maydan and provided media support, and by Western states, mainly the US.

to the European Union and the continuation of rapprochement with the West meant, firstly, the loss of its previous influence in Kyiv (mainly by the Party of Regions (Ukrainian *Партія регіонів*, Russian *Партия регионов*) and Ukrainian communists, hostile to nationalist and pro-Western groups), and secondly, a significant worsening of the military situation as a result of the reduction of the Russian buffer zone with NATO<sup>21</sup>.

Yanukovich, who for Ukrainians became a symbol of corruption and state decay, and who was regarded by Russians and pro-Russian forces as a cowardly and indecisive man<sup>22</sup>, lost the opportunity to return to prominent political positions and was no longer useful from the Kremlin's point of view. In the absence of any possibility to influence the political reality of Ukraine after the victory of the Maidan parties, the Russians – perceiving policy towards their neighbours in the spirit of imperialism – could only reduce the scale of geopolitical losses. This was achieved through the large concentrations of Russian-speaking population in the east and south-east of Ukraine<sup>23</sup> and their loss of political representation due to actions interpreted by Russia and pro-Yanukovich forces as a forcible seizure of power<sup>24</sup>.

From the point of view of Russian tacticians in 2014, the only option for the Russian Federation to act was to detach parts of strategically important territories from Ukraine<sup>25</sup>. In this way, the buffer zone of the Russian Federation and its own economic and human resources could have been increased, while at the same time depriving Ukraine of a large part of its heavy industry and tourism, which would have significantly weakened the economy there in the long term.

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<sup>21</sup> Ukraine's policy shift towards NATO - from Russia's point of view - meant a potential military threat to the south-western flank of the Russian Federation.

<sup>22</sup> Some political commentators in Ukraine believe that his deep religiosity is behind Yanukovich's inability to take violent but effective action. As an example, they cite his failure to allow the use of 40,000 Donbas miners to suppress the protests associated with the 2004 Orange Revolution. Cf. *Виктор Янукович. Удар властью (Viktor Yanukovich. Udar vlast'yu)*, YouTube, 7 VII 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyMSuxjpEhE> [accessed: 4 III 2023].

<sup>23</sup> There is a de facto ethnic Russian population in the Donbas, as a result of the USSR-era policy of settling former prisoners sent to work in the mines in the area.

<sup>24</sup> For Russia and the people of the eastern Ukrainian territories supporting Yanukovich, the Revolution of Dignity was a forcible seizure of power.

<sup>25</sup> That is, Crimea, through which the Russian Federation dominates the Black Sea region and Donbas, which contains most of its mineral resources, including strategically important deposits of lithium, manganite, titanium, gallium, germanium and iron. From: P. Woźniak, *Zasoby Ukrainy w rękach Rosjan* (Eng. Ukraine's resources in Russian hands), "Gazeta Polska Codziennie", 20 II 2023. Heavy industry and aviation were concentrated in Donbas. Ukraine without Crimea and Donbas (and the areas occupied by the Russian army after February 2022) would be an agricultural country, almost completely de-industrialised.

At the same time, there was the possibility of using the Russian-speaking population as a force for the break-up of the state.

The strong polarisation of Ukrainian society, underpinned by ethnic differences, resulted in high levels of aggression on both sides. This allowed the Russian Federation to attempt to break up Ukraine and present this as a centrifugal process.

The course of events in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 proves that the Russians had numerous agent networks in those areas. And both infiltrating the Ukrainian administration (presumably under the control of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation) and creating underground paramilitary structures, controlled by the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (Главное управление Генерального штаба Вооружённых Сил Российской Федерации, GU)<sup>26</sup>. However, in order to effectively use them as a so-called trigger for covert Russian intervention, it was necessary to justify it in the eyes of Western public opinion, so that the internationalisation of the conflict and the inclusion of sanctions could be avoided<sup>27</sup>. It was also necessary to activate the Russian-speaking population sufficiently to provoke riots that could become a maskirovka for the covert actions of diversionary and reconnaissance groups and, later, the intervention of the Russian armed forces.

### Provocations as a cover-up for covert intervention by the Russian Federation

One way to build a narrative politically favourable to the aggressor state is to present its own aggression as a response to that of the victim state. For Russian strategists, this was a relatively easy task in the context of the ongoing strong conflict between Western and Eastern Ukraine, which had begun to escalate since 18 February 2014 (i.e. since the killing of the first people on Kyiv's Maidan), reaching at times the level of ethnic hatred.

One of the actions designed to portray the separatists' actions as self-defence against "aggressive West Ukrainian chauvinism" was the Korsun incident of 20 February 2014.

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<sup>26</sup> See in more detail: M. Świerczek, *2014 takevoer of the SBU headquarters in Lugansk as an example of the operation of the Russian special services*, "Internal Security Review" 2023, no. 28, pp. 280–314. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.23.002.17662>.

<sup>27</sup> There is currently a lack of information as to what contributed to the Russian transition to full-scale war in February 2022, without masking Russian military participation. This contradicted the narrative pushed since 2014 that the war in the east was an intra-Ukrainian conflict.



## Course of events

Protests in Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti were accompanied by rallies of pro-Yanukovich and pro-Russian groups<sup>28</sup>. The highest intensity of such actions was recorded in Kyiv and in eastern and south-eastern Ukraine. Characteristic features of the pro-Yanukovich movement, apart from the political option, were the Russian-speaking nature of the participants and references to Soviet traditions (for example, through the wearing of a St George's ribbon commemorating the victory of the USSR over the Third Reich). Both of these factors contributed to the conflict between the participants and the supporters of the so-called Euromaidan, who – in addition to representing a pro-Western orientation – referred to the traditions of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (Організація українських націоналістів, OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Українська повстанська армія, UPA), as well as to Ukrainianness understood as belonging to Western Ukrainian culture (resulting from several centuries of influence of Latin civilisation on the Ruthenian population<sup>29</sup>).

Despite accusations from the Ukrainian media that the 'Anti-Maidan protesters' were exclusively people paid by Russia or Yanukovich's entourage, the published photo-reports show that they were a heterogeneous group by gender, class and occupation<sup>30</sup>. Even if it is acknowledged that the so-called titushkas (Ukrainian тітушки, titushky), i.e. paid by the Yanukovich government to the lowest strata of society, used to forcibly break up pro-European gatherings, were an element of the Anti-Maidan, the footage available on the web clearly shows that a variety of Russian-speaking communities and those referring to the historical-cultural Orthodox-Soviet identity took part. This can be concluded from the symbolism used, the language and the slogans chanted.

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<sup>28</sup> More on this phenomenon: В.Г. Николаев, *Перестройка идентичностей и новые маргинализации в условиях затяжного политического кризиса (на примере событий 2013-2014 гг. в Украине)*, "Вопросы социальной теории" 2015 (V.G. Nikolayev, *Perestrojka identichnostey i novyye marginalizatsii v usloviyakh zatyazhnogo politicheskogo krizisa (na primere sobytyy 2013-2014 gg. v Ukraine)*, "Woprosy sotsyalnoj teorii" 2015), vol. 7, no. 1–2, pp. 240–252.

<sup>29</sup> The linguistic and cultural differences in Ukraine are the result of the so-called Pereiaslav settlement concluded on 18 I 1654 between Bohdan Khmelnytskyi and the Russian Tsar's plenipotentiary Vasył Buturlin, which brought Ukraine under the authority of the Russian Tsar. This led to a war with Poland, the suppression of the Polonisation of the boyars and Cossacks, and the Russification of the population of eastern Ukraine.

<sup>30</sup> *Антимайдан в Києве: як это было. ФОТОрепортаж, Цензор.НЕТ (Antymaydan v Kyjeve: kak eto bylo. FOTOREPORTAZH, Sensor.NET)*, 23 XII 2016, <https://censor.net/ru/p420434> [accessed: 4 III 2023].



One of the larger protests that took place as part of the Anti-Maidan was organised in Kyiv's Mariinsky Park, where - in a tent city that had been set up - there were supporters of Yanukovich from Kyiv as well as from eastern and south-eastern Ukraine, including several hundred people from Crimea<sup>31</sup>. As Kyiv's Anti-Maidan was separated from Maidan Nezalezhnosti by only a few streets, clashes between the two camps occurred regularly. After the situation in the Maidan was aggravated by the shelling of demonstrators and security forces by still undetermined perpetrators and a massive attack on the Anti-Maidan by militants of the Maidan Self-Defence Party<sup>32</sup>, the Crimean branch of the Party of Regions decided to evacuate the demonstrators.

Anti-Maidan supporters left Kyiv on 20 February 2014 in eight tour buses carrying 100 Berkut officers and internal army soldiers as well as 300 (or according to other sources - 500<sup>33</sup>) Anti-Maidan activists<sup>34</sup>. In Bila Tserkva, the buses encountered a blockade organised by Euromaidan supporters. In order to bypass it, the column headed through Mironovo to Korsun-Shevchenkivskiy, where an ambush was waiting for them. According to unverified information from the participants of the incidents, among the Euromaidan supporters there were 200 members of the Maidan Self-Defence and many residents of Korsun (a number of narratives mention a figure of 2,000, although it is not known who or how this was to be established) who joined them (although there is no certain information to establish whether these people gathered spontaneously<sup>35</sup>). The road was blocked off with fallen trees and burning tyres. Korsun inhabitants, who were waiting for the Crimean residents, were informed (although there is no indication of who would be doing this) that they would be stopping buses with titushkas and Berkut officers<sup>36</sup>, so they had batons, long wooden beams, workers' helmets, knives, firecrackers, pepper spray, as well as hunting weapons and probably pistols and Kalashnikovs<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром» (*Dokumental'nyy fil'm «Korsun'skiy pogrom»*), YouTube, 30 VII 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FfPTBQ4l38> [accessed: 4 III 2023].

<sup>32</sup> There are conflicting versions as to whether the attack was carried out by the 12th or 14th Sotnia of the Maidan Self-Defence. Cf. *После этого Путин захватил Крым. Крым. Реалии ТВ (Posle etogo Putin zakhvatil Krym. Krym. Realii TV)*, YouTube, 17 II 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sjwCsALWh8> [accessed: 6 III 2023].

<sup>33</sup> Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...

<sup>34</sup> *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>35</sup> This point will be developed later in the article.

<sup>36</sup> *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>37</sup> *Корсунский погром Крымчане Свидетели рассказывают 20.02.14 Обыкновенный Фашизм (Korsun'skiy pogrom Krymchane Svideteli rasskazyvayut 20.02.14 Obyknovenyy Fashizm)*, YouTube,

This part of the narrative is more or less – ignoring the inaccuracies resulting from the multiplicity of narratives and the lack of officially established facts – common to both sides. The subsequent course of the incidents is presented quite differently by the witnesses, depending on their political and ethnic affiliation.

## Ukrainian version

After the buses were stopped, the plan was to inspect the people riding in them and document the found weapons. It was then supposed to turn out that the first two buses contained internal army soldiers and Berkut officers. The Berkut men were forced to ask on their knees for forgiveness from the Korsun women present for the crimes committed in Maidan<sup>38</sup>. They were then stripped of their ammunition and weapons and allowed to leave<sup>39</sup>.

This is all the more surprising as it was the Berkut men who were accused of shooting at demonstrators in Kyiv, and those who were drawn from the Russian (and not just the Russian-speaking<sup>40</sup>) part of Ukraine. The Crimean Berkut was accused on a par with the Berkut men from eastern Ukraine of murdering dozens of protesters in Maidan Nezalezhnosti<sup>41</sup>. In contrast, titushkas and soldiers were never accused of shooting protesters. It is worth remembering that on 18 February 2014 alone, a number of demonstrators were allegedly killed in the Maidan area controlled by the Crimean Berkut<sup>42</sup>.

According to crowd psychology<sup>43</sup>, it would be possible to explain the passing of the Berkut men if they were armed and ready to fight. It would then be possible

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26 II 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2TGeF-xbTc&list=PLeuqEfNtM8zleTjJ-n8DXE-2Uz9OHm2Ty> [accessed: 23 II 2023].

<sup>38</sup> From the footage of the incident available on YouTube, it appears that there were no women among the attackers. There is also no documented scene showing Berkut men kneeling in front of women.

<sup>39</sup> This narrative does not explain why the trained and organised Berkut officers allowed the unlawful detention, gave up their weapons and drove on without a word of objection. Moreover, none of the officers appeared later as witnesses in the propaganda films shot by both the Russian and Ukrainian sides.

<sup>40</sup> In Crimea, the majority were ethnic Russians, whose language differs from Russian-speaking eastern and south-eastern Ukraine in, among other things, the pronunciation of the 'g' vowel (which sounds like an 'h' among Russian-speaking Ukrainians).

<sup>41</sup> See: *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> One of the factors contributing to rioting is the occurrence of a fight-or-flight syndrome response in people. This is a reaction of the sympathetic nervous system to a threatening situation to prepare the body for fight or flight. In the first moments after a stressor, it stimulates the adrenal glands to se-

that the crowd – fearful of confronting a dangerous opponent – would have retreated, venting their frustration on the unarmed titushkas. However, a recurrent theme in the Ukrainian witness accounts discussed here is that the Berkut men had equipment and weapons in their luggage compartments and that they were released after asking the women for forgiveness. Why, then, were people allowed to go who, according to members of the Maidan Self-Defence, had blood on their hands, and at the same time titushkas, among whom were women, were beaten<sup>44</sup>?

This part of the Ukrainian narrative<sup>45</sup> also contradicts the version adopted by the Ukrainian side, according to which the buses were blocked by immobilising and burning two vehicles at the front of the column, which were supposed to be carrying soldiers and Berkut men<sup>46</sup>. These buses must therefore have – together with a pre-prepared barrage of tyres and fallen trees – effectively blocked the way for the other vehicles.

The Ukrainian narrative maintains that members of the Maidan Self-Defence approached the titushka buses to inspect them, where they were attacked from with firecrackers<sup>47</sup>. After boarding the buses, in one of them they found ‘taken prisoner’ members of the Maidan Self-Defence (from the checkpoint in Mironovo, which had been passed earlier by the column), who were said to have signs of beatings and knife wounds<sup>48</sup>. In the luggage compartments, they found weapons (knives, pipes and batons with traces of blood) and shields of the Maidan Self-Defence sotnia smashed by Anti-Maidanists, which had been taken to Crimea as a trophy<sup>49</sup>.

This was to provoke the fury of the crowd, who began to get the titushkas out of their vehicles, beating them and throwing them to the side of the road. There were no fatalities and no one was seriously injured. The titushkas were ordered

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crete adrenaline and noradrenaline. This phenomenon was already described in the 1930s in the work of Walter B. Cannon’s work entitled *The Wisdom of the Body* (London 1932).

<sup>44</sup> These women took part later in Russian propaganda. They told of killing Crimeans with firearms. However, at least one of them, Oksana Mediyeva, changed versions: while in a Ukrainian hospital after the attack in Korsun, she claimed that no one had been killed, and later – in interviews with Russian journalists – talked about the murder of detainees. Cf. *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>45</sup> The Ukrainian narrative is adopted in the Ukrainian media, while being a clear response to Russian propaganda.

<sup>46</sup> *Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...*

<sup>47</sup> *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. However, no one in Mironovo confirmed the ‘taking of prisoners’ by the Crimeans, while one of the residents of Mironovo, allegedly wounded by them with a knife, refused to report to the police.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

to clean the glass from the road (from the broken windows of the buses<sup>50</sup>) and shout: *glory to Ukraine!*<sup>51</sup> They were then placed in undamaged buses and allowed to leave. The others, for whom there was not enough room and who were taken from the surrounding fields<sup>52</sup>, were fed (they were later to write letters of thanks for the refreshment<sup>53</sup>) and taken to the train station. With the money of the activists of the Maidan Self-Defence, they were bought tickets and were only told to sing the Ukrainian anthem as a farewell. A video allegedly illustrating the event shows young people singing with their hand over their hearts and looking into the camera<sup>54</sup>. On the destroyed vehicles, Ukrainian activists wrote in black paint: *мы титущки и нас наказали* (Eng. we are titushkas and they punished us<sup>55</sup>). It is not clear why the Ukrainians who attacked the Russian-speaking demonstrators made the inscription in Russian and not in Ukrainian (the Ukrainian version would read: *ми титущки і нас покарали*).

In support of its version, the Ukrainian side cites, inter alia, a letter from the Ukrainian police from Cherkasy dated 9 September 2017, which reported that there were no dead or missing during the incidents in Korsun on 20 February 2014, and that the only investigation by the authorities concerned destruction of property and involvement in mass riots<sup>56</sup>.

## Russian version

The Russian version differs from that given by the Ukrainian side. According to Russian propagandists quoting witness statements, the demonstrators from Mariinskyi Park were withdrawn from Kyiv by the Crimean Party of Regions almost immediately after the attack by the armed Maidan Self-Defence. The Ukrainian version says that the demonstrators bypassed the blockade in Bila Tserkva, while the Russian version says that the column was led out of Bila Tserkva and led

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<sup>50</sup> *Корсунская трагедия Убивали только за то, что они из Крыма 2014 весна (Korsun'skaya tragediya Ubivali tol'ko za to, chto oni iz Kryma 2014 vesna)*, YouTube, 27 V 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqUcM5YBWFw> [accessed: 23 II 2023].

<sup>51</sup> *Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...*

<sup>52</sup> According to later interviews, some of the beaten Crimeans managed to escape from the stopped buses.

<sup>53</sup> *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

into an ambush by a GAI road militia patrol<sup>57</sup>. It is emphasised that the ambush was organised<sup>58</sup> and the column of buses was followed by Ukrainian activists all the time<sup>59</sup>. At the same time, there is no information about the soldiers and Berkut soldiers who were supposed to accompany the Anti-Maidanists. The column was supposed to have been stopped after the driver of the first vehicle was shot with a hunting rifle. The buses were surrounded, pelted with glue and stones. In addition, their windows were smashed with rods<sup>60</sup>. Each passenger was beaten 'in lines' as soon as they exited<sup>61</sup>. They were to be mistreated for almost eight hours<sup>62</sup>. During this time, they were looted<sup>63</sup>, tortured<sup>64</sup>, forced to eat broken glass<sup>65</sup> and to kneel on the roadway full of glass shards and move in a crouched position, and lay one on top of the other<sup>66</sup>. In addition to batons, rods, armour and knives, the attackers

<sup>57</sup> The available videos (discussed in the text) do indeed show the GAI car at the head of the stopped column.

<sup>58</sup> Between 1,500 and 2,000 members of Right Sector, Udar (Український демократичний альянс за реформи, Eng. Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform) and UPA (this is what Russian propaganda calls national-socialist groups that refer to the Banderist tradition) were expected to wait for the buses, see: Э.А. Попов, *Украинский нацизм в наши дни: источники происхождения и идейно-политическая типология*, Министр иностранных дел Российской Федерации (Е.А. Попов, *Ukrainskiy natsizm v nashi dni: istochniki proiskhozhdeniya i ideyno-politicheskaya tipologiya*, Minister inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii), 11 XII 2023, [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/istoricheskie\\_materialy/1920326/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/istoricheskie_materialy/1920326/) [accessed: 12 XI 2024]). From: *Корсунський погром Крымчане Свідетелі розповідають 20.02.14 (Korsun'skiy pogrom Krymchane Svideteli rasskazyvayut 20.02.14)*, YouTube, 26 II 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_uzMAxXtsMc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uzMAxXtsMc) [accessed: 23 II 2023].

<sup>59</sup> *Документальний фільм «Корсунський погром»...*

<sup>60</sup> *Корсунський погром Крымчане Свідетелі розповідають 20.02.14 Обыкновенный Фашизм...*

<sup>61</sup> *Документальний фільм «Корсунський погром»...*

<sup>62</sup> "Корсунський погром": зверства сторонників майдана ("Korsun'skiy pogrom": zverstva storonnikov maydana), YouTube, 21 VI 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlf\\_AdGbfjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlf_AdGbfjE) [accessed: 22 II 2023]; *Документальний фільм «Корсунський погром»...*

<sup>63</sup> *Корсунський погром Крымчане Свідетелі розповідають 20.02.14...* This information was indirectly confirmed by the Ukrainian side, which maintained that they had to buy some of the Crimeans train tickets with the activists' money. This indicates that those escorted to the train station did not have any money on them, which is unlikely, as they were leaving Crimea with the knowledge that they would be spending an extended period of time in Kyiv. Videos shot with phones show the detained Crimeans kneeling on the roadway and emptying their pockets. Cf. *Корсунський погром Крымчане Свідетелі розповідають 20.02.14 Обыкновенный Фашизм...*

<sup>64</sup> *Корсунська трагедія...*

<sup>65</sup> *Документальний фільм «Корсунський погром»...* The Ukrainian version only mentions an order to clean the glass with bare hands. From: *После этого Путин захватил Крым...*

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Корсунський погром Крымчане Свідетелі розповідають 20.02.14 Обыкновенный Фашизм...*

were said to have used firearms. Gunshots can be heard on the available footage<sup>67</sup>, but Ukrainian witnesses claim that shots were fired at the engines of the buses to immobilise them<sup>68</sup>. Guns were allegedly put to people's heads, they were threatened with castration and execution and burned alive with petrol<sup>69</sup>. Seven or eight Crimeans were allegedly killed during the incidents, while dozens of people were reported missing. All bus passengers were said to have suffered wounds, including gunshot wounds<sup>70</sup>. According to witnesses quoted by Russian media, the bodies of those shot were supposed to have been either buried in a mass grave<sup>71</sup>, or thrown into a rubbish container and taken away in an unknown direction<sup>72</sup>. There were said to be 20-30 people missing, with Russian propaganda films clearly suggesting that these people were murdered during the pursuit of fleeing Anti-Maidan participants<sup>73</sup>.

The pogrom – as a Russian side called these incidents – was first publicised by ad hoc Комитет по Вопросам Прав Людей Пострадавших от Проведения Незаконной Акции Майдана (Eng. Committee for the Safeguarding of the Rights of Victims of Unlawful Actions in Maidan). Subsequently, the Следственный Комитет (Eng. Investigative Committee) launched an investigation<sup>74</sup>, which became the main topic in the Russian media. In Russia, the case was used for propaganda, including the production of three films depicting the events in Korsun – two documentaries: *Корсунский погром* (Eng. Korsun pogrom) from May 2014 and *Крым. Путь на Родину* (Eng. Crimea. The way to the homeland) from March 2015, as well as the feature-length melodrama *Крым* (Eng. Crimea), which hit cinemas in 2017. In all these productions and in many film and press materials in the Russian information space, the cruelty of the Ukrainian activists attacking the buses and their alleged links to neo-Nazism were highlighted<sup>75</sup>. This message was consistent

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> *После этого Путин захватил Крым...* In the footage available online, shots can be heard, although the entire column is already immobilised.

<sup>69</sup> *Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...* One witness (Andrei Verhovskiy) claimed that the attackers had boasted that they had burned 15 Crimeans in one of the buses. From: *Корсунский погром Крымчане Свидетели рассказывают 20.02.14...*

<sup>70</sup> *Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...*; *Корсунский погром Крымчане Свидетели рассказывают 20.02.14...*

<sup>71</sup> *Документальный фильм «Корсунский погром»...*

<sup>72</sup> *Корсунский погром Крымчане Свидетели рассказывают 20.02.14...*; *Корсунская трагедия...*

<sup>73</sup> *Крым Путь на Родину...*

<sup>74</sup> „Корсунский погром”: зверства сторонников майдана...

<sup>75</sup> In the film *Crimea*, made on the initiative of Sergei Shoigu and financed by the Russian Ministry of Defence, Ukrainian fascists shoot bus drivers with a submachine gun and then torture and murder Crimeans with knives, asking the rhetorical question ‘Why, don’t you like Bandera?’. This is ac-

with the narrative spread by Putin that Russia had to intervene in Ukraine to protect the Russian-speaking population from ethnic cleansing prepared by Ukrainian nationalists<sup>76</sup>.

One of the two leitmotifs of the propaganda campaign was Putin's statement about the seizure of Crimea only as a result of the Korsun pogrom, which showed the scale of the threat to the Russian population in what he believed was a fascist-facing Ukraine: *When we saw the outbreak of the most extreme nationalism, it became clear that very difficult times could come for the people of Crimea. And it was only then, I want to emphasise, that the conviction arose that in this situation you cannot just leave people in trouble*<sup>77</sup>. The second was an excerpt from an interview with one of the victims of the pogrom, Mikhail Gunka (who, among other things, claimed that the attackers made him eat broken glass): *They were simply torturing. They saw our blood, they saw our pain. And they stood around and laughed, and it gave them pleasure. What else can we talk about? After this tragedy, we simply realised that we could not stay in Ukraine*<sup>78</sup>.

According to the Russian narrative, Ukrainian nationalism – referring to the tradition of Western Ukrainian historical myths – meant risking the physical destruction of the non-Ukrainian population, especially the Russian and Russian-speaking population. Later, this propaganda line was steadily expanded using images from the Donbas war. It was portrayed as a crime against humanity unfolding before the eyes of a world trying to overlook the Ukrainians' use of artillery, tanks and aircraft against their own population originally demanding only autonomy within a federal state<sup>79</sup>. Perhaps the most perfect manifestation, in terms of the emotional manipulation, of this propaganda line are the songs of Artiom Grishanov, especially the video clip distributed in the West under the title

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accompanied by emotional scenes of young lovers suffering and appropriate background music. From: *Крым. Фильм. Мелодрама (Krym. Fil'm. Melodrama)*, YouTube, 15 II 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6WJu5hbL04> [accessed: 8 III 2023].

<sup>76</sup> This was the purpose of spreading rumours about alleged buses with 'Banderites' heading to Crimea and Donbas to slaughter the Russian population.

<sup>77</sup> *Крым Путь на Родину...*

<sup>78</sup> Quoted from: Д. Бунякина, *Черкасчане: «Корсунський погром» – выдумка российских пропагандистов* (D. Buniakina, *Cherkaschane: «Korsun'skiy pogrom» – vyдумka rossiyskikh propagandistov*), 17 III 2015, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/26905081.html> [accessed: 5 III 2023].

<sup>79</sup> The Ukrainian government, by rejecting the idea of a federation in favour of a unitary state in a situation where the people of eastern Ukraine were deprived of political representation as a result of the unconstitutional overthrow of Yanukovich, made a serious political mistake. With this decision, it facilitated the task of the Russian special services preparing the secession of Donbas.



*Toys for Poroshenko*<sup>80</sup> showing Donbas children being murdered and mutilated by Ukraine's armed forces. The perfect combination with text and music of children's expressions, scenes depicting air and heavy artillery attacks on the Donetsk agglomeration and wounded children are the culmination of the content of both narrative lines, i.e. the impossibility of the Russian population to remain in one state with Ukrainian nationalists of the UPA provenience and Russia's moral duty to ensure the protection of the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, threatened by genocide.

### The Korsun incident as a political provocation

The Korsun incident – as can be seen from the above descriptions of the Ukrainian and Russian versions – is difficult to describe objectively. Conflicting statements from witnesses on both sides and the use of the event for political struggle by involving the police and the prosecution to give credence to their own versions, now precludes getting to the truth.

If one ignores the contentious issues in the analysis and takes into account the common issues of these narratives, the following can be concluded. Both sides confirm that buses were expected in Korsun and a blockade was organised. Both sides agree that the buses were accompanied by cars of Ukrainian activists and that – expecting a detachment of Berkut soldiers (which were not present<sup>81</sup>) in the vehicles – around 2,000 people were gathered.

Korsun in 2017 had a population of about 18 000 people<sup>82</sup>. In Ukraine, the population between the ages of 15 and 64 was about 70% in 2010. There were about 48% men in this group<sup>83</sup>. If these figures are superimposed on the population of Korsun, it would mean that the 2,000 men participating in the blockade<sup>84</sup> would therefore cover more than a third of the city's total male population between the ages of 15 and 64. In the footage available online, most of the attackers – contrary to the assertions of the Ukrainian side – consisted of young and middle-aged men,

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<sup>80</sup> *Артём Гришанов – Изрушкы (Artëm Grishanov - Igrushki) / Toys for Poroshenko / War in Ukraine (English subtitles)*, YouTube, 22 IX 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8veOzd39VWI> [accessed: 8 III 2023].

<sup>81</sup> No video from the participants' phones shows either soldiers or Berkut militiamen.

<sup>82</sup> *Korsun Szewczenkowski* (Eng. Korsun-Shevchenkivskiy), Wikipedia, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korsu%C5%84\\_Szewczenkowski](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korsu%C5%84_Szewczenkowski) [accessed: 1 III 2023].

<sup>83</sup> *Ukraina: demografia* (Eng. Ukraine – Demographics), Wikipedia, <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukraina#Demografia> [accessed: 1 III 2023].

<sup>84</sup> Virtually no women are seen in the films shot during the incidents.

not women and old men. It takes about 1.5 hours to drive from Bila Tserkva, where the bus column first encountered the blockade, to Korsun<sup>85</sup>. However, the column of Crimeans could, instead of going to Korsun, have travelled from Bila Tserkva to Tarashcha. If one assumes that the Self-Defence from Korsun had about an hour to organise the blockade – the ad hoc gathering of 2,000 people in such a short time seems unlikely.

This may indicate that the Russian version is closer to the truth and that the events in Korsun were not a fully spontaneous character. It may have been an organised ambush, which the Russian side maintains included GAI officers to lead the column to the Korsun blockade. But why would the Ukrainian militia cooperate with the Maidan Self-Defence in a politically unclear situation, when it was uncertain how long the power of the oppositionists in Kyiv would last? The militiamen may have been carrying out the orders of their previous, ‘Yanukovich’ superiors, rather than the new government – who were, in the eyes of representatives of the power sectors, putschists.

Since there are many indications of an act of organised rather than spontaneous aggression in which Ukrainian militiamen are believed to have participated, it is legitimate to ask who might have organised it and what its purpose was.

There is no information about the organisers of the incident. The Ukrainian side only mentions the activists and introduces by name only a few people from the Korsun Self-Defence. It does not explain how a newly formed organisation could organise a blockade and gather 2,000 armed people in such a short time. On the other hand, the question of the purpose of triggering the incident – from the point of view of logic – is easier to analyse.

It is evident both from the propaganda activities of the Russian Federation described above and from the statements of some Self-Defence activists that the events in Korsun were favourable to Russia. On the one hand they provided justification for the seizure of Crimea, and on the other hand, set the Crimean people (mostly ethnic Russians) hostile to Ukraine. This was clearly expressed by deputy chairman of the Ukrainian National Council<sup>86</sup> Vladimir Voropayev, who said that (...) *the incident was planned much earlier* (i.e. it was not a spontaneous reaction of the population of Korsun – author’s note), *and people were used to make*

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<sup>85</sup> Google maps, <https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Korsun%C5%84+Szewczenkowski,+Obw%C3%B3d+czerkaski,+Ukraina,+19401/Bia%C5%82a+Cerkiew,+Obw%C3%B3d+kijowski,+Ukraina/@47.2719291,29.706795,8z/data=!4m13!4m12!1m5!1m1!1s0x40d3e63ae2cb7605:0x8d508893aaf9c8bb!2m2!1d31.2618527!2d49.4261119!1m5!1m1!1s0x40d3423e37227b9d:0x84e311f8582c-c6e8!2m2!1d30.1310853!2d49.7967977?hl=pl> [accessed: 1 III 2023].

<sup>86</sup> A body set up by the opposition in January 2014 as a counterweight to the government structures controlled by Yanukovich and the Party of Regions.

*the Crimean people no longer want to be with Ukraine*<sup>87</sup>. This sentence fully captures the psychological significance of the Korsun incident, which resulted in the Russian Federation obtaining a moral-political pretext to occupy Crimea – without resistance from the Ukrainian armed forces and special services composed overwhelmingly of the peninsula's population and with the almost massive support of the Russian-speaking population. Without the psychosis of fear of 'Banderites', invoked by Russian propaganda to evoke associations with the slaughters carried out by the UPA during World War II, this operation could have been much more complex.

From this point of view, it is possible that the choice of provocation site was not accidental. Korsun was to facilitate the narrative of the alleged ambush murder, as in Poland Korsun is associated with the deception and resulting defeat of the Hetman's army in 1648, when only 15–20% of the Polish quarter army survived<sup>88</sup>.

## Coordination of political provocations in 2014

The hypothesis that the Korsun incident may have been a Russian provocation is also strengthened by the fact that it was one of several events of a provocative nature that became the trigger for the attempted secession of the eastern and south-eastern parts of Ukraine and the covert intervention of the Russian armed forces in the civil war resulting from that secession.

Depriving the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine of their rights to their cultural heritage was an essential link in the provocation. This occurred a few days after it lost its political representation due to Yanukovich's flight from the country and opposition parties to the Party of Regions expressing the interests of the east and south-east of Ukraine took power. On 23 February 2014, i.e. three days after the Korsun incident, the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada, Ukrainian Верховна Рада) adopted a law cancelling the previous language legislation, i.e. the law on regional languages in force since 2012, and decided to recognise Ukrainian as the only official language<sup>89</sup>. The 2012 law gave the right to use a non-Ukrainian

<sup>87</sup> Quoted from: И. Аннитова, *Убийства, которых не было: о чем лжет фильм «Крым»* (I. Annitova, *Ubiystva, kotorykh ne bylo: o chem lzhet fil'm «Krym»*), Stopfake.org, 19 X 2017, <https://www.stopfake.org/ru/ubijstva-kotoryh-ne-bylo-o-chem-lzhet-film-krym/> [accessed: 8 III 2023].

<sup>88</sup> Only 650 horsemen escaped out of the 4,000 to 4,500 soldiers of the crown army on whom an ambush was prepared in the Kruta Balka Gorge. See in more detail: W. Kucharski, *Rozbicie armii koronnej w dzialaniach wojennych 1648* (Eng. Disruption of the Crown army in the warfare of 1648), "Studia z Dziejów Wojskowości" 2015, vol. IV, pp. 57–99.

<sup>89</sup> *Проект Закону про визнання таким, що втратив чинність, Закону України "Про засади державної мовної політики"*, Верховна Рада України (*Proekt Zakonu pro vyznannya takum,*

language as an official language in regions where ethno-linguistic minorities made up a minimum of 10% of the population. This meant that the population of almost the entire east and south-east of Ukraine, where the official language was Russian, was deprived of the right to use it as an official language. Although the new language law was not signed by acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, it was the beginning of an acceleration of Ukrainisation of the population, which had been ongoing since the Orange Revolution in 2004. As a result of the adoption by Ukraine, after the break-up of the USSR, of the unitary state option, whose historical and cultural policy since 2004 has been based on the history and cultural heritage of western Ukraine<sup>90</sup>, a process of opportunistic concealment of one's own national roots began in the east and south of Ukraine. This is confirmed by statistics from the Kharkiv registry office: in 1993, 43% of registrants in the registry office declared Russian nationality, and in 2014, only 7.3%<sup>91</sup>. This meant a decrease in the number of people declaring Russian origin by almost 36 percentage points. This cannot be explained by emigration, as the east of Ukraine – unlike the pauperised western part – was industrialised and prosperous thanks to cooperative ties with the Russian Federation.

The inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, declaring Ukrainianness, were still part of the eastern ethnos, which remained within the Russian cultural area<sup>92</sup>. Consequently, apart from the well-established mythology of the Patriotic War and pro-communist sympathies, Russian was spoken almost exclusively in the east<sup>93</sup>.

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*shcho vtratyv chynnist', Zakonu Ukraini "Pro zasady derzhavnoi movnoi politiki"*, Verkhovna Rada Ukraini), 29 XII 2012, [https://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4\\_1?pf3511=45291](https://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=45291) [accessed: 12 XI 2024].

<sup>90</sup> This - unfortunately - took the form of glorifying the OUN/UPA treated as symbols of the fight for Ukrainian independence, despite the fact that this led to a conflict with the culturally Russian ethnos in eastern Ukraine and with Poland, among others, over the assessment of the Volhynian massacre.

<sup>91</sup> From: Л.А. Атраментова et al., *Этническая консолидация на Украине и её роль в популяционных, медико-генетических и фармакогенетических исследованиях*, in: *Генетика человека и патология. Проблемы эволюционной медицины. Сборник научных трудов*, В.А. Степанов (ed.), Томск 2014 (L.A. Atramentova et al., *Etnicheskaya konsolidatsiya na Ukraine i yeyo rol' v populyatsionnykh, mediko-geneticheskikh i farmakogeneticheskikh issledovaniyakh*, in: *Genetika cheloveka i patologiya. Problemy evolyutsionnoy meditsiny. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, V.A. Stepanov (ed.), Tomsk 2014), p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> An ethnos is 'a group of people having a sense of common origin, a common culture and feeling a group bond; also: a set of characteristic features of such a group of people'. From: *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* (Eng. PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language), <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/etnos;2557154> [accessed: 6 X 2022].

<sup>93</sup> The cultural and linguistic issue in Ukraine is much more complex, as a survey conducted in 2004 (i.e. after the Orange Revolution) found that 45% of the total Ukrainian population spoke and used Russian on a daily basis, while Ukrainian was spoken by 42% on a daily basis. See: *Судя по*

According to a study by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology from 1991-2003<sup>94</sup>, in the east of Ukraine, Russian was spoken on a daily basis by 86.8% of the population and Ukrainian by only 3.7%, while in the south-east the percentages were 82.3% Russian and 5.2% Ukrainian respectively. Interestingly, even central Ukraine was linguistically divided. Accordingly, Ukrainian was spoken by 31.9% in the east-central part of Ukraine and 61.2% in the west-central part (the remaining population spoke Russian or a mixture of Russian-Ukrainian, the so-called surzhyk). Only in Western Ukraine did 94.4% of the population use Ukrainian exclusively.

The recognition of only Ukrainian as an official language struck at the rights of almost half of the population living in Ukraine and, in the east and southeast, undermined the foundations of cultural identity. In a situation where the entire east was closely linked not only by linguistic-religious-cultural ties, but also by economic ties with Russia, stripping Russian of its official language status amid the political chaos following the fall of Yanukovich was almost an open invitation to revolt. And – as predicted – it led to an outbreak of separatist sentiment and the secession of a large part of the Donbas<sup>95</sup> and the loss of Crimea.

On 24 February 2014, Right Sector activist Ihor Mosiychuk<sup>96</sup>, publicly threatened that the organisation would send a so-called ‘friendship train’ (Russian

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данным опроса, 40% украинцев хотят, чтобы русский язык стал официальным (*Sudya po danym oprosa, 40% ukrainsev khotyat, chtoby russkiy yazyk stal ofitsial'nym*), newsru.com, 14 IX 2004, <https://www.newsru.com/arch/world/14sep2004/lang.html> [accessed: 9 III 2023]. This survey was undermined by a 2008 Gallup Institute study, which found that 83% of respondents chose Russian in the survey. This may imply that an overwhelming part of the Ukrainian population – even if they declared Ukrainianness – did not know Ukrainian well enough to use it in the survey. See: S. Gradirovski, N. Esipova, *Russian Language Enjoying a Boost in Post-Soviet States*, Gallup, 1 VIII 2008, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/109228/Russian-Language-Enjoying-Boost-PostSoviet-States.aspx> [accessed: 9 III 2023].

<sup>94</sup> В.Є. Хмелько, *Лінгво-етнічна структура України: регіональні особливості й тенденції змін за роки незалежності* (V.Ye. Khmel'ko, *Linhvo-etnichna struktura Ukrayiny: rehional'ni osoblyvosti y tendentsiyizmin za roky nezalezhnosti*), [https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/articles\\_HVE/16\\_linguaethnical.pdf](https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/articles_HVE/16_linguaethnical.pdf), p. 13 [accessed: 8 III 2023].

<sup>95</sup> Attempts at secession in Ukraine's southeast were violently suppressed with the help of Ihor Kolo-myoskyi's private armed forces.

<sup>96</sup> Ihor Mosiychuk was, among other things, a deputy to the Verkhovna Rada on behalf of Oleh Lashko's Radical Party and a deputy of the 'Azov' battalion. In September 2015, the Verkhovna Rada, after reviewing a recording documenting Mosiychuk's acceptance of a bribe, decided to strip him of his immunity. He was escorted out of the parliamentary session by 20 SBU officers, who drove him to the detention centre and searched his car, where they found illegally possessed firearms. Although during interrogation and the presentation of the detained items, Mosiychuk admitted to taking bribes, as a result of behind-the-scenes games, he was released from custody and both the prosecution and the court considered the detention order to be illegal. The case never went to trial. Interestingly, in his official declaration as an MP in 2017, Mosiychuk admitted to owning, among other things,

поезд дружбы) to Crimea, on which militants would arrive to crack down on Crimean separatists. Information about Mosiychuk's threats has been widely circulated in the Russian-speaking information field, arousing a psychosis of fear among the Russian-speaking population against the allegedly planned ethnic cleansing<sup>97</sup>. This strengthens the hypothesis that Mosiychuk's declaration was another link in a series of provocations aimed at intensifying fear and anti-Ukrainian sentiment among the Russian-speaking population and ethnic Russians in Crimea.

Almost immediately after the Korsun incident, the cancellation of the 2012 language law and Mosiychuk's threats, protests erupted in Crimea in Kerch and Sevastopol. The formation of paramilitary Self-Defence units (Russian ополчение) to defend the Russian population from allegedly incoming Banderites began. On 26 February 2014, the creeping invasion of the Russian armed forces began, first in masked form (the so-called 'green men') and then overtly, culminating in a referendum on the status of Crimea on 16 March 2014. Its results became the pretext for Russia's seizure of Crimea.

So far, there is no evidence that the bribed deputies to the Verkhovna Rada were carrying out tasks imposed by the Russian special services and were not merely acting on a wave of national euphoria following the fall of Yanukovich. Amendment of the language law (the harmfulness of which was seen by almost all political analysts and even by the nationally-minded presidents Oleksandr Turchynov and Petro Poroshenko, who refused to sign the law) cannot be explained by mere emotions. Especially as it was part of a succession of provocations (in the form

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a huge collection of antique white weapons (from the 14th to the 20th century), 17th century icons, luxury watches (including Roger Dubuis, Easy Diver Men Wristwatch 44 mm), a Lexus car, a house near Kyiv, EUR 89,000 and USD 117,550. At the same time, he amassed this wealth (only the portion disclosed in the declaration is mentioned) with annual earnings as an MP of UAH 233,058 - the equivalent of PLN 36,000. From: *Kurs hrywny ukraińskiej (UAH) i złotego (PLN) z dnia 18 maj 2016 roku* (Eng. The exchange rate of the Ukrainian hryvnia (UAH) and the Polish zloty (PLN) as of 18 May 2016), eGospodarka.pl, 18 V 2016, <https://www.finance.egospodarka.pl/kursy-walut/porownanie-walut/2016-05-18/UAH/PLN> [accessed: 26 V 2023]. No one has ever explained the source of Mosiychuk's wealth. The prosecution accused him of accepting UAH 450,000, which in no way explained the surprising wealth of a man who, since 1994, had been criminally prosecuted for robbery, embezzlement, evading maintenance payments, and who had never engaged in business or any profitable activity other than publishing a low-circulation newspaper. See: *Мосійчук Ігор Володимирович (Mosiychuk Igor Volodimirovich)*, Wikipedia, [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%96%D0%B9%D1%87%D1%83%D0%BA\\_%D0%86%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80\\_%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B8%D1%87](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%96%D0%B9%D1%87%D1%83%D0%BA_%D0%86%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80_%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%B8%D1%87) [accessed: 21 XI 2024].

<sup>97</sup> E. Гусакова, *Как возвращались домой О чем вспоминают участники Крымской весны*, "Российская Газета" 2019 (Ye. Gusakova, *Kak vozvrashchalis' domoy O chem vspominayut uchastniki Krymskoy vesny*, "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" 2019), no. 55 (7813).



of, inter alia, the Korsun incident and the Mosiychuk threats) designed to provoke social polarisation along ethnic lines until the outbreak of militant separatism among the Russian-speaking population.

Another provocation was a series of arrests of separatists in Lugansk, which led to an armed uprising. On 5 April 2014, officers of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the Special Branch ‘Alpha’ – on suspicion of belonging to a sabotage group led by Russian intelligence – detained 13 people and carried out searches at their places of residence and work<sup>98</sup>. According to the SBU, the detainees were planning to provoke separatist speeches throughout the east and south-east of Ukraine<sup>99</sup>. A large number of weapons were found in the detainees’ places of residence<sup>100</sup>, which were taken to the SBU headquarters in Lugansk.

<sup>98</sup> On 5 IV 2014, 150 officers of the ‘Alpha’ assault subunit arrived in Lugansk. However, the next day, the SBU leadership, for unknown reasons, was unable to send these men to defend the Lugansk SBU. From: *Как начиналась война на Луганщине. Рассказ офицера СБУ (Kak nachinalas’ voyna na Luganshchine. Rasskaz ofitsera SBU)*, korupciya.com, 22 XII 2014, [https://korupciya.com/dhsdhdh-dh-dhndhdhdhdhdhdfnoe-dhdhdhdhdh-dhdh-dhndhdhdhdhdhdhdhu-dhdhndhdhdhdhdh-dhdhdhdhdh/](https://korupciya.com/dhsdhdh-dh-dhndhdhdhdhdfnoe-dhdhdhdhdh-dhdh-dhndhdhdhdhdhdhdhu-dhdhndhdhdhdhdh-dhdhdhdhdh/) [accessed: 5 VIII 2022]. It was not possible to organise assistance either from the SBU headquarters or from neighbouring regions, and this despite the fact that the heading the Lugansk SBU was in constant telephone contact with SBU head Valentin Nalyvaichenko and, through him, with Interior Minister Arsen Avakov. From: В. Буткевич, *Как захватывали луганскую СБУ (V. Butkevich, Kak zakhvatyvali luganskuyu SBU)*, argumentua.com, 16 XII 2015, <https://argumentua.com/stati/kak-zakhvatyvali-luganskuyu-sbu> [accessed: 5 VIII 2022]; *Экс-начальник Луганской СБУ Петрулевич: Террористические группы ГРУ России уже в Киеве и ждут сигнала (Eks-nachal’nik Luganskoj SBU Petrulevich: Terroristicheskiye grupy GRU Rossii uzhe v Kiyevе i zhдут signala)*, gordonua.com, 2 VII 2014, <https://gordonua.com/publications/petrulevich-terroristicheskiye-grupy-gru-rossii-uzhe-v-kyeve-i-zhdut-signala-29825.html> [accessed: 1 IX 2022]. Among those detained were the later leaders of the separatist movement: Alexei Kariakin (owner of a gun shop) and Alexei Relke. However, the SBU failed to arrest Valery Bolotov (the first leader of the Lugansk People’s Republic), Leonid Ruban (ataman of the Lugansk region’s Donsko Cossacks) and Alexei Mozgovoy (later commander of the ‘Prizrak’ battalion). From: *Экс-начальник Луганской СБУ... They were supposed to have been forewarned by the former head of Lugansk’s SBU, Aleksandr Tretiak, who (after fleeing to Russia) received this information from still active Lugansk SBU officers.* From: В. Буткевич, *Как захватывали луганскую СБУ...*

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Tatiana Oriel’s interview with General Petrulevich. Т. Орел (T. Oriel), “Бульвар Гордона” (“Bul’var Gordona”) 2017, no. 15 (623).

<sup>100</sup> This included 300 machine guns, anti-tank weapons, five pistols, grenades, Molotov cocktails, shot-guns, explosives. From: *СБУ разоблачила диверсионную группу, планировавшую захват власти в Луганской области*, Tass (SBU razoblachila diversionnuyu gruppu, planirovavshuyu zakhvat vlasti v Luganskoj oblasti, Tass), 5 IV 2014, [https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnayanapanorama/1099728?utm\\_source=ru.wikipedia.org&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=ru.wikipedia.org&utm\\_referrer=ru.wikipedia.org](https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnayanapanorama/1099728?utm_source=ru.wikipedia.org&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ru.wikipedia.org&utm_referrer=ru.wikipedia.org) [accessed: 28 IX 2022]. However, it is unclear whether this information corresponds to the truth, or whether the authorities merely seized confiscated weapons from Kariakin’s legitimate shop and distributed them to reduce the number of SBU-owned weapons seized by the rebels.



The arrests and searches were publicised in the media and carried out as ineptly<sup>101</sup> as if they had been carried out with the sole aim of provoking the Lugansk opposition into open revolt<sup>102</sup>. The fact that the operation may have been planned by the Russian special services is evidenced by the fact that, shortly after the arrests, a video appeared online in which the leader of the allegedly disbanded group, who had been in camouflage the day before, took off his balaclava and declared: *My name is [Dmitry] Bolotov<sup>103</sup>, the so-called People's Governor of Lugansk Oblast, and I call on everyone to oppose (...)*<sup>104</sup>. One of the arrested members of the group was a registered militia agent<sup>105</sup>, and among those attacking the SBU headquarters, the day after the arrests, Ukrainian officers recognised their own agents, whose details had been given to the Russians by the previous head of the Lugansk SBU, Alexander Tretiak<sup>106</sup>.

On 6 April 2014, a crowd of thousands gathered in front of the Lugansk SBU headquarters<sup>107</sup>, demanding the release of 'political prisoners' (members

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<sup>101</sup> Most of the searches were unsuccessful, which convinced people that these were not deliberate actions by the state apparatus. It is noteworthy that the decision to carry out such an extensive operation was taken by General Petrulevich - allegedly against the opinion of Lugansk operational officers. See: *Как начиналась война на Луганщине...* Despite the tense situation in the region, neither the arrested nor the seized weapons were transported to Kyiv, but remained in federalist-controlled Lugansk. That there may have been intrigue behind this may also be evidenced by the accumulation of a surprising amount of combat weapons at the SBU headquarters and the importance attributed to the Lugansk branch of the SBU for future secession. See: *ibid*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>103</sup> Dmitry Bolotov, through Ivan Sherdec, head of the local association of Afghanistan veterans, was linked to Aleksandr Yefremov – who heads the local organisation of the Party of Regions. This indicates that he was pursuing a specific political and military plan, rather than a spontaneous speech by people agitated by the upheaval in Kyiv.

<sup>104</sup> *Как начиналась война на Луганщине...; Валерий Болотов: бесславная смерть первого главы ЛНР – Гражданская оборона (Valeriy Bolotov: besslavnaya smert' pervogo glavy LNR – Grazhdanskaya oborona)*, YouTube, 31 I 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV10U553-0M> [accessed: 29 IX 2022].

<sup>105</sup> *Как начиналась война на Луганщине...*

<sup>106</sup> В. Буткевич, *Как захватывали луганскую СБУ...*

<sup>107</sup> In the initial phase of the mythology rally, the number of participants was estimated to be around 1,000. From: *СБУ по требованию митингующих освободила арестованных активистов в Луганской области*, Тасс (*SBU po trebovaniyu mitinguyushchikh osvobodila arestovannykh aktivistov v Luganskoj oblasti*, Tass), 6 IV 2014, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1101119> [accessed: 23 IX 2022]. Later, however, their number was to increase to at least 5,000. From: *Экс-начальник Луганской СБУ...*

of the GU-led sabotage group detained during the night<sup>108</sup>). Neither the militia nor the SBU countered the crowd's storming of the building. The leadership of the Lugansk SBU disarmed the officers and forbade the shredding of documents (the protection of these documents from seizure by the attackers was an obvious requirement), and the militia quickly detained a small number of officers, in a way 'inviting' the crowd to attack. The doors to the building were opened with keys from the inside. The separatists knew the layout of the corridors and where the weapons were stored. The head of the Lugansk SBU, General Alexander Petrulevich, gave them the keys to the armoury without resistance, while explaining that the mines securing it were dummies<sup>109</sup>. When the armoury was opened, it emerged that – it is not known on whose orders – several thousand machine guns, explosives, grenades and heavy machine guns had been brought there earlier<sup>110</sup>. The entire arsenal was housed in the SBU headquarters, whose total staff with cleaners, janitors, drivers and secretaries amounted to 600 employees (!). This meant that the 300 or so separatists who had taken over the building (despite the fact that their structure had allegedly been broken up the day before by the SBU) were immediately ready to launch an armed uprising. The Ukrainian government set up after Yanukovich's escape initially decided to retake the building and arrest the attackers in order to calm the mood by means of criminal and administrative repression. However – due to widespread sabotage by the Lugansk militia and civil administration – Kyiv's 'Alpha' special unit was unable to attack the separatists barricaded inside the SBU headquarters<sup>111</sup>.

The Donbas was thus pushed, by means of provocation, into a confrontation with the new power, which first reacted ineptly and indecisively, trying to bribe the secessionists and negotiate with them<sup>112</sup> (which was perceived by them as its

<sup>108</sup> О. Стрижова, *Годовщина захвата луганского СБУ: воспоминания очевидцев*, Радіо Свобода (O. Strizhova, *Godovshchina zakhvata luganskogo SBU: vospominaniya ochevidtsev*, Radio Svoboda), 6 IV 2017, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/28414815.html> [accessed: 5 VIII 2022].

<sup>109</sup> On his instructions, the armoury was not mined with real explosives.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. *Как начиналась война на Луганщине...*

<sup>111</sup> *Что происходит в Луганске: захват СБУ и торги с властями (Chto proiskhodit v Luganske: zakhvat SBU i torgi s vlastyami)*, Odessa Daily, 17 IV 2014, <http://odessa-daily.com.ua/news/chto-proishodit-v-luganske-zahvat-sbu-i-torgi-s-vlastyami-id64412.html> [accessed: 5 VIII 2022]; Tatiana Oriel interview with General Petrulevich...; *Генерал СБУ Александр Петрулевич. „ГОРДОН” (2017) – (General SBU Aleksandr Petrulevich. „GORDON” (2017))*, YouTube, 19 I 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQOxmK5YNc> [accessed: 24 IX 2022].

<sup>112</sup> As evidenced by the subsequent course of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine (Ukrainian Антитерористична операція на сході України, АТО), this was a decision forced by the weakness of government forces in Lugansk, rather than a genuine attempt to find a consensus. This was proven by the subsequent course of the АТО, during which, at the request of Acting President Turchinov

weakness). And then, in an irrationally brutal manner, using artillery, air force and tanks against its own rebellious population, it sent so-called volunteers, i.e. mainly members of the private armies of Ukrainian oligarchs, to the Donbas<sup>113</sup>. As a result of a series of political blunders and Russian provocations, the Donbas population – like the majority of post-Soviet society – completely indifferent to national issues for many years, became hostile to the Ukrainian state. This resulted in the secession of the Donbas and the conflict that has been ongoing since 2014, which in 2022 escalated into an unmasked war, thanks to the open involvement of the armed forces of the Russian Federation.

## Summary

If we arrange the events described above chronologically with their consequences, their internal logic becomes apparent.

On 20 February 2014, the Korsun incident took place, of which Russian propaganda reported, while warning. Three days later the Verkhovna Rada repealed the 2012 language law, thereby depriving almost half of the country's population of the right to use their native language. On 24 February 2014, Ihor Mosiychuk publicly threatened to send Right Sector punitive troops to Crimea. This was also exploited by Russian propaganda, which has been heating up the mood for

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(despite resistance from the General Staff of the WSU), fighter planes were used against the separatists. From: Г. Гусев, «Западные дипломаты не верили, что мы выстоим». Александр Турчинов рассказывает как весной-летом 2014 года занял все высшие посты в Украине, заново строил власть и начал АТО, Бабель (G. Gusyev, «Zapadnyye diplomaty ne verili, chto my vystoim». Aleksandr Turchinov rasskazyvaet kak vesnoy-letom 2014 goda zanyal vse vysshie posty v Ukraine, заново строил власть и начал АТО, Бабель), 23 VIII 2021, <https://babel.ua/ru/texts/68499-zapadnye-diplomaty-ne-verili-chto-my-vystoim-aleksandr-turchinov-rasskazyvaet-kak-vesnoy-letom-2014-goda-zanyal-vse-vysshie-posty-v-ukraine-zanovo-stroil-vlast-i-nachal-ato> [accessed: 5 VIII 2022]; *Военные действия в Луганске: Захват базы СБУ террористами, а люди покидают опасный регион (Военные действия в Луганске: Захват базы СБУ террористами, а люди покидают опасный регион)*, YouTube, 6 VI 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbwOdOIM3Ns> [accessed: 17 IX 2022]; «ЛНР». *История одной авантюры («ЛНР». Istoriya odnoy avantury)*, YouTube, 28 III 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu97AEWt8HY> [accessed: 1 X 2022].

<sup>113</sup> The Ukrainian government's actions were most accurately described by Alexei Arestovich (advisor to the Ukrainian president until 2022), who said during an interview: 'From the point of view of Ukrainian legislation, all participants in the ATO, all without exception, are criminals... All of them. From the point of view of international law as well... Because the status of the ATO does not give the right to bomb cities with aircraft and heavy artillery.' Quoted from: *Арестович: Все участники АТО – преступники! (Arestovich: Vse uchastniki ATO – prestupniki!)*, YouTube, 2 XI 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzxcEvZVbjA> [accessed: 14 XI 2023].

the past four days with the help of Russians allegedly being tortured in Korsun and the threat that the Russian-speaking population would be second-class citizens and persecuted on ethno-linguistic grounds.

This led to riots in Crimea and the formation of pro-Russian militias in the name of protection against allegedly threatening terror from Ukrainian nationalists. This situation became a pretext for the Russian Federation to annex Crimea, whose civil-military administration proved to be infiltrated by Russian agents to such an extent that it not only failed to take any defensive action, but also switched en masse to the side of the enemy.

The tightening of inter-ethnic relations, the political crisis triggered by the seizure of power by parties with a nationalist and pro-Western profile and the stirring up of fears by Russian propaganda of allegedly threatening massacres of Russians did not stop the SBU from carrying out an operation to detain a dozen pro-Russian activists in Lugansk on 5 April 2014. This happened despite the fact that Donetsk and Lugansk were the centres of the political-ethnic rebellion and mass agitation was to be expected at the news of the repression of the Russian population representatives. It is worth highlighting the ineptitude of the SBU, which, knowing well the public mood, did not carry out mass detentions of activists, which could have broken up the separatist structures there and suppressed the rebellion, but focused on arresting of a dozen or so selected individuals, well-known enough for their capture to bring their supporters into the streets. The next day, an enraged mob stormed the SBU headquarters and seized a gigantic arsenal of weapons.

This was the de facto beginning of an uprising that soon covered the entire Donbas. When it became apparent that the separatists, deprived of heavy weapons and aviation, were unable to fight the Ukrainian army, the border was crossed by Russian army units devoid of identification marks, which began to eliminate Ukrainian groupings in successive so-called pockets<sup>114</sup>.

As a result of the war masked by both sides of the conflict<sup>115</sup>, two quasi-states were created in the form of the Lugansk People's Republic (Луганская Народная Республика) and the Donetsk People's Republic (Донецкая Народная Республика) as a result of the – illegitimate – popular referenda on 11–12 May 2014.

The Verkhovna Rada's decision of 23 February 2014 – despite the deep social polarisation caused by Yanukovich's removal from power and the Korsun incident –

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<sup>114</sup> The so-called Ilovaisk pocket in August 2014 and the Debaltseve pocket, the fighting that lasted from July 2014 to February 2015.

<sup>115</sup> The Russian Federation has consistently denied the involvement of its troops in the conflict, while Ukraine has pursued full-scale warfare and maintained that it is doing so as part of the Anti-Terrorist Operation.

further restricting the rights of the Russian-speaking (often ethnically Russian) population must have led to an outbreak of public opposition and exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. This was so obvious that even successive presidents<sup>116</sup> refused to sign the repeal of the 2012 language law. In turn, the Korsun incident, threats by the leader of the Right Sector and the arrests of pro-Russian activists in Lugansk were – together with the language law – the triggers that prompted people to cross the psychological boundary and take action against the authorities. This ruled out reaching a consensus through the law in force at the time. And, what is the most important, they provided the Russian Federation with a moral-political pretext to intervene in Ukraine.

The differences in the course of the annexation of Crimea and the attempt to detach Donbas were most likely due to the different military situation in these places. In Crimea, Russian units were stationed, and the intervention could therefore take place so quickly that the international community was put in the position of a *fait accompli*. In turn, an armed force had to be created on the Donbas, thanks to the operation described above of bringing weapons to Lugansk and seizing them by the separatists. This made the conflict in the Donbas evolved into prolonged and turn into a prolonged military action. The Russian Federation did not want to become officially involved in them in order to avoid overt Western support for Ukraine for as long as possible, because it could have turned the local conflict into a proxy war against Russia. The Russians in 2014 were not prepared for such a scenario, as they only reacted to the surprising events on Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Therefore, they used provocations and acted punctually – only where there were favourable circumstances<sup>117</sup>. In doing so, they tried to avoid open warfare, masked the real course of events, the involvement of Russian troops and special services and, through provocation, presented the conflict as intra-Ukrainian.

The reactivity of the Russians and the resulting lack of effectiveness (apart from in Crimea, where the actions of the special services were supported by the military), had the effect of limiting the extent of effective secession to Donbas and Crimea. Indeed, the events in Odesa in May 2014<sup>118</sup> effectively blocked attempts to turn

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<sup>116</sup> They were not pro-Russian in their attitude.

<sup>117</sup> That is, in the Donbas and Crimea, where there were large concentrations of Russian-speaking populations and hostile to the new government and structures built up in earlier years by the Russian special services.

<sup>118</sup> Forty-six pro-Russian activists were incinerated on 2 May 2014 during a fire at the Odesa House of Trade Unions. So far, none of those responsible for the arson have been criminally liable. See: O. Grytsenko, K. Chernichkin, *Odesa's Agony: 5 years later, few answers in May 2, 2014 deaths of 48 people*, Kyiv Post, 31 V 2019, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/7609> [accessed: 10 III 2023].

pro-Russian protests into open rebellion by intimidating the Russian-speaking population.

The provocations described above have served both to generate acute inter-ethnic conflict in Ukraine and to justify the actions of the Russian Federation. In this way, Russia succeeded until 2022 in avoiding a direct conflict with Ukraine, supported by Western states, and in doing so initiated processes to disintegrate that state. The invasion in 2022 was merely a continuation of the creeping partition of Ukraine, which, however – for the time being – has been stopped thanks to military support from the West.

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