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The logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the conflict in Donbas

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ABSTRACT

The crisis in Ukraine since late 2013 has seen four successive internationally mediated agreements that have been at best partially implemented. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and 42 key informant interviews sides, we explain this outcome with reference to the logic of competitive influence-seeking: Russia is currently unable to achieve a friendly and stable regime in Kyiv and thus hedges against the consolidation of an unfriendly pro-Western and stable regime by maintaining its control over parts of eastern Ukraine and solidifying the dependence of local regimes there on Russian support. This gives Russia the opportunity to maintain the current status quo or settle for re-integration terms through which Russia can sustain long-term influence over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. We conclude by reflecting on the consequences of competitive influence-seeking in the post-Soviet space: the likely persistence of low-intensity conflict in Ukraine; the further consolidation of territorial divisions in other post-Soviet conflicts; and the need for policy-makers in Russia and the West to prioritize the management of the consequent instability.

Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine since 2013 and its local, regional, and global ramifications indicates a return to the dynamics of violent state fragmentation prevalent in the early 1990s. More strategically now than then, Russia is using violent civil conflict in countries in its so-called Near Abroad as a means to extend its own influence in the post-Soviet space and simultaneously to reduce that of the West. The conflict in the Donbas area of Ukraine, from this perspective, potentially foreshadows a more fundamental transformation of Russia's strategic behavior and illustrates how Russia may use different tactics of societal destabilization and covert occupation as a part of its military and security doctrine to manage a regional security complex that is critical to both its identity and ability to retain great power status and the capability to act globally. The situation in Ukraine, and Russia's actions and reactions there, must, thus, also be seen in the broader context of a region where interactions between state and non-state actors are structured by actual and potential conflicts (e.g. the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, the conflicts in the North and South Caucasus, and potentially the Baltic States and Central Asia). Russian policy towards Ukraine since late 2013 in this sense also indicates that actual and latent conflicts in

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Eastern Europe have entered a qualitatively new and more dangerous phase, frequently described as a new Cold War yet far from the hegemonic stability that then prevailed in this part of the world. Although largely shaped by Moscow, in some cases for more than two decades, these conflicts exist within a broader regional and global geopolitical context that is not always or entirely under Moscow's control. This external dimension has undergone far-reaching shifts with the consolidation and strengthening of Russia as a regional power with an ambition to play a dominant role in its Near Abroad and beyond, and increasingly with the military capabilities and political will to do so.

The emerging and re-emerging violent conflicts in what the EU and NATO consider their eastern neighborhood thus represent a major challenge to the West and its policies in the region. Approaches designed to promote stability and peace through comprehensive social, economic, and political trans-formation and a geopolitical re-orientation of the countries in this now severely contested space towards the EU and NATO, albeit without any clear membership perspective, face a resolute challenge in the form of Russia's promotion of its own version of influence-seeking qua supporting and establishing pro-Russian regimes and locking them into social, political, and economic dependencies through closer, Moscow-centered regional integration across much of the post-Soviet space.

Our focus in the following analysis is on understanding what drives Russian policy in eastern Ukraine. We start from the empirical observation that Ukraine (much like other countries in the region such as Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova) has been pushed and pulled in different directions—east towards Russia, and west towards the EU and NATO (Cadier 2014; Nováky 2015; Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa 2015; Samokhvalov 2015; Smith 2015). At the same time, Ukraine suffers from systemic social, political, and economic crises, institutional weaknesses, and internal divisions that are enabled by competing vectors of linkages between different parts of Ukrainian society and their respective eastern and western counterparts and exacerbated by the exercise of great power leverage.[1]

Drawing on the existing literature on Russian policy in the near abroad (e.g. Saivetz 2012; Saltzman 2012; Fedorov 2013; Orenstein 2015; Tolstrup 2015; Averre 2016) and the growing literature on the con-flict in Ukraine (e.g. Tsygankov 2015; Yost 2015; Yurgens 2015; Strasheim 2016), complemented by data gained from interviews with members of the social, political, and economic elites in Kyiv and Donbas, as well as with Western and Russian experts and officials, we argue that Russia has instrumentally used societal destabilization as a set of tools in the framework of its military and security doctrine of managed escalation–de-escalation in order to avoid the consolidation of a stable, pro-Western regime in Kyiv as a second-best option short of achieving a stable pro-Russian regime. This has resulted in the creation of two new Russian-backed de facto states in the post-Soviet space that provide Russia with leverage over Ukraine and its Western partners and simultaneously serves as a "placeholder" before an opportunity may arise in the future for establishing a stable pro-Russian regime.

In the empirical part of our article, we analyze Russia's policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Donbas and its broader context. We demonstrate that the set of destabilization policies pursued by Russia are tools directed both at elites and society and aimed at the temporary dispersion of power in order to facilitate the replacement of incumbent local elites in Donbas with new, pro-Russian elites relying on a support base of hitherto marginalized, but newly empowered social groups. This, in turn, has been implemented along with the gradual and strategic escalation of covert forms of occupation in eastern Ukraine—nomadic, creeping, and consolidating occupation—which have allowed Russia to establish a firm hold on parts of Donbas that it has used to prevent the establishment of a stable, legitimate, and pro-Western regime in Kyiv.

We proceed as follows. First, we develop a theoretical framework for understanding Russian strategy in the neighborhood and identify a suitable methodology for applying it to the single case study of the Ukrainian conflict. We then carry out our case study using a chronological approach tracing the processes that underpin the evolution and implementation of Russian strategy and its results on the ground. We conclude with a summary of our findings and offer some cautious reflections on policy implications.

Competitive influence-seeking: understanding Russia's neighborhood strategy

At present, two sets of explanations are prominent in the academic and think-tank discourses on Russia's strategy in Ukraine. According to the first, Russia has mostly improvised by opportunistically exploiting tactical openings at high costs (Freedman 2014). The second explanation, in contrast, considers Russia's policies in Ukraine as part and parcel of a new grand strategy that seeks to return Russia to its previous position as a global superpower (Allison 2014; Tsygankov 2015; Yost 2015).[2]

More consistent with this second kind of reasoning, a separate relevant literature is broadly concerned with the underlying logics of regime export or promotion, one of which is that of "political survival." Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner (2010) argue that authoritarian regional powers have an interest in being surrounded by other autocratic regimes. Yet, equally, autocratic (as well as democratic) regimes have an overarching interest in stability. Thus, while there is a clear causal link between the rise of authoritarian powers, such as Russia, and the slowing down of democratization (Puddington 2007; Diamond 2008; Kagan 2008; Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010), as long as a stable domestic environment prevails, high incentives exist for presumptive regional or global hegemons to favor the continuation of the status quo, regardless of the prevailing regime type. As Way (2016, 74) notes, "autocrats care less about destroying democracy than about maintaining geopolitical power." Instability, especially in a contested neighborhood, threatens this goal. Consequently, instability begets intervention that may be driven by a potential desire for change (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Bader and Kästner 2010).

In analogy to the global competition argument that the US and USSR

> viewed the colonial and postcolonial world as a field of battle in which the competition had all the characteristics of a zero-sum game, in which even the slightest gain in presence or influence for one side was seen as transforming immediately into a comparable loss of presence or influence for the other (Kanet 2006, 334),

Russian policies (the focus of our article) should, thus, prioritize influence over stability, i.e. seek the establishment, restoration, and/or maintenance of a regime in Ukraine that is aligned to Moscow, rather than the West.

Our argument, thus, is that Moscow prefers a stable and friendly neighborhood and seeks to avoid a stable but hostile pro-Western neighborhood (Braun 2012; Fedorov 2013).[3] Moscow's commitment to achieving such a friendly and stable neighborhood has been expressed repeatedly by a number of senior figures, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who noted explicitly early on in the crisis that Russia wishes "Ukraine to be a peaceful, stable, and friendly state."[4]

Such an assumption is underpinned by a broadly realist approach to understanding states' behavior in the international arena, and our argument, as it is more limited in scope to the case of Ukraine as a specific manifestation of Moscow's policy in the Near Abroad, is that Russia's perception of its neighborhood is generally best understood as a "tug-of-war situation,"[5] and the crisis in Ukraine as a situation in which the "peace process … is hostage to geopolitical aspirations."[6] In other words, the Kremlin vies with the West for influence, considering any loss of such influence ultimately as a threat to its role as a regional hegemon and its aspirations for global major-power status (Mearsheimer 2014; Götz 2015).[7]

Short of being able to rely on wholly dependent client regimes under its effective control (as it mostly could during the Cold War), further penetration by the West into an already shrunken zone of influence, from a Russian perspective, needs to be countered at all cost. The stability and "friendliness" Russia needs can be achieved either by "soft" or "hard" power, or a combination of both. Like other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine is an important part of the neighborhood for Russia. Thus, Russia is interested in a predictable, stable, and manageable Ukraine. This goal can be achieved through promoting the rise and stability of a friendly, i.e. pro-Russian political regime.

Yet, developments in Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space (e.g. in Moldova or Georgia) have demonstrated that friendly stability is not always achievable. Alternative outcomes, from a Russian perspective can then be rank-ordered as follows: friendly and unstable; unfriendly and unstable; and unfriendly and stable. In line with our logic of competitive influence-seeking,[8] we expect Russia thus to prefer an unfriendly, unstable neighbor over an unfriendly and stable one, i.e. a neighbor over which it can retain some influence and hold out hope for future change towards greater "friendliness."

Russia's policy of destabilization in Ukraine over the past three years indicates that policy-makers in the Kremlin are aware of the difficulty of achieving friendly stability in Ukraine—a country that is deeply divided along several societal cleavages, including its relationships with its major foreign partners, and is characterized by systemically weak institutions unable, and often unwilling, to manage the resulting domestic challenges. In the face of a counter-project of Western integration[9] that has at least some traction among significant sections of the population and confronted with a fragile state, both of which rule out establishing and sustaining a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv, one would expect that Russia should employ various tools in order to destabilize the socioeconomic and political situation within Ukraine in order to avoid unfriendly stability (a stable pro-Western political regime). At the same time, we would expect a Russian approach aimed at creating a situation in which the sustainable realization of its interests remains a viable future option, for example through securing influence in and over Ukraine. The current situation in Ukraine would thus appear the logical outcome of a strategy that, while not immediately achieving the preferred outcome of a stable and friendly neighborhood, "settles" for a temporary second-best result of preventing the worst-case scenario of a stable and hostile pro-Western country in the neighborhood.

Approach

If the logic of competitive influence-seeking as outlined in the preceding section applies to our case study, what would we need to observe in our analysis of Russian strategy in Ukraine? This is a critical issue that connects our research question about the drivers of Russian policy in eastern Ukraine and our theory to our methodological approach, and thus ultimately determines the extent to which we can draw credible inferences from our analysis. Reflecting on these expected observations also enables us to determine likely observations that we would make if our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking were not true. This, in turn, allows us to avoid confirmation bias (i.e. looking only for hypothesis-confirming information).

When determining our data requirements in line with observations that we can assume would confirm or disconfirm our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking, we also need to consider the research context in which we gather our data. Existing research has highlighted the difficulties associated with working in environments characterized by the dynamics of conflict and authoritarianism and the challenges that arise for data gathering, including ethical and safety concerns for researchers and interlocutors, and the reliability of any information gained (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, loc. 1449).

We now consider these issues in turn as we specify our methodology and, in particular, justify our methods of data collection and analysis. To begin with our expected observations, we should, first, be able to identify key moments in the development of the crisis in Ukraine that created opportunities and need for Russian *responses* to what the Kremlin would have perceived as events and processes detrimental to its objectives.

At each of these key moments, we should be able to see a change in policies, in particular, as it became clear that the preferred goal of a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv became unattainable. Put differently, there should be an observable shift in policies towards achieving the second-best outcome of preventing a stable but unfriendly regime in Ukraine. Given the logic outlined above, Russian policies should have shifted more and more towards creating a situation in which Kyiv is denied full sovereignty over its territory, while strengthening Moscow's hold over separatist-controlled territories and/or simultaneously using the possibility of some form of partial conflict settlement as a means to destabilize the Ukrainian Government and further weaken and at times paralyze state institutions, while keeping alive the various divisions in Ukrainian politics and society that contribute to this institutional fragility. The practical implication of this is that the negotiation and subsequent non/implementation of the four political agreements in the Ukrainian crisis between February 2014 and February 2015 constitute the key moments at which policy change was possible (and necessary) and that, alongside an analysis of the actual agreements, official statements, participant observation, and key informant interviews

should provide a sound evidentiary basis to substantiate our claims that Russian policy was driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking.

At the same time, the key moments frame distinct periods of comparatively more gradual developments in response the "outcome" of a key moment (negotiation and non-implementation of a political agreement). Here, our logic of competitive influence-seeking would lead us to expect observations that would demonstrate the increasing extent to which Moscow was prepared to defend what it perceived as its vital security interests, including the extension of effective political control over more territory, keeping real the possibility of escalating civil war, and even major armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Throughout this process, we should simultaneously be able to observe a Russian approach that would seek to achieve maximum possible influence in and over Ukraine, both directly and indirectly. Direct influence could, for example, be secured through the use of military and economic tools, and indirect influence might be sought through securing representation of Russian proxies in Ukrainian politics as part of negotiations on the settlement of the conflict.

By contrast, what would be the likely observations that would disconfirm the applicability of our logic of competitive influence-seeking? The most obvious disconfirmation of the way in which we have conceptualized our logic of competitive influence-seeking would be an absence of Russian policies that can be presumed to seek the prevention of a stable and unfriendly regime in Kyiv in the absence of any possibility to achieve stable and friendly neighbor. An indication of such an approach would be either the recognition or annexation of the contested areas of Donbas (thus eliminating the possibility of either destabilization through continuing low-intensity conflict and or influence over a future government in Kyiv following reintegration of Donbas on terms preferred by Moscow) or a policy of non-interference in the conflict, including any settlement negotiations (thus limiting the opportunities for Moscow to shape the terms of any settlement in its favor). Our hypothesis would also be disconfirmed if we see no change in Russian policy in relation to what is negotiated and/or implemented or change that is unrelated to any key moments in the evolution of the conflict (e.g. escalation or de-escalation policies driven by tactical opportunity and unrelated to and/or detrimental to strategic interest).[10]

What are the appropriate methods of data collection and analysis that would allow us to confirm or disconfirm our hypothesized logic of competitive influence-seeking? In line with established standards of good practice in case study research, we rely on the textual analysis of relevant documents[11], official statements,[12] and participant observation[13] and key informant interviews[14] as our primary sources for data collection, as these allow us to utilize co-variation and process tracing (George and Bennett 2005; Bennett and Checkel 2014) as our main methods of data analysis.[15] This enables us to establish a thick analytical narrative that maximizes data reliability through triangulation and minimizes risks to interlocutors. Using multiple sources also allowed us to compensate for limited access to policymakers in Donbas and in Russia, as did the use of experts in universities and think tanks elsewhere in Russia and Ukraine who have a particular familiarity with Russian policy and the evolving situation in Donbas. Thanks to long-standing (i.e. pre-conflict) networks and contacts across the political spectrum in and beyond Kyiv and Donetsk, we were also able to conduct a number of interviews with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Donbas who were evacuated with local government institutions, universities, and other organizations formerly based in now rebel-controlled territories. We have not privileged any individual source or type of source in terms of weighing the evidence they provide, but rather use the mix of sources to which we have had access to offer a well-substantiated argument in which our claims are corroborated by more than one source and type of source in every instance.

This nuanced and reflective approach to data gathering and analysis gives us confidence that the inferences we draw from the evidence we present below are a credible demonstration of the relevance of the underlying logic that we argue connects Russian preferences regarding the political regime in Ukraine (i.e. a preference for unstable and unfriendly over stable and unfriendly) and the tactics used to destabilize the government in Kyiv (i.e. prevent the consolidation of an unfriendly regime). It also allows us to contribute to typological theorizing about Russian policy vis-à-vis the states of the former Soviet Union in the western CIS and the South Caucasus. Our explanation of the Ukrainian case

in the context of a general theory of competitive influence-seeking thus also acts as a limited test of this evolving theory. Given the significance of the Ukrainian case and of Russia-West relations in the contested neighborhood more generally, this is clearly of importance for policy-making in terms of developing scenarios for future developments in this region and in this relationship and in terms of offering policy recommendations.

Failed agreements as key moments in the destabilization process

The negotiation of the four agreements that have been concluded in the context of the Ukrainian crisis—the Kyiv Agreement of February 2014, the Geneva Agreement of April 2014, and the two Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015—are the key moments that we use to trace relevant developments, respectively, in the periods before, between, and after them to illustrate the evolution of Russian policy. As we demonstrate below, each agreement saw a marked increase in provisions that would have strengthened Russian influence in Ukraine, and each period following the signing and partial or non-implementation of the political agreements concluded was characterized by gradual escalation of Russian destabilization of Ukraine. The four agreements thus represent "snapshots" or milestones in the change of Russian policy from maintaining a pro-Moscow regime in Kyiv at the beginning of 2014 to securing a permanent foothold in Donbas from which to hold a pro-Western government in Kyiv ransom, while the periods in between take us from largely peaceful anti-Maidan protests in eastern Ukraine in the aftermath of the first agreement (February 2014) to active Russian support of, and arguably participation in, the civil war in Donbas by the time of the second Minsk Agreement (February 2015). As one of our interlocutors (Interview 32) put it, "Russia's strategic goal is to maintain control over its Near Abroad. The methods to do so may change over time, but the goal itself can and will not be changed."

We proceed in two steps. First we summarize the provisions in each agreement to substantiate our point that they represent an increasingly pro-Russian set of provisions extending the degree to which Russia would have been able to exert influence in Ukraine. This confirms in some empirical detail our *prima facie* observation of the existence of key moments in the evolution of the Ukraine crisis and the qualitative differences between them. It also offers evidence for our expected observations of gradually increasing demands in each agreement, illustrating Russia's determination to prevent the emergence of a future stable and unfriendly government (i.e. a stable government over which Russia would have little, if any, influence).

Second, we offer a more detailed analytical narrative that traces the escalation of Russian policies towards Ukraine in response to each failed agreement. This provides the detailed evidence of Russia's policy of destabilization, i.e. denying the government in Kyiv any opportunity to consolidate its power and authority. Our analytical narrative also illustrates how policy escalation and "improved" terms in each agreement go hand-in-hand. Russia's escalation tactics forced Kyiv to offer ever more concessions that were politically extremely controversial (e.g. constitutional reform and decentralization) and undermined the government's legitimacy—domestically as a result of the concessions made, and internationally due to its inability and unwillingness to implement them.

Kyiv to Minsk (I): from negotiated transition to entrenched control

The negotiations of four agreements serve as the key moments in our argument about competitive influence-seeking by Russia in Ukraine. The purpose of the following section is to establish, by way of a textual analysis, why we think that they each represent a distinct step in Russia's approach to the Ukrainian crisis and illustrate an increasingly more hard-line approach by Russia to securing its influence in Ukraine.

The Kyiv Agreement was concluded on 21 February 2014 between then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych and three leaders of the parliamentary opposition—Vitaliy Klichko, Oleh Tyahnibok, and Arsenij Yatseniuk—witnessed by foreign ministers of France, Poland, and Germany.[16] Although a special envoy of the Russian president had also participated in the negotiations, he did not sign the agreement

as a witness. The agreement establishes a period of transition until the end of 2014, encompassing a government of national unity formed by the signatory parties, constitutional reform aimed at a better balance of powers between parliament and president, and presidential elections following the adoption of a new constitution. This would have provided for a managed transition during which Russia's main ally at the time, President Yanukovych, would have shared power with the parliamentary opposition. The outcome of the transition, however, would have been open ended in terms of both the constitutional nature of Ukraine and its next president. Russia's limited enthusiasm for the agreement is, thus, not difficult to understand, but in the actual course of events, the fatal blow was dealt by the extra-parliamentary Maidan opposition who rejected the agreement. Having also lost the support of his own power base,[17] Yanukovych found himself in an unsustainable situation and fled to Russia.

This clearly represented a significant problem for Moscow, as it now was left without a major source of influence in Kyiv and with no clear pathway to regain any either, as the timeline initially envisaged would have kept open a path for Moscow to have at least some indirect influence over Ukrainian politics through securing favorable terms in a constitutional reform process whose conduct and outcome would have involved the participation of pro-Russian forces. A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry consequently noted,

> [w]e are surprised that several European politicians have already sprung to support the announcement of presidential elections in Ukraine this May, although the agreement of 21 February envisages that these elections should take place only after the completion of the constitutional reform. It is clear that for this reform to succeed all the Ukrainian political forces and all regions of the country must become its part, but its results should be approved by a nationwide referendum.[18]

The policy escalation that followed (see below) in the period after the collapse of the Kyiv Agreement paved the way to the next agreement, the so-called Geneva Statement on Ukraine released by the US, EU, Ukraine, and Russia on 17 April 2014.[19] While vague in some respects, the Statement establishes a disarmament process and a broad amnesty, as well as, for the purposes of constitutional reform, "a broad national dialogue, with outreach to all of Ukraine's regions and political constituencies, and allow[s] for the consideration of public comments and proposed amendments." This latter provision constitutes a specification of the constitutional reform process not present in the Kyiv Agreement of February 2014, and arguably creates an additional opportunity for the representation of pro-Russian interests within it by specifically mentioning "regions and constituencies" and making reference to a "national dialogue." The latter is also a recurring theme in official statements when it comes to Russia pushing for direct negotiations between the government in Kyiv and the de facto authorities in Donbas. A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 13 April, for example, emphasizes the need to "immediately start a true, national dialogue with equal participation of all the regions in the interests of the organization of swift and radical constitutional reform,"[20] while later on references abound drawing parallels to national dialog processes elsewhere, such as in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, and South Sudan and argue that in Ukraine, too, the government should directly engage with opposition forces in Donbas.[21]

Similarly, the endorsement of a leading role for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission and the committing of US, EU, and Russian monitors ensures a continuing "legal" Russian foothold in the crisis in Ukraine, while paving the way towards internationalized monitoring, and thus stabilization and entrenchment, of an emerging boundary line within Ukraine. Through the constraints that this placed on Ukraine's sovereignty, alongside the disarmament requirements for "all illegal armed groups" (thus including Ukrainian "volunteers" who had borne the brunt of the fighting until then), Russia laid the foundations for a potentially emerging de facto state in Donbas before this appeared as a seriously pursued option in the next stage of the conflict. With likely the same objective in mind, Russia kept pushing for some official status for representatives from Donbas, with Lavrov noting at his press conference immediately after the conclusion of the Geneva talks in April 2014 that it was necessary to secure "the immediate establishment of a broad national dialogue within the framework of the constitutional process, which should be inclusive, transparent, and accountable" and that the talks had "emphasized that all the Ukrainian regions and political forces should be involved in this dialogue."[22] Having "learned" from the failure of the Kyiv Agreement, Russia at least partially hedged against a similar fate with the Geneva

Statement, by bringing in the OSCE as an implementer, and thus implicitly an international guarantor, of the agreement, while further working towards securing a status for representatives from Donbas and the "region" itself.

With militias in the Donbas region refusing to disarm and to end their occupation of government facilities, there was no progress on constitutional reform, and the activities of the OSCE mission became the only element of real implementation. However, an attempt by the OSCE to have a roadmap for the implementation of the Geneva Declaration, agreed initially, failed (even though the Geneva Declaration was re-confirmed in the Normandy format in early July 2014).[23] Worse still, fighting soon escalated—in the form of Ukraine's so-called Anti-terrorist Operation and the increasingly muscular Russian response to it (see below).

This triggered a renewed international effort towards a settlement resulting in the first Minsk Agreement of 5 September 2014, concluded under the auspices of the so-called Trilateral Contact Group consisting of representatives of the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, and, notably, the separatists. The marked qualitative change in Minsk I, compared to previous agreements, is the specific stipulation to "implement decentralization of power, including by means of enacting the 'Law of Ukraine with Respect to the Temporary Status of Local Self-Government in Certain Areas of the Donetsk and the Luhansk Regions" and to "ensure the holding of early local elections" in accordance with this law. If implemented, this so-called temporary status of the separatist-controlled areas and the political legitimation of separatist leaders through local elections would have fundamentally altered the situation in Ukraine and established a de facto state in all but name, albeit with yet unspecified local powers and influence at the center. This was again an indication of an approach aimed at strengthening the representation of pro-Russian interests, including in the "inclusive national dialogue" that the agreement reiterates. This long-standing Russian determination to have the de facto authorities in Donbas accepted as direct negotiation partners also becomes apparent when the Russian foreign minister points out that although originally established in the Geneva Agreement, "a national dialogue immediately with participation of all the Ukrainian regions" only began in September when "it [was] possible to convince the Ukrainian leadership to sit at the negotiation table with the militia."[24] In fact, a month later, Lavrov goes as far as confirming some success in the Russian strategy of both building a de facto state and legitimizing its authorities by noting that:

> [s]ome government bodies have already emerged there spontaneously. Not only have they been recognized as the leadership of the self-proclaimed republics—they have also become partners to the Minsk agreements and are taking part in the Contact Group alongside Kiev officials, enjoying the support of both Russia and the OSCE. Their representatives, Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky, have signed a number of the Group's documents, and the Minsk agreements of 5 and 19 September. The elections to be held in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics will be very important in terms of legitimizing these authorities."[25]

Nonetheless, few, if any, of the provisions in the Minsk Agreement of September 2014 came even close to implementation, and both sides increasingly worked towards consolidating and expanding their gains. This, in turn, intensified tensions and eventually led to renewed major escalation of fighting (see below). Consequently, a renewed international effort to achieve a political solution commenced in Minsk, resulting in the so-called Minsk II agreement of 12 February 2015.[26] Here, in addition to re-committing to a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline, etc., the sides agreed to carry out

> constitutional reform in Ukraine with a new constitution entering into force by the end of 2015 providing for decentralization as a key element (including a reference to the specificities of certain areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, agreed with the representatives of these areas), as well as adopting permanent legislation on the special status of certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in line with measures as set out in the footnote until the end of 2015.

The provisions in this footnote are significant in that they make concrete stipulations for future self-governance arrangements prior to any negotiations thereof, including the participation of local authorities in judicial appointments, the possibility of specific center-periphery agreements on economic, social, and cultural development, cross-border cooperation with regions in Russia, and locally controlled militia units—measures designed to strengthen and consolidate the status of Donbas as a "special" region

within Ukraine, thus legitimizing its existence and its representatives. Put differently, from a Russian perspective, "the February 12 Minsk Agreement, the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements and the declaration signed by our leaders in Minsk, set out exhaustively everything that needs to be done."[27]

While Minsk II remains unimplemented, its provisions clearly signal the extent to which Russia's position had shifted within a year—from a negotiated transition of uncertain outcome to a situation in which a fundamental territorial and political re-organization of the Ukrainian state, quasi-constitutionally empowering and entrenching a strongly pro-Russian entity within Ukraine, was agreed in an ad hoc international negotiation format. This confirms our initial assumption of the existence of these key moments and the qualitative differences between them, thus providing a plausible basis for further investigation of our theory of competitive influence-seeking.

Kyiv to Minsk (II): from peaceful protest to civil war

Much like with the changing terms of the political agreements concluded between February 2014 and February 2015, we see a marked escalation of Russian policies in response to each failed agreement.

As noted above, the Kyiv Agreement was dead in the water within three days of its conclusion. Thus, in this first period between February and April 2014, the agreement on a managed transition immediately failed and events on the ground were perceived as a significant challenge to Russia, which saw the disposal of Yanukovych as a major setback (Workshop A).

However, the pro-Western trajectory for which the Maidan partly stood was not universally popular in Ukraine (Workshop A). Rejected by significant parts of the population and political and economic elites, anti-Maidan protests started spontaneously in parts of Donbas (Malyarenko 2015). The anti-Western and anti-new regime sentiments that they expressed coincided with Russian security interests and Russia's interpretation of the Maidan as a coup d'etat. The mere fact of an overlap of interests in Donbas and Moscow, however, did not mean that local elites in Donbas were automatically pro-Russian (Workshop D). Rather as the former governor of Donetsk Oblast, Sergei Taruta, noted in a newspaper interview,

> Donbas did not agree with the Euromaidan and subsequent decisions by the newly appointed Ukrainian government. But this does not mean that Donbas was on the Kremlin's side. … Russia managed the public protests in the way they best served her own interests.[28]

The perceived threat of a potential "loss" of Ukraine, thus, led Moscow to more concerted efforts to keep the pressure up on Kyiv with further anti-Maidan protests in Donbas and other former strongholds of the previous regime, such as Kharkiv and Odessa (Interviews 15, 18, and 31). Yet, this counter-Maidan failed to get sufficient traction outside Donbas, and Russia escalated its tactics and began to start nomadic occupation in Donbas. This, in turn, "facilitated" the Geneva negotiations and the agreement achieved there in April.[29]

As noted above, the Joint Statement that resulted from these negotiations also proved to be impossible to implement. In response, the Ukrainian Government resumed its so-called anti-terrorist operation, which, over the coming weeks succeeded to a certain extent in rolling back territorial gains made by the rebels (Interview 27). This, in turn, prompted Russia to increase its support to the rebels, especially in terms of equipment. Over the following months, fighting between Russian-backed rebels and Ukrainian security forces and pro-Ukrainian militias continued and included the downing by rebel forces (Dutch Safety Board 2015) of a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet killing all people on board. Apart from a major "PR disaster," this tragedy also signaled the need to the Kremlin for more control over the rebel forces,[30] and soon after the invasion of so-called "vacationers" (Russian military personnel "on leave" from their regular service) began (Interview 17). During discussions in one of our workshops, one participant noted,

> Russia invaded in Donbas gradually, pushing as far as Ukraine allowed. The government in Kyiv was rather passive. On the one hand, Kyiv did not want to accept Russia's demand for federalization. However, Kyiv also failed to respond adequately by military means to the annexation of Crimea, to Strelkov's operations, and to the invasion of 'vacationers'. Ultimately, Kyiv's passivity encouraged Russia to increase the stakes" (Workshop L).

While there was some support in Donbas for Russia and Ukraine as one state (according to an opinion poll conducted in February 2014, 33.2% of residents in Donetsk and 24.1% in Luhansk favored such an option), an independent Ukraine was still the preference of an overwhelming majority of the population in these arguably most pro-Russian regions of Ukraine (Workshops D and F).[31] Russia's aim of gaining territorial control of Donbas, and thus the ability to either influence or destabilize any government in Kyiv, therefore, required the pursuit of three objectives: (1) physical removal from power of (actually or potentially) pro-Ukrainian social, political, and economic elites in Donbas; (2) deeper polarization of society in Donbas in order to (3) facilitate mobilization of hitherto marginalized groups from which to recruit local pro-Russian elites (Interviews 27, 39, 41, and 42).

These objectives were highly interdependent in their realization and Russia faced significant challenges in achieving them. The main reason for this was that local society in Donetsk and Luhansk was generally characterized by a high level of internal cohesiveness, dense social networks, significant social capital, a high level of public trust in local elites, and a well-developed regional (so-called "Donetsk") identity (Mikheieva and Victoria 2014).[32] Put differently, Donbas exhibited considerable potential for self-organization, resilience, and mobilization in the face of Russia's intervention (UkrlifeTV 2017). However, in the simultaneously ensuing turf battles among the major political-economic groups in Ukraine, local and Kyiv-based Donbas elites were not given an opportunity to re-align with the new regime in Kyiv. They, thus, had few incentives to mobilize local resources in support of the government in Kyiv, but this did not automatically turn them into supporters of Russian-backed creeping occupation, especially as this posed a potentially considerable threat to their own interests.

Rather, the widely prevailing anarchy triggered by the anti-Maidan protests in Donbas had led to the establishment of two other types of politico-territorial arrangements in eastern Ukraine. The first was informally coordinated by local Ukrainian oligarchs who challenged the new government in Kyiv for control at the local level, seeking the maintenance of the local elite's political power and access to economic resources after the flight of Yanukovych. Local oligarchs, such as Rinat Akhmetov, used the remaining structures of Ukrainian local authorities, which continued operating until mid-November 2014 (i.e. the Decree of the President of Ukraine on the Withdrawal of Ukrainian Institutions) to retain their influence in the large industrially developed cities where they owned and/or controlled significant assets, including critical transport and communication infrastructure. This was the case, for example, in Donetsk and Yenakievo before Strelkov's occupation in July 2014 and in Mariupol before the Ukrainian army retook the city in May 2014. These local Ukrainian elites ("Donetskie") were not interested in waging a real war against Kyiv, which would have resulted in the destruction of the very assets they were keen to control. Similar to Russian tactics at the time, but for very different reasons, these local elites encouraged and supported anti-Maidan protests in Donbas in order to strengthen their own negotiating position vis-à-vis the post-Euromaidan government in Kyiv (Interviews 4 and 27).

In the city of Mariupol, for example, associates of Rinat Akhmetov took control in the wake of these anti-Maidan protests and began bargaining with Kyiv directly, while local authorities were more cautious and generally reluctant to challenge the central government in this way. This bargaining process accelerated as soon as Aleksandr Borodai, the prime minister in the Russia-controlled wing of the DPR at the time, signaled his intention to expand territorial control towards Mariupol. Akhmetov and other Ukrainian Donetsk elites quickly reached an agreement with Kyiv, which allowed them to keep hold of their assets and the Ukrainian army, in the form of the paramilitary "Azov" battalion, to restore full Ukrainian government control over Mariupol despite the fact that local Ukrainian security forces were paralyzed.[33] These events in Mariupol illustrate some of the key dynamics in these early stages of the conflict, including the fluidity of alliances on the ground between various state and non-state actors (Kyiv, pro-Ukrainian paramilitaries, local elites) and their ability, at the time, to thwart the expansion of territorial control by Russian-backed forces.

Yet, local elites competing over control of economic assets in post-Yanukovych Donbas were not the only local "players," and the multitude of other actors seriously complicated the situation and contributed to Kyiv's eventual loss of control over significant parts of the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The critical factor in this process was the collapse of Ukrainian institutions across Donbas, which created

opportunities for a pre-existing criminal subculture to flourish. For example, after the initial relative stabilization in the DPR and LPR in 2014, "representatives" delegated by major local criminal clans occupied key positions in the economic structures of government of the self-declared republics, such as Aleksandr Timofeev, who became minister of incomes and taxes in DPR.[34] Small, economically and socially depressed cities built around coal-mining enterprises saw the rise of previously marginalized groups and organized criminals capture local political power, often in cooperation with local security forces, or what remained of them after the flight of Yanukovych and the at least partial withdrawal of pro-Kyiv/pro-Ukrainian elites. Operating like warlords, local groups, led, for example, by local criminals-turned-warlords such as Bednov, Dremov, and Mozgovoy, established a quasi-feudal system of rule in the territories they controlled, relying on the extortion of local entrepreneurs, kidnapping, illegal extraction of resources, and the use of slave labor (Interviews 28 and 38).[35] While the armed groups associated with these warlords did not participate in full-fledged battles against Ukrainian forces, they exhibited a much higher degree of violence against Ukrainian prisoners of war, pro-Ukrainian activists, and civilians (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015). The system of rule that they established was, thus, significantly different from what was going on in areas controlled by Kremlin-sponsored groups under the control of people like Aleksandr Zakharchenko or Igor Strelkov.

Thus, during the spring and summer of 2014, three different types of politico-territorial arrangements emerged in eastern Ukraine that reflected different dimensions of the conflict locally and in relation to the new government in Kyiv and exhibited different degrees of Russian control and influence. This anarchical situation bore several risks for Russia and its strategy to use the conflict in eastern Ukraine as leverage over the government in Kyiv. First, there was a danger that an agreement might be achieved between the "Donetskie" and Kyiv that would facilitate the consensual return of Donbas under the Ukrainian Government's control (as happened in one of Rinat Akhmetov's strongholds, Mariupol).[36] A second potential threat was declining local public support for any new arrangement and instead a popular preference to return to the status quo ante because of the lawlessness and criminality that the population of Donbas had to endure following the collapse of the Ukrainian state structures.[37]

As Russian destabilization tactics escalated from nomadic to creeping occupation in order to consolidate territorial control in Donbas, the first objective, thus, was the physical removal from power of the local elite, including public servants, representatives of the middle class, liberal intellectuals, urban professionals, and other local opinion leaders. This was achieved through the use of instrumental violence, including widely publicized intimidation, torture, and executions of local leaders. For example, the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights, an NGO founded in 1922 with now 184 membership organizations across 112 countries, issued a report in October 2015 based on extensive fieldwork conducted by one of its members, the Kyiv-based Center for Civil Liberties, in cooperation with Memorial, the International Partnership for Human Rights (see also below), and the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (International Federation for Human Rights and Center for Civil Liberties 2015). The report highlighted "that certain categories of civilian are specifically targeted by separatist armed groups. National and local civil servants, journalists, local and international NGO representatives, businessmen and religious authorities are particularly subjected to threats and persecution at the hands of fighters" and that "crimes of murder, imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearance and persecution on political grounds" committed by separatist armed groups "may constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7 for the Rome Statute" and, because they appear to be part of "a policy to direct such attacks against the civilian population," may also be "consistent with the qualification of crimes against humanity" (International Federation for Human Rights and Center for Civil Liberties 2015, 5).

Similarly, the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights, in a report issued in 2015, has documented

> a plethora of criminal conduct perpetrated by separatists against civilians in Eastern Ukraine, including 18 murders, 57 cases of illegal detention, 36 episodes of ill treatment amounting to torture, inhuman and/or degrading treatment, multiple cases of illegal destruction and appropriation of civilian property and other forms of persecution on political and religious grounds (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28).[38]

According to the organization's researchers, there has been an

identifiable targeted group whose members are actual or perceived opponents of the separatist movement. This group includes civilians identified as right-wingers (pravoseki), those accused of being part of the Euromaidan movement, and more generally civilians perceived as being pro-Ukrainian or anti-separatist (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28)

This resulted in the intended exodus that critically undermined society's will and ability to resist Russian control (Interviews 39 and 42; Workshops B, C, and K).

Russia's second objective was to deepen social polarization along ethnic lines and between different social strata in Donbas, which was considered a prerequisite for achieving its third objective, namely to mobilize hitherto marginalized groups as a support base for, and recruitment pool of, new local pro-Russian elites that could eventually take over from Russian and Transnistrian "imports," thus allowing Russia to maintain the fiction of its non-involvement while simultaneously ensuring a higher level of control over Donbas elites than it had during the initial period of nomadic occupation (Workshops E and G). Capitalizing on pre-existing distrust towards the pro-Western elites in Kyiv and a significant degree of political exclusion and economic deprivation, Russia was able to create a perception of upward social mobility under a new regime for those who lacked any such prospects under successive Kyiv governments (Interviews 40 and 41, Workshop L). Empowering socially excluded groups in an ideational sense by giving them a future perspective and in a material sense by providing them with the means and at times leadership to pursue such promising new perspectives (Workshops D and F), in turn, also created the manpower necessary to achieve the first objective, the physical removal from power of local elites. Hence, a pool of willing "executioners" became readily available to escalate conflict locally, displace local elites, and prepare the ground for their replacement.[39]

By late August 2014, the fighting had further escalated, but had reached a stalemate on the ground with newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko unable to make decisive territorial gains or inflict significant losses on the increasingly well organized and equipped forces of the two self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and their institutionally better performing *hinterland*. Thus pressured, Kyiv agreed to a further round of negotiations in the Belarusian capital of Minsk, which resulted in the first of two Minsk Agreements on 5 September 2014, followed by an additional protocol two weeks later. Yet again, implementation was at best selective and eventually stalled completely. Subsequent parliamentary elections in Ukraine in October saw a strong showing of the pro-Western, anti-Russian bloc, but also exposed deep divisions and a high degree of apathy among the population, with a national turnout of just over half of eligible voters, and less than a third in Kyiv-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

It was only in this period after Minsk I that Moscow began to capitalize on the successful deployment of its earlier destabilization tactics during the periods of nomadic and creeping occupation. Realizing that a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv was unlikely to emerge in the near future, Russia shifted its approach from the managed destabilization tactics of nomadic and creeping occupation, which were focused on undermining Ukrainian efforts at consolidating the country's post-Maidan Western trajectory by creating a sufficient level of (violent) instability in Donbas, to an approach that pursued the institutional strengthening of the separatist regions to build them up into capable pro-Russian players in an otherwise hostile, pro-Western Ukraine (Workshops G and K). With the conditions for "state-building" put in place due to the success of societal destabilization in Donbas prior to the autumn of 2014, and with a partially positive track record of an earlier, albeit much more rudimentary Russian-sponsored and Russian-led state-building effort, the Russian-backed republican governments in Donetsk and Luhansk embarked on a much more comprehensive path to state-building, including the reorganization of uncoordinated forces into a "regular" army and police under centralized command, the delivery of public services by the republican authorities, and closer integration into the Russian economic and legal space (Interviews 22, 23, and 31; see also Gushchin et al. 2016; OTR Online 2017).

A conduit of this new phase of entrenching occupation was the gradually escalating violence on the ground: as a resolution of the crisis on Russian terms became more and more unlikely and as Moscow continued to establish a "proper" de facto state within the recognized international borders of Ukraine, the actual extent of Russian-controlled territory and its military and infrastructural viability acquired

higher priority for both sides, but simultaneously led to intensified efforts in the so-called Normandy format to rescue the first Minsk Agreement and its implementation protocol. These talks continued on and off throughout January and early February, but it was not before a 16 hours negotiation marathon on 11 and 12 February among the four countries' leaders that the second Minsk Agreement was concluded, almost a year to the date of the 2014 Kyiv Agreement. Unsurprisingly, some initial optimism on the sustainability of this agreement quickly evaporated—fighting continued around the strategic railway intersection of Debaltsevo, with both sides taking heavy losses and the Russia-backed rebels eventually taking the town a week after Minsk II. Again, the agreement was implemented selectively and slowly—enough to avoid, so far, a return to all-out war, but nowhere comprehensively enough to demonstrate either side's commitment to a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Interviews 8, 13, 16; Workshops I and J).

Each failed agreement implementation, thus, went hand-in-hand with an escalation of destabilization efforts. In the period between late February and mid-April 2014, Russia supported and funded anti-Maidan protests in mainland eastern Ukraine.[40] From mid-April 2014, Russia began supporting the rebels initially with money and weapons. This was the period of "nomadic" occupation. As a Ukrainian offensive gained momentum and ground in early summer 2014, Russia strengthened the rebels first through supplying more and more equipment, including heavier weapons, advisers, and eventually through a clandestine invasion of "vacationers" in mid-August. This led to a period of "creeping" occupation by the rebels, who began to regain territory they had lost in May and June. As a result, by August 2014, fighting had significantly intensified from the usage of small arms in the early clashes of April 2014 to using tanks, heavy artillery and multiple rocket systems, aircraft, and anti-aircraft defense systems (Interview 17; see also Malyarenko 2015). This major escalation of fighting and the losses suffered by the Ukrainian side facilitated a return to negotiations, producing the first Minsk Agreement on 5 September 2014. An immediate failure of this agreement was averted by an additional protocol two weeks later, but eventually the volatile ceasefire established broke down and fighting resumed. Following the parliamentary elections in Ukraine on 26 October 2014 with the strong performance of pro-Western, anti-Russian forces, any prospects of a pro-Russian government had clearly evaporated, and Russia now began to focus on consolidating the rebels' territorial gains. Thus, the period of "entrenching" occupation began, accompanied by more pronounced and comprehensive efforts at state-building in Donbas. A simultaneous escalation of fighting to create militarily and strategically more viable rebel territories pressured Ukraine into another round of negotiations that produced the second Minsk Agreement. Following the rebel capture of Debaltsevo, a more or less stable line of control was established between the sides that has remained in place despite sporadic clashes and very little progress on the implementation of the political provisions of Minsk II (Interviews 8, 15, and 23), indicating that, despite its volatility, the two sides have settled, at least temporarily, for the existing status quo.[41]

The logic of competitive influence-seeking: managing instability for long-term gains

The logic of competitive influence-seeking is predicated on the assumption that great powers seek stable and friendly neighborhoods, but are willing to settle for a second-best option of an unstable country in their neighborhood if they can manage and use instability to prevent the worst-case scenario of a stable and unfriendly regime. From a Russian geopolitical perspective, Ukraine is too strategically important a prize to allow the country to drift out of a self-proclaimed Russian zone of influence.[42] Ukraine, similar to other countries in the post-Soviet space such as Moldova and Georgia, thus became a new battleground on which Russia and the West (chiefly the EU) are locked in a competition for influence over that country's domestic and foreign policy orientation. Russia has used various tactics to assert and sustain its influence in and over Ukraine, gradually escalating its level of military engagement in combination with consolidating its diplomatic and political leverage (Workshop G).

As we have argued above, instability in Ukraine has increased over time between late 2013 (the beginning of the Maidan) and the end of February 2015 (the time when the ceasefire agreed as part of Minsk II had been consolidated following the Ukrainian army's defeat at Debaltsevo) as Russia escalated

its destabilization efforts in response to each agreement's collapse. This escalation served the dual purpose of pushing for renewed negotiations that could be conducted from an improved Russian/rebel bargaining position and achieving agreements that would secure Russian influence in Ukraine more strongly in case of actual agreement implementation (Interviews 13, 15, and 17). In the course of these negotiations, ever greater Russian demands were incorporated: from a managed transition in the February 2014 Kyiv Agreement, to the disarmament terms of the April 2014 Geneva Agreement, and to the increasingly detailed, yet simultaneously unattainable, terms of constitutional reform and territorial reorganization of the Ukrainian state in the two Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015,[43] the latter of which acquired international legal status through the unanimous endorsement it received in UN Security Council Resolution 2202 (United Nations Security Council 2015). The importance that Russia attaches to such international guarantees was stated clearly by Lavrov in response to a question after his speech at the Munich Security Conference on 7 February 2015, less than a week before the conclusion of Minsk II:

> As soon as the main participants of the Minsk process —the Ukrainian authorities and representatives of the pro-claimed republics of the DPR and LPR— reach agreements on all the practical aspects of implementing each of the Minsk items, I am confident that Russia will be among those to ensure such guarantees, either in the OSCE, or in the UNSC. I am convinced that Germany, France, and other countries will also be ready to offer such guarantees.[44]

As Russian confidence in the willingness and ability of Ukraine to implement agreements diminished, it shifted its position towards including more implementation mechanisms and guarantees in each agreement with the aim of consolidating its own position and that of its proxies in an internationalized settlement process that would commit Russia and the West equally to abide by its outcome. With the simultaneous realization that a stable and friendly pro-Russian regime in Kyiv was unlikely to materialize in the near future, Russia pushed for, and achieved, more specific requirements for constitutional changes to secure long-term influence in Ukraine through its proxy regimes in Donbas. Yet, as these more elaborate agreements faced even greater obstacles to implementation, Russia, at the same time, consolidated its client regimes in Donbas. Taken together, this illustrates the Kremlin's gradual shift towards prioritizing Moscow-managed unfriendly instability as a second-best, interim goal, yet one that does not rule out the eventual achievement of a stable and friendly regime in Kyiv (its ultimately preferred, yet presently unobtainable outcome).

Our case study of Russian policies in the Ukraine crisis thus serves as an initial plausibility test of a typological theory of competitive influence-seeking. We have established Russian motivations for its policies and noted their outcomes in this specific case. Future research could take this as a starting point and re-examine Russian policy vis-à-vis Moldova (Transnistria) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), as well Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagornyi Karabakh). Questions that such research could investigate would also include the limits of competitive influence-seeking (e.g. in the case of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), effective Western counter-strategies and the conditions under which they can be employed (e.g. to prevent unilateral recognitions and achieve favorable terms of reintegration), while also testing the theories, assumptions, and predictions in other cases (Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara, Iraqi Kurdistan) and regions (Central Asia, Maghreb, Middle East).

Conclusion

Throughout the period from November 2013 to February 2015, Russia employed a spectrum of escalating destabilization tactics in order to shape the nature and outlook of the political regime in Ukraine, including diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy warfare, including military occupation. These tactics were used in a sequential, but cumulative way; that is, Russia sought to use, expand, and consolidate its influence across all spheres of Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies, starting with non-violent methods in late 2013 and early 2014, and progressing towards more and more openly used violent tools while maintaining the pressure that non-violent methods deliver. Russia, thus, created multiple dependencies that it continues to use at will in order to

secure the best possible outcomes of its efforts to ensure a friendly and stable regime in Ukraine, while hedging against the possibility of an unfriendly and stable one. In other words, in line with the logic of competitive influence-seeking, Russia has sought to manage the level of instability in Ukraine in a way that does not preclude the emergence of an overall stable and friendly (that is, pro-Russian) regime in Kyiv, but that prevents the consolidation of a stable and unfriendly (that is, pro-Western) regime.

The evolution of Russia's tactics from nomadic, to creeping, to entrenching occupation, and ultimately to some limited form of state-building is consistent with our view that Russia's neighborhood strategy in Ukraine is driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking. Russia is hedging against the consolidation of an unfriendly and stable, Western-supported regime in Kyiv by consolidating its control over parts of eastern Ukraine and solidifying the dependence of local regimes there on Russian support. This gives Russia the opportunity to either maintain the current status quo or settle for favorable re-integration terms that establish Moscow-controlled regions with special status (and hence special powers) within Ukraine through which Russia can assert and sustain its long-term influence over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy orientation.

With these drivers of Russian policy in the so-called Near Abroad in mind, three more general conclusions can be offered about likely future developments. First, confrontation between Russia and the West in and over this area is unavoidable as the EU, NATO, and their respective member states similarly consider their eastern neighborhood as strategically important for their security.[44] Such confrontation need not necessarily involve direct military hostilities, but at a minimum it is likely that some form of low-intensity conflict in Ukraine will persist and that there is a possibility of escalation around other de facto states, such as Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. It is also conceivable that new "battlegrounds" might be opened up by Russia, such as in the Baltic states, especially in Estonia and Latvia both of which have significant Russian minorities.

Second, taking this logic of competitive influence-seeking through to its natural conclusion means accepting that, short of the "withdrawal" of one side or an agreed simultaneous withdrawal of both sides, there is little likelihood of restoring the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries affected in the near future. We may thus be facing the continuation and further consolidation of territorial divisions in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which in turn will increase the social and political obstacles to any conflict settlement short of legalizing the current state of affairs. In this sense, Minsk II is the "endpoint" of competitive influence-seeking—its non-implementation will either lead to a protracted status quo situation (as in Transnistria) or, eventually, to a recognition (possibly followed by annexation) of the de facto states in Donbas by Russia (as in the case of Georgia). Recognition/annexation, however, is unlikely for as long as the continued existence of de facto states in eastern Ukraine gives Moscow leverage over Kyiv, either by ensuring continued instability that limits the domestic and foreign policy choices of the Ukrainian government or for as long as there is a reasonable prospect of their re-integration on terms favorable to long-term Russian influence in the country.

Third, in light of these difficult challenges locally, regionally, and globally, the management of stability and security in the contested neighborhood should remain a priority for policy-makers in Russia and the West. In the absence of other institutionalized forms of dialog, this means that there is a place and a role for the OSCE in this process. Not only is it an established and accepted actor in conflict settlement efforts in all but Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it remains the only transatlantic security actor that offers an established forum for negotiations for all parties to these conflicts. Given that this is, at present, perhaps not the most thrilling prospect for effective security management, it might be time to invest more resources in reinvigorating this organization so it can live up to its conflict management and settlement potential.

Notes

1. On linkage and leverage in general, see, for example, Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006). For a recent specific application to the post-Soviet region, see Beyer and Wolff (2016).
2. Both of these literatures convincingly reject the idea that Russian policy in Ukraine was significantly driven by ideational factors, a finding that we concur with in our analysis. This is not to argue that Russian foreign policy is entirely immune to such factors, but rather to emphasize that, as Hopf (2016, 228) has argued in the context

of Russia's annexation of Crimea, "discursive changes [in what it means to be Russia and Russian] made Russia's annexation of Crimea thinkable and possible, [but that] it was the contingent circumstances of that moment that made it a reality." We also acknowledge the existence of a growing critical geopolitical strand in the literature on Russia's foreign policy (Omelicheva 2016), but cannot engage with it in detail for reasons of space.

3. A similar point was made more than a decade ago by Buzan and Wæver (2003, 410), who stated that "if Russia is to remain a great power able to both defend itself and assert some influence globally, it needs to retain its sphere of influence in the CIS".

4. Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, given to the program "Voskresnoye vremya," Moscow, 30 March 2014, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/68426.

5. This phrase was used by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to describe a "situation, in which Brussels told Ukraine to choose between the West and Russia." See the interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with ITAR-TASS," 10 September 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/671172. Western pressure exerted on Ukraine to choose is also noted by Zannier (2015, 48), stating that "When I met with EU officials, including the then-European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, he was very firm in stating that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement was not compatible with the Customs Union, and that Ukraine had to choose its own future course".

6. Russian Foreign Ministry statement on the implementation of the Minsk agreements on a settlement in Ukraine and elections in its southeastern regions, 29 October 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNIr/content/id/742441.

7. This view of the neighborhood as a contested ground in which Russia and the West compete is not new, nor is it limited to Ukraine. For example, Russia's interpretation of the failed 2003 settlement for Transnistria is that "once the parties have agreed upon something, external support should gently keep them at the negotiating table rather than trying to throw in some provocation, as happened in the case of Transnistria settlement in 2003. At the time the settlement plan—every page of which had already been initialed by the head of Transnistria and the President of the Republic of Moldova—was not signed, because late in the evening before the signing, the European Union political structures demanded that the President of Moldova not sign the document." See remarks and responses to reporters' questions by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during a news conference following the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting, Basel, 5 December 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/812884.

8. We use the term "logic" in the same sense as Fearon (1995, 381): "general mechanisms, or causal logics, that operate in a variety of more specific international contexts".

9. We proceed from, without further interrogating, the assumption that the EU (the "West") is pursuing a policy of regional economic and political integration aimed at Ukraine that involves some aspiration of building stable, effective, law-based, and democratic institutions (primarily through the European Neighbourhood Policy/Eastern Partnership). See, for example, Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk (2015).

10. The absence of any key moments would also invalidate our theoretical propositions. While this is relevant for further tests of our theory in other cases in the future, it is clearly not relevant here as much of our theorizing is driven by us having *prima facie* established, through empirical observation, that the four political agreements concluded constitute such key moments.

11. We have collected all relevant agreements from official sources and collated them in a single online repository available at: http://stefanwolff.com/publications/the-logic-of-competitive-influence-seeking-russia-ukraine-and-the-conflict-in-donbas/.

12. We primarily rely on press releases, statements, and speeches released by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://www.mid.ru and as cited) to ensure the authenticity of the material used.

13. Since May 2014, we have individually or jointly participated in 12 workshops on different aspects of the evolving crisis in Ukraine conducted under the Chatham House Rule, five of which we co-organized (see the table on workshops in the Appendix). When using data from these workshops to substantiate our claims, we observe the conventions of the Chatham House Rule for doing so and reference workshops in the chronological order in which they occurred (e.g. Workshop A, Workshop B, etc.).

14. Given the sensitivity and volatility of the situation in Ukraine, we have followed a policy of strict anonymization of all 42 interviews, including in the very few cases in which interlocutors did not request this. In order to balance the protection of our interlocutors with the need to keep referenced information meaningful and credible for our analysis, we thus refer to an interlocutor's affiliation but not to his or her rank or the date or location of the interview. In addition, we have randomly assigned short references (e.g. Interview 1, Interview 2, etc.) in order to obscure dates (May 2014, July 2014; August 2015, November 2015, December 2015; January 2016, February 2016, April 2016; April 2017) and locations (Brussels, Chisinau, Kramatorsk, Kyiv, London, Mariupol, Vienna, Washington, DC, and online/email) of interviews, as well as dates (May 2014; February 2015, April 2015, August 2015, November 2015, December 2015; February 2016, April 2016; April 2017) and locations of workshops (Chisinau, Kyiv, Rome, Washington, DC) for the purposes of increasing anonymity. All interlocutors were informed of the research purpose of the interview, of our anonymization policy, and of their right to withdraw from the project prior to manuscript submission (see the table on interviews in the Appendix).

15. We are thus confident that we adhere closely to the three principles of data access and research transparency (DA-RT)—data access, production transparency, and analytic transparency—as elaborated in the Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science (American Political Science American Political Science Association 2012, 9–10) and further specified, among others, by Kapiszewski and Kirilova (2014) and Elman and Kapiszewski (2013).

16. "Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine," http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/671350/publicationFile/190051/140221-UKR_Erklaerung.pdf.

17. As Yanukovych realized that the Maidan movement did not accept the agreement, he went to Kharkov to a meeting of all deputies of local councils. Unable to obtain their support, he escaped to Russia.

18. Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the events in Ukraine, 24 February 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/73918.

19. "Geneva Statement on Ukraine"; https://geneva.usmission.gov/2014/04/18/text-of-the-geneva-statement-on-ukraine-released-by-the-us-eu-ukraine-and-russia/.

20. Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the aggravation of the situation in the southeastern regions of Ukraine, 13 April 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RNIr/content/id/65894.

21. See, for example, "Interview of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with ITAR-TASS," 10 September 2014 (http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/671172) and "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Delivers a Speech and Answers Questions during Debates at the 51st Munich Security Conference, Munich," 7 February 2015 (http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/949358).

22. Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his answers to questions from the mass media summarizing the meeting with EU, Russian, US, and Ukrainian representatives, Geneva, 17 April 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/64910.

23. For a more detailed exploration of OSCE activities during this period, see Zannier (2015).

24. Interview given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the "Russia Today" TV channel and "Vesti nedeli" on the "Rossiya" TV Channel, New York, 27 September 2013; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/668812.

25. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Life News television and *Izvestia* daily, Moscow, 27 October 2014; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/742828.

26. "Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements"; https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e3.

27. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comment for the media on the results of a Normandy format meeting, Paris, 24 February 2015; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/961334.

28. Authors' translation from www.gazeta.zn.ua/internal/sergey-taruta-dazhe-esli-shahterov-ispolzuyut-eto-ne-isklyuchaet-ih-realnyh-problem-nuzhen-dialog-a-ne-ultimatumy.html.

29. This view of the sequence of events is broadly shared among local and international observers (Interviews 8, 16, and 17; Workshop J).

30. In summer 2014, Russian nationals took over key positions in Donbas and a team of "officials" from Transnistria were drafted in to use their experience of (de facto) state-building (Malyarenko and Wolff 2014).

31. Dinamika stavlennya naselennya Ukraïni do Rosiï ta naselennya Rosiï do Ukraïni, yakykh vidnosyn z Rosieyu hotili b ukraïntsi [How Relations Between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like? Public Opinion Polls' Results]. Public opinion poll was conducted in the period between February 8–18, 2014; 2032 respondents were interviewed. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. 4.03.2014 http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=236&page=1

32. These findings were also confirmed separately by another of our interlocutors (Interview 19).

33. Interview with Gennadii Korban, 23 October 2015; http://gordonua.com/publications/korban-ahmetov-reshil-potorgovatsya-s-kievom-chtoby-sohranit-vliyanie-na-donbasse-no-pereblefoval-i-seychas-stradaet-103299.html.

34. See https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/accidents/2016-05-14/jurnalist-rasskazal-o-konflikte-zaharchenko-s-glavnyim-reyderom-dnr/58936.

35. See, for example, http://www.osce.org/uk/odihr/131776?download=true; http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UAReport17th_UKR.pdf; and https://jfp.org.ua/coalition/novyny-koalicii/articles/osce-hdim.

36. Consequently, Akhmetov's economic and humanitarian networks and structures were forced out of the rebel-controlled parts of Donbas.

37. A particularly notorious example of this was the case of Vadim Pogodin, the commander of the "Kerch" battalion of the DPR. He is alleged to have killed a local teenager for expressing pro-Ukrainian sympathies in July 2014 in rebel-controlled Donetsk (Interviews 27 and 44; see also www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/07/28/73261-rasstrel).

38. As the report notes, "[d]ue to access and resource limitations, our findings are likely to represent only a fraction of the actual criminal conduct" (International Partnership for Human Rights 2015, 28). The widespread, prolonged, and systematic occurrence of human rights violations during this period has also been well documented by the United Nations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014), by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch 2016), and by the US State Department

(US Department of State 2015, 2016). It is also important to bear in mind that such abuses have been committed by all sides in the conflict and have not stopped after the conclusion of Minsk II. See, for example, Human Rights Watch (2017); US Department of State (2017).

39. An illustrative example is the "Sparta" battalion of rebels in Donetsk. Led by Russian mercenary Arsen Pavlov (aka "Motorola"), himself a veteran of several Russian military campaigns who failed to reintegrate into civilian life in Russia, members of Sparta are infamous for their cruelty against Ukrainian troops on the battlefield and in captivity (Interview 39; see also Mikheieva 2015).

40. Simultaneously, Russia prepared and executed the annexation of Crimea. We do not cover this particular sequence of events in our analysis, as Russia here pursued a very distinct approach, solely focused on the annexation of the peninsula and driven by military-strategic and political considerations that were distinct from those underpinning the Russian approach in mainland eastern Ukraine and addressed a particularly critical Russian security concern, namely securing its naval base in Sevastopol.

41. Similar to the situation in Georgia in 2008, it is, however, also conceivable that Russia may eventually decide to consolidate its gains and either recognize the two entities or, like Crimea, annex them.

42. All our Russian interlocutors, when asked about this issue, confirmed this as Russia's position (e.g. Interviews, 23, 31, and 32).

43. By the time of writing (summer 2017), implementation of Minsk II had ground to a nearly complete halt. Analogous to the failed 2003 Kozak plan for Moldova, parliamentary and popular opposition in Ukraine, especially to granting "special status" to the Donbas, is very high (Interviews 9, 12, and 13; Workshop J). Simultaneously, there is almost no political, social, and economic capacity for the reintegration of Donbas (Interviews 10 and 11).

44. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivers a speech and answers questions during debates at the 51st Munich Security Conference, Munich, February 7, 2015; http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/949358.

45. At this stage, we do not consider US disengagement from Ukraine very likely, and even if it were to happen, EU disengagement is even less likely.

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Appendix. List of interviews and workshops

Table A1. Interviews.

Anonymized interlocutor	Reference
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 1
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 2
Donetsk state regional administration official	Interview 3
Former member of "Dnepr-1" battalion, Ministry of Internal Affairs	Interview 4
Academic, Donetsk State University of Management	Interview 5
OSCE official	Interview 6
World Bank official	Interview 7
EU official	Interview 8
EU official	Interview 9
World Bank official	Interview 10
World Bank official	Interview 11
World Bank official	Interview 12
Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative	Interview 13
Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative	Interview 14
UNDP official	Interview 15
OSCE official	Interview 16
OSCE official	Interview 17
OSCE official	Interview 18
Academic, Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv	Interview 19
Former Ukrainian MP	Interview 20
Human rights activist	Interview 21
Advisor, Russian Council on International Affairs	Interview 22
Advisor, Russian Council on International Affairs	Interview 23
Academic, Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation	Interview 24
Academic, Perm' State University	Interview 25
ECMI Ukraine Representative	Interview 26
Ukrainian NGO activist	Interview 27
Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union official	Interview 28
Representative, Gorchakov Foundation	Interview 29
Representative, US-Russia Business Council, Eurasia Foundation	Interview 30
Representative, Carnegie Moscow Center	Interview 31
Academic, Southern Federal University	Interview 32
Academic, Southern Federal University	Interview 33
Academic, MGIMO	Interview 34
NGO, Institute for Peace	Interview 35
Colonel (ret.), Ukrainian Armed Forces	Interview 36
Major General (ret.), Ukrainian Armed Forces	Interview 37
UNDP, Kramatorsk-Donetsk	Interview 38
Academic, Boris Grinchenko University, IDP from Donetsk	Interview 39
Journalist	Interview 40
UNICEF, Kramatorsk	Interview 41
Academic, Boris Grinchenko University, IDP from Donetsk	Interview 42

Table A2. Workshops.

Workshop title	Anonymized participants	Reference
Enhancing Strategic Analytical Capabilities in NATO Partner Countries: Security Cooperation and the Management of Current and Future Threats in Europe's Strategic Orbit	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop A
Ukraine and Its Neighbourhood: How to Deal with Aggressive Russia	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop B
NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop C
Minorities and the Construction of an Inclusive Society: Ukraine, Moldova, and National Practice	Ukrainian and Moldovan government representatives, representatives of Ukrainian and Moldovan NGOs	Workshop D
US and European Russia Policy: Toward a Strategy	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop E
Minorities and the Construction of an Inclusive Society: Moldova, Ukraine and International Practice	Ukrainian and Moldovan government representatives, OSCE, EU officials, officials from local embassies, representatives of Ukrainian and Moldovan NGOs	Workshop F
Russia's Long War on Ukraine	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop G
NATO Transformation and Adaptation	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop H
Conflict in Ukraine and the Road Ahead: Impacts on Livelihoods and Development Prospects	Ukrainian government representatives, OSCE, EU, UN, and World Bank representatives, representatives from local embassies, representatives of Ukrainian NGOs	Workshop I
Strengthening Democratic Security Governance in the European Union's Neighbourhood	Experts, analysts from governmental, non-governmental, and academic institutions in Bulgaria, France, Italy, Latvia, Moldova, Poland UK, Ukraine, US	Workshop J
NATO's Future: Bigger and Better or Tired and Torn?	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, international organizations, NATO International Military Staff	Workshop K
The EU's Comprehensive Approach to Security in the Eastern Neighbourhood	Civilian and military experts from various research institutions, think tanks, the EU, and the Ukrainian government	Workshop L