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The “Russian Minority in Donbas” and the History of the Majority



Image by [Chuko Cribb](#).

Much is made of the “Russian minority” in Donbas. But a closer look at the complex lives of people and forces at play in the region—in the Soviet period and since—makes clear just how much this concept obscures.

Larisa called me in April 2014 from her home city of Makiivka near Donetsk. Terrified by the development of the pro-Russia uprising in the region, she said she was about to leave for central Ukraine. “I won’t live under Russian rule,” she told me. “I am Russian, I know what Russia is.”

The truth is, I do not know what exactly she meant. A woman in her late fifties, who has lived in Ukraine since before it gained independence, Larisa might remember the Soviet Union but not Putin’s Russian Federation. The apparent source of fear for her was also the

source of enthusiasm for many in southeastern Ukraine, especially in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, commonly known as Donbas.

In 2014, Soviet nostalgia was still widespread in this most heavily industrialized and urbanized region of Ukraine, where the post-Second World War Soviet Union was thought of as the glory days. This sentiment arose from the rapid economic decline of the 1990s. For years, local politicians had fed their supporters claims that the only way to restore Donbas to prosperity and glory was to redevelop ties with Russia. They portrayed Ukrainian independence as the source of all woes. Unable to offer comprehensive political and economic changes, Ukrainian elites (locally and in Kyiv) leveraged popular dissatisfaction with the most sensitive issues of language and culture. Russian elites, in turn, were always eager to help their Ukrainian allies by exploiting the same issues.

Donbas has witnessed several waves of migration. Catherine the Great resettled Christians from the Ottoman empire, Greeks and Serbs above all, to these newly conquered lands. German settlers were invited with the promise of fat Ukrainian land. At the turn of the twentieth century, during the Russian empire's short-lived industrial revolution, the most impoverished and reckless people from across the empire came to Donbas *en masse*. The barely inhabited eastmost part of today's Ukraine, with its rich coal fields, seaports, and emerging railway system, suddenly found itself the center of attention. Living and working conditions were terrible, though, so the Donbas population fluctuated due to constant migration and a high mortality rate. The next wave of migration came after the Second World War, consisting of those, young communists and political prisoners alike, sent to the region to rebuild the region's industry that was in tatters. And then there were the blooming 1960s and 1970s, when youth from the entire Soviet Union rushed to Donbas for jobs in coal mining, one of the most prestigious industries during Soviet rule.

My father was fourteen when he boarded the first available train to flee his home on a collective farm in the south of Ukraine, near Crimea. On the train, he met several teenagers who suggested that he get off in Kursk and enter military college. But in Kursk it turned out that the admission period was already over. Someone suggested going to Donbas to learn coal mining. And so my father ended up in Donetsk.

What is typical in this story is not only a teenager fleeing a kolkhoz. After arriving in Donetsk, my father, of mixed Belarusian and Ukrainian origin, stopped speaking Ukrainian, his mother tongue. The single safest way to integrate into his new multiethnic but paradoxically quite chauvinistic environment, a big city with a Russian-speaking majority, was to speak the Soviet lingua franca without an accent. As a result of this

process, by 1991 many of those who lived in this melting pot saw themselves only as Soviet people or Donbas people. It meant virtually nothing to be Russian or Ukrainian.

In Soviet Ukraine, Ukrainian was intended to be the majority language. But in urbanized, predominantly Russian-speaking Donbas, it was regarded as the language of the backward villages or of extreme Ukrainian nationalism.

By 1989, the Soviet Union was nearing its economic collapse and the Soviet nomenclature was demoralized. But new political movements lacked an economic agenda. The Soviet state, which proclaimed ethnic solidarity as one of its core principles, took only several years of relative freedom to become the site of bloody ethnic conflicts. Those who, like Donbas miners, took to the streets for economic satisfaction and not out of ethnic pride, were left virtually alone. But for the non-ethnic Donbas population, the state of the local economy, especially its mythologized coal mining, was also very much about dignity.

The idea of Ukrainian independence had been gaining popularity in Donbas, but things changed dramatically by the end of 1991. Instead of bringing expected improvements, the Soviet Union's collapse put local industrial entities on the verge of catastrophe. The shockingly swift severance of economic ties was followed by galloping inflation, the demolition of a familiar way of life, and a new type of bloody clash in Ukraine itself: mafia wars. To average Soviet men and women—who suddenly lost any perspective for the future and were left only with new political, economic, and cultural freedoms that were of no practical use, all of this was foreign and humiliating.

Eastern and western Ukraine stared each other in the face for the first time in 1991, even if still mainly from a distance. Neither liked how the other looked. Their mutual image has remained distorted for decades, feeding stereotypes and instigating the exchange of insults and blame. For Ukraine, Donbas has been an unloved child, an unconvertible *enfant terrible*. Still, it was family.

I grew up with all of this in the 1990s and 2000s. For years, I shared the common Donbas-centricity. In my father's village, I laughed at mistakes in my cousin's Russian-language workbook. In my school, I flipped with surprise through new textbooks with the greatest texts of Russian literature translated into Ukrainian. It did not even matter that I myself learned Ukrainian to fluency. In that exclusive political, economic, and cultural environment in Donbas up to the 2010s, it was not obvious that there were children in Ukraine, not far from us, who did not—and must not—know Russian.

New Ukrainian textbooks were a scarcity, though. Our public libraries were still full of Marx, Tolstoy, and Shevchenko from the 1970s and 1980s. Ukrainian culture was

perceived as backward compared to Russian, even for many years after our country gained independence. I learned about post-Soviet Ukrainian literature only in the mid-2000s as internet access in my area and for people of my social stratum was still scarce. It was a challenge to find books by Serhiy Zhadan or Yuri Andrukhovych on Donetsk bookshelves. Our right to preserve Russian, proclaimed and well defended by local politicians, in practice meant either ignorant or aggressive fencing off from everything Ukrainian.

Meanwhile, I visited Russia for the first time in 2018. For Moscow, keeping Ukraine in its orbit has never been about soft power. It was broadcasting state television rather than arranging open, live exchanges; funding political puppets instead of negotiating with independent politicians; leveraging gas deliveries instead of seeking contracts that would be economically advantageous to both sides. For millions of Ukrainians, our notion of modern Russia came from the media—and now from our streets.

I wonder what Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's former foreign minister, meant when he insisted recently, echoing other European politicians, that Ukraine has no path to peace apart from complying with the interests of "the Russian minority in the Donbas." Did he also have in mind the area that the Russians are now annihilating with air raids and artillery? Who belongs to this "Russian minority" in my city if most Ukrainian patriots speak Russian and numerous collaborators bear Ukrainian family names? Has anyone asked Larisa what she wants?

These are not the flourishing 1960s and 1970s that Donetsk locals recollect now as their city's best days. Still overwhelmed by pain, they recall 2012, the year of the European football championship, which Donetsk co-hosted. This place without history that emerged from workers' barracks suddenly turned into a supermodern megapolis, the shining city of the future. Now this future has been repeatedly tortured, raped, looted, vandalized, exiled, killed, demolished under Orwellian slogans about the protection of Donbas "Russians."

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