THE NATURE OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN THE DONBAS:
A POSTNONCLASSICAL VIEWPOINT

Igor Piliaiev
The Institute for Economics and Forecasting of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine
ORCiD: 0000-0001-7509-3158

Abstract. The article explores the armed conflict in the Donbas as a derivative of the Ukraine crisis through the prism of postnonclassical methodology. Three main approaches to research—and, accordingly, three levels of cognizing the conflict’s nature—are critically analyzed: neorealist, political, and cultural.

On the basis of a postnonclassical conception of the world and a fractal understanding of the East-West dichotomy, Ukraine’s historical, linguistic and cultural diversity, particularly in the Donbas, are considered as a continuum of fractal differences and oppositions from the national to the local levels. Political and institutional ways of settling the armed conflict in the Donbas in line with contemporary globalization trends are recommended. The author concludes that the conflict cannot be settled until Ukraine represents a certain balance (dynamic and value-varied in space) between East and West. An inclusive cooperative model of security in Europe and Eurasia is advocated. For its part, Ukraine may have a crucial significance for the success of an Asia-Europe transcontinental dialogue.

Keywords: the East-West dichotomy, fractality, the Ukraine crisis, the Donbas conflict

INTRODUCTION

In one of his last appearances in the media in early 2017, Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of America’s foremost foreign policy strategists, pointed out with some trepidation that “strategic insecurity is now a fact of life on a scale heretofore not experienced by the now increasingly vulnerable humanity” (Brzezinski 2017). Great strategic conflicts among the United States, the world’s still-dominant superpower, Russia, which inherited the military power status of the former Soviet Union, and the rising superpower of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), have “brought about two strategic fault lines, one cutting across East Asia and the other eastern Europe” (Wu 2017: 214). With regard to the armed conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas region, the efforts of the international community have thus far not brought about any real progress toward long-term political, institutional or security...
stability. The conflict is still simmering, threatening to explode and thereby undermine security throughout the region.

OBJECTIVES
By using an interdisciplinary approach—based in large part on recent achievements in synergetics, such as discovering the world's fractal regularities (Christian 2004; Grinin & Korotayev 2013; Afanas’yeva, Kochelayevskaya & Lazerson 2013), along with neo-modernization and other non-linear approaches to social history, politics and economics (Müller 1998; Spier 2005; Yefimchuk 2010), including postmodern and postnonclassical concepts and transformation theories—we will:

• generalize principal academic approaches to researching and interpreting the Ukraine crisis, particularly as pertains to the armed conflict in the Donbas, analyze the latter’s historical background, and respectively define its nature;
• recommend political and institutional ways of settling the Donbas conflict and the general Ukraine crisis in view of contemporary globalization trends.

METHODOLOGY (THEORETICAL TOOLS PARADIGM)
Postmodern thinkers of the last quarter of the 20th century tried to present some kind of anarchic picture of the world and society, generated in the will to overcome the bloody legacy of totalitarian regimes.

_Rhizome_ (rootstock) is one of the key concepts in the philosophy of poststructuralism and postmodernism. It was introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari their eponymous book published in 1976, which was later included in _A Thousand Plateaus_, and intended to serve as the basis for their “nomadological project” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). The rhizome as a metaphor of postmodern consciousness is a network of multiple non-linear anti-hierarchical connections opposite to the linear structures of being and thinking typical of classical European culture. While the root (or pivot)—the key concept of structuralist binary thinking—has a center and goes deep, the rhizome is a structure with a missing semantic center, growing in breadth. The rhizome’s intrinsic “multiplicity” is a negation of the tree’s properties and manifests at all levels in the absence of any main stem or root. In this case, it is obvious that it is not possible to reduce the rhizomatic structure of society to a single common denominator or single general property, be it liberal democracy or a free market or, at the other end of the spectrum, a paternalistic empire or a nationalized economy.

The whole Eurasian megacontinental space is like a rhizome. To use an analogy from _A Thousand Plateaus_, it is a space where a multitude of orchids and wasps, “as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 10). This metaphor can be understood as one of the innumerable variants in the interaction between East and West: a dynamic, fractal process of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization”. It is not a phenomenon in which alien civilizations are opposed, but a fertilization (“pollination”) process that penetrates into all levels of international, national, regional
and local interaction—a dynamic process of mutual becoming generated not by a single actor, but by the conflict among powers in its non-linear development.

Meanwhile, poststructuralist “nomadism” striving to “do away with foundations” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 24) fundamentally denies causation and the very desire to harmonize being (individual, society and the surrounding world), the knowledge of its deep integrity and unity. At the socio-psychological, national and international levels, such a worldview actually contributes to the “deconstruction” of political will to build and maintain sustainable development systems based on the principles of peace and collective security, multilateral cooperation and integration. Such intellectual anarchism is fraught with chaos, social alienation and pessimism, an ego-war of “all against all” and, ultimately, the advent of a geopolitical “attractor” that establishes its external dictates over the society which has lost its foundation and inclination to sets goals.

By contrast, the fractal methodological approach to the universe, world and society is grounded and rooted in the progressive theoretical breakthroughs and achievements of the last quarter of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

Postnonclassical epistemology, which has been winning more and more proponents among intellectuals, organically combines methods of scientific, philosophical, religious and artistic cognition, as well as the corresponding pictures of the world (Prigogine 1991: 51). In particular, as a result of the interdisciplinary research boom, it became clear that fractality—i.e., self-similarity of part(s) to the whole across different scales—is, along with nonlinearity, a typical property of nature and society (Afanas’yeva, Kochelayevskaya & Lazerson 2013; Yefimchuk 2010).

Fractality, as a determining feature of the postnonclassical vision of the world, essentially overcomes the nomological (anarcho-“nomadic”) picture of the universe, which was proposed in the 1970s, later called poststructuralism, and became the “mainstream” of Continental philosophy in the post-bipolar era of the 1990s.

In light of the latest achievements of synergetics, which has already revived the holistic worldview based on universal regularities and patterns (previously inherent in mythology and religion) at the scientific level, the issue of trans-civilizational dialogue and integration seems particularly vital. This, in turn, relativizes the dichotomous thinking characteristic of the bipolar and the post-bipolar worlds.

Thus, from the postmodern understanding of the world, we take the concept of rhizome, and from the postnonclassical understanding we take the universal property of fractality. As a result of such a synergetic approach, the world, society in particular, may be represented and cognized as a substantive multiplicity, or plurality (“rhizome”) of interwoven “tree-properties” each nevertheless having its root-centers and its own logic of fractal development (ramification). Such “tree-properties” are capable both of “grafting” and being “grafted” by various factors and actors, leading in organic nature to mutations and in the social world to socio-economic, political, cultural and even civilizational transformations spawning hybrid or principally new properties.

Behind the empirical accumulation of multi-dimensional, non-linear trajectories of contradictions and conflicts that characterize today’s structural shocks in the political
and security architecture of Eastern Europe, the fractal-synergetic approach allows us to distinguish certain universal paradigms determining the genesis, development and prospects of settling the hybrid armed conflict in the Donbas, as well as the Ukraine crisis in general.

In this regard, the conceptual contrast between East and West—which has existed since Herodotus (484 BCE–425 BCE) and has been developed by universal historians and theoreticians up through Samuel Huntington (1996), Iver Neumann (1999), Alexandr Panarin (2002), Yurii Pavlenko (2002)—needs further, essentially interdisciplinary development in accordance with the latest achievements in the world of science. Apparently, in the progress toward a multivariate vision of the world and its spatial and temporal dynamics, one may foresee the emergences of new trans-civilizational intellectual currents and socio-political initiatives aiming to reconcile the traditional East-West dichotomy through the global synthesis of different civilizational views of religion, ethics, metaphysics, science and art (Marmazov & Pliliaiev 2018: 327–328).

THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT: THREE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

The Neorealist Approach to the Ukraine Crisis in the Context of European and Eurasian Security

Modern political science literature devoted to the conflict in the east of Ukraine is dominated by the neorealist vision of the conflict. This vision sees the conflict through the prism of geopolitics—contradictions in the world, megacontinental and macroregional orders—as a “great strategic crisis” (Wu 2017: 197) of international security and of Europe (more precisely, Eastern Europe) and the post-Soviet space’s political and institutional architecture (Bacevich 2002: 114–116).

Leading political realists in the US—such as Robert Kagan, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Robert Kaplan, Andrew Bacevich, et al.—have argued that the new world order will continue to resemble the great power struggles, wars and conflicts of the past. They refute Francis Fukuyama and other neoliberal institutionalists’ views throughout the 1990s about the end of the global rivalry for influence (Zając 2016: 178), the triumph of democratic liberalism and “democratic peace” (Berryman 2017: 178). In the vein of the realists, Justina Zając asserts in her skeptical view “from Warsaw”:

“The 21st century saw a return to the geopolitics of the 19th century—to the power of states, the concert of powers, political and military rivalry, and the division of the world into spheres of influence” (Zając 2016: 192–193).

At this level of political analysis, the Ukraine crisis is the result of unresolved geopolitical contradictions between the West and Russia after the collapse of the USSR and the former bipolar world order with two global superpowers maintaining the geopolitical and military-strategic balance: the US and USSR. In institutional terms, this geopolitical contradiction is expressed in the conflict of the normative orders (regimes) of the Euro-Atlantic hierarchy (which the Kremlin considers the substitution of international law for the NATO-centric but not the universal rules (Lavrov 2019: 13) and the Russia-controlled (relying on its strengthened economic power) hierarchy (Eurasian
Economic Union, Customs Union, CIS, CSTO) (Bogdanov 2017: 39). According to dominant political analysts in mainland China, it is “one of the most serious geopolitical crises since the end of the Cold War” (Lilei 2015: 159). “The Ukraine Crisis, in essence, embodies competition and mutual confrontation between the EU and the Eurasian Union” (Lilei 2017: 173), and “is seen as a clash between the West and Russia” (Zajac 2016: 137). At the same time, some political analysts, not only Russian and Chinese but also Western ones, lay the blame primarily on the West. Among the main arguments put forward by critics of the West, two stand out: the failure to comply with the political assurances of not expanding NATO to the east given to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by the then-US leadership in late 1989 and early 1990; and the alleged “hypocrisy in US policies on Ukraine versus Kosovo: Washington argued for elections in Kosovo under the guise of human rights, while denouncing elections in Crimea under the argument of sovereignty” (Saalman 2017: 138).

Certainly, such accusations are likely to only intensify after the recognition by US President Donald Trump on March 25, 2019 of Israel’s 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights—i.e., Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights. Earlier, on December 6, 2017, Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The EU is against such steps.

Other political scientists lay the blame for undermining the world and the European normative order—the Helsinki principle of inviolability of borders and the entire system of regional, continental and global security—on Russia and, indirectly, on the PRC (for getting closer to Russia on the basis of their rivalry with the US) (Berryman 2017: 180; Duleba 2014; Gorbulin 2015: 23; Haran 2015; Karolewski & Cross 2017: 150; Loftus & Kanet 2017; Motyl 2014: 82; Radziyevska, Us, & Pokryshka 2017; Serbos & Anastasiadis 2018; Engaging Russia 2014: 12; Yekelchyk 2015; Yermolenko 2019). Still others, though less commonly, take a neutral (equidistant) position (Arakelyan 2017, Costea (Ghimis) 2016: 345; Freire 2017: 205; Rytövuori-Apunen 2017; Wu 2017).

As Ana-Maria Costea (Ghimis) points out, the Kremlin’s “constant antagonism vis-à-vis the West and the expansion of the EU and NATO in Russia’s own backyard” created “the preconditions of a war that would lead to a frozen conflict on the Ukrainian territory that ultimately would freeze Kyiv in a gray zone in which is neither with Russia, nor with the EU/NATO. Taking all these into consideration, we should acknowledge also the West’s responsibility in playing in the Russian backyard and not reacting sooner and in a more constant manner” (Costea (Ghimis) 2016: 345). In this regard, from the global and continental perspective, the armed conflict in the Donbas might also be seen as a proxy war (Minasyan 2014; Mumford 2013; Saalman 2017: 135) between the world’s biggest nuclear powers and major geopolitical actors in Eurasia, which has much in common with the Korean War, the ongoing confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, and the strategic conflict over Taiwan. From this point of view, along with Russia’s direct military intervention in the armed conflict in Ukraine, another great power has become actively involved as a security protector: the US. As Taiwanese political thinker Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang emphasizes in this regard: “Taiwan is more like the rest of Ukraine, dangerously and unfortunately situated in a competition between great powers and simply trying to survive” (Huang 2014). Academician Yu-Shan Wu further posits: along with
the main geopolitical fault line for Sino-American competition found in East Asia”, “another great strategic conflict in today’s world is between the West and Russia over Ukraine. The lesser powers in Eastern Europe are in a situation similar to that of their counterparts in East Asia: both are caught in a competition between two great powers” (Wu 2017: 197).

As British political scientist Richard Sakwa (2015: 31-32) rightly points out: “The Ukrainian crisis is only the latest symptom of the long-term failure to reconcile the various interests on the European continent.” This is eventually a continental crisis, reflecting fundamental problems in the East-West relations of the post-unipolar epoch. Sakwa sees the root of the Ukraine crisis in the fact that after the fall of the Berlin Wall “unlike at Yalta, there was no Winston Churchill to speak on behalf of Europe” (2015: 31–32). As a result, at the Maltese summit of the leaders of the USSR and the US, Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush, held on December 2–3, 1989, less than a month after the Berlin Wall had fallen, there was no substantive talk about Greater Europe:

“The tragedy of the Malta Summit is that Gorbachev was not talking about these ideas with European leaders, but with the President of the United States. [...] Not surprisingly, the idea of a Greater Europe was the last thing that Bush wished to talk about, since it would signal precisely what America had long feared: a split between the European and American wings of the Atlantic alliance. [...] Thus, Malta turned out to be not just a lost opportunity but a political disaster” (Sakwa 2015: 32).

In 1989-1990 Germany and in the early 1990s Poland claimed the role of bridge between East and West (Zając 2016: 186–187). Then this role passed to Russia and Ukraine. Now, since the above crisis, there is no country playing such a role. After the dissolution of the USSR, Washington and Brussels’ policy toward the new independent states of the CIS has been fundamentally different from their approach to Russia, setting up the foundation for strategic conflicts.

Helena Rytövuori-Apunen sees causes of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and the simmering conflict in the Donbas in the “normative dualism embedded in the concept of the state border” since the latter has become increasingly contested starting from the 1999 NATO military intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Helena Rytövuori-Apunen 2017: 186–187). This has loosened the fundamental principle of the inviolability of borders (agreed in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and further implemented in various international treaties between European/Eurasian states) under the pretexts of blatant and/or mass human rights violations necessitating international “humanitarian interventions”, “peace-forcing” missions, self-declared separatist referendums, etc. By referring to the Kosovo precedent (including the eventual recognition in February 2008 by Western powers of Kosovo’s self-declared independence from Serbia), Russia, as Rytövuori-Apunen emphasizes, “used a similar argumentation in its recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, as well as in its annexation of Crimea in 2014” (Rytövuori-Apunen 2017: 180).
Like John W. Burton, who, on the eve of the detente crisis in Europe and a new arms race, warned that the “win-lose” framework logically contradicted conflict resolution (Burton 1979), Helena Rytövuori-Apunen sees in such a “(quasi)legal approach” the establishment of “right” and “wrong” categories, which create a dangerous trap for efforts to settle border-related conflicts by freezing them without settling the real fundamental contradictions that gave rise to these conflicts (Rytövuori-Apunen 2017: 180).

With regard to the trajectory of the Ukraine crisis, Rytövuori-Apunen argues:

“[…] the conflict in Eastern Ukraine became deadlocked when the Ukrainian parliament in January 2015—subscribing to a practice that already existed in the government—defined the insurgents and separatists in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics as ‘terrorists’ and thereby criminalized not only their military methods but also their voices concerning the issues that had ignited the conflict” (Rytövuori-Apunen 2017: 180).

Some political scientists in the context of the Ukraine crisis note its destructive consequences (Arakelyan 2017; Bock, Henneberg, & Plank 2015; Freire 2017: 205; Rytövuori-Apunen 2017; Sakwa 2015: 31-32; Zając 2016), while others actually support the black-and-white logic of the zero-sum/“either-or” (Arakelyan 2017: 70) geopolitical game (Baev 2019).

Back in the mid-1990s, Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out the key geopolitical role of an independent Ukraine as a pivot between the West and Russia:

“Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state […]” (Brzezinski 1997: 46).

Nowadays, this conviction and its corresponding arguments are still rather mainstream among American political scientists engaged in Ukraine studies, although such views are not always expressed in an explicitly neorealist form. In this regard, John Berryman’s analysis of the Ukraine crisis, with respect to its impact and implications, is of particular interest:

“Nonetheless, it remains clear that a combination of American military power and the contribution of other regional powers will be necessary to prevent the emergence of a Eurasian hegemon—the central aim of US grand strategy” (Berryman 2017: 180).

From the position of offensive realism, Suzanne Loftus and Roger E. Kanet directly link the potential realization of Russia’s aspiration “to reestablish itself as a world power and sustain its rebellious attitude” towards the post-Cold War order with the capacity “to support its loud barks with substantial economic strength” (Loftus & Kanet 2017: 29).

Authors of the North American Chapter of the Trilateral Commission’s report released on May 15, 2014, devoted to the current state of and prospects for the West-Russia relationship in the context of the Ukraine crisis, are extremely frank as well:
“Putin's Russia is an adversary, bent on pursuing regional hegemony and challenging the Western-led international system.

[...] Above all, Russia affects the United States' ability to [...] ensure a favorable balance of power in critical regions that enables continued US global leadership” (The Trilateral Commission 2014: 12).

Characteristically, the Brzezinski concept applies in this regard not only to Russia but also to China as the emerging Eurasian and world superpower. Meanwhile, such a "win-lose" framework is logically opposed to the conflict's peaceful (diplomatic), not to mention consensus-finding, resolution.

Pavel Baev is skeptical about the efficacy of a China-Russia alliance doing away with US dominance:

“Instead of a cordial arrangement for complementary efforts at cutting short the US dominance, the China-Russia pseudo-alliance has turned into a mutually irritating duress, in which Beijing seeks to prevent Moscow from spoiling its difficult deal-making with Washington, and Moscow resents the short leash—and needs to escape from the path of a designated loser” (Baev 2019: 13).

By contrast, a Chinese contributor to East-Asian Chapter of the Trilateral Commission's above-mentioned report argued:

“From a Chinese perspective, the Ukrainian crisis is the product of residual Cold War mentality. [...] What Western media called 'a new Cold War' triggered by the Ukraine crisis is in no one's interest. If Ukraine at this point is forced to choose between the US/Europe and Russia, the situation will be further destabilized and the country risks another round of disintegration after it lost Crimea, and if the EU breaks with Russia for supporting Ukraine [sic] and the two end up in a new Cold War, the interests of both sides will be jeopardized as the costs far outweigh the gains” (The Trilateral Commission 2014: 27).

Among the EU member states, where there are strong fears of a revival of German imperialism and revanchism, the recommendations to use the Ukrainian crisis to contain German-Russian relations and prevent their transformation into a close strategic partnership (a nightmare for both American strategists and many politicians from countries that survived the German and/or Soviet occupation in the 20th century) are noteworthy. For example, Greek scholars Sotiris Serbos and Georgios Anastasiadis2 emphasize:

“We argue that US strategy favoring a united Europe can exploit events in Ukraine and security fears in Eastern Europe to contain the German-Russian relation, leaving Germany with no better option than commitment to lead EU integration” (Serbos & Anastasiadis 2018: 178).

In an effort to preserve for an indefinitely long time a tough confrontation between Ukraine and Russia in the US's strategic interests, one American political analyst, in the midst of the armed conflict, was proposing a direct Machiavellian strategy with regard to the particular districts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts not controlled by Kyiv:

---

2 It is noteworthy that Georgios Anastasiadis works at the American College of Thessaloniki.
“The goal would be to turn them not into autonomous federal units within a weak Ukraine, as Putin desires, but into an independent entity, as he pointedly does not” (Motyl 2014: 82).

In this regard, one may dispute the expediency of the West’s decision to fully include the Central and Eastern Europe states in the decision-making process regarding the EU-Russia relationship, because their relations with Russia were burdened by recent conflicts and problems, such as the occupation of the Baltic States, events in Hungary in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968, and very painful Poland-Russia relations with respect to historical memory, etc.

Some prominent Polish politicians, in particular, not only actively supported providing Ukraine with defensive weapons but “entertained a possibility” of armed intervention in Ukraine by using NATO forces (Zająç 2016: 168). At the same time, politicians and political forces aimed at resolving the Ukraine crisis by taking into account the interests not only of the West, but also of Russia, were labeled as “Trojan horses”—that is, direct agents of the Kremlin—in the scientific literature of the countries of the former “sanitary cordon” against the USSR (Karolewski & Cross 2017: 150). All this is very reminiscent of the aggressively derogatory Cold War rhetoric at its worst. Naturally, with such rhetoric, the “Donbas is likely to remain an unresolved conflict” (Karolewski & Cross 2017: 150).

At the same time, a number of prominent American political scientists are well aware of the danger of a global and continental US confrontation on two fronts—both against Russia and China. As early as April 2014 Rory Medcalf wrote:

“Is it fanciful fearmongering to start thinking of the prospect of a future double Cold War, with US-Russia and US-China relations in the freezer at the same time?” (Medcalf 2014).

Soon after Donald Trump’s election as US President, Graham Allison and Dimitri Simes addressed him with a blueprint wherein they argued that for the US “closer relations with Russia could provide counterbalancing to China” (Allison & Simes 2016).

Serbian political scientist Srdja Trifkovic also stresses the above need if one takes the viewpoint of US geopolitical interests:

“In the early 1970s, Dr. Henry Kissinger was really wise to consider the benefits of the discovery of the United States for China [...].

Then the Soviet Union was much more powerful than China, so the United States had a logical connection with the weaker side of the triangle. However, today China is economically and demographically much stronger than Russia, and for the United States the best strategy would be to strive for good relations with Moscow as a weaker side in the same triangle” (Trifkovic 2014: 21-22).

Turning to the issue of blame for the conflict in the east of Ukraine (by exploring and explaining), one may logically move to a second, deeper level of analysis of the conflict associated with confrontation and direct clash between different value-identity and political-normative orders on the Eurasian megacontinent. Herewith, some political scientists are limited to a purely political modernization approach, appealing to the
contradictions and dynamics of democratization in the modern world in general and in Eurasia and in the post-Soviet space in particular.

Conflict in the Context of Post-Soviet Transformation

In addition to the geopolitical conflict of the regulatory regimes of integration groupings in Eastern Europe, the second level of analysis of the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine considers the latter as a conflict of institutional value-normative orders or political regimes through the context of political/economic transformation/modernization in the post-Soviet, the post-Communist and Eurasian megacontinental spaces. Such an analysis is based on the normative content and qualities of the respectively Western (Euro-Atlantic and EU) democratic and, as alternative, Russian (pro-Russian, pro-Soviet, pro-Horde) authoritarian political regimes reflected in the Ukraine conflict at its various levels: international, national, subnational, etc.

At the same time, conflicting and antagonistic differences in political regimes are emphasized—in the context of modernization and globalization—in the countries one way or another involved in the conflict: i.e., primarily Ukraine, Russia and Ukraine’s Western partners. The main contradiction (conflict) here is seen between the authoritarian monopoly (in Russia and in the particular districts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts not controlled by the Ukrainian government) and the plural pro-Western, appealing to the principles of Western democracy (in Kyiv-controlled Ukraine), opposing political regimes. Thus, the clash between different political doctrines and political regimes in the post-Soviet space is represented as tending either to Western-style pluralist democracy and integrating to the European/Euroatlantic community, or to strong authoritarianism (also including paternalism and post-Soviet nostalgia), accepting Russia’s strategic interests and clout in the post-Soviet space (Bogdanov 2017; Hughes & Sasse 2016; Teramae 2017; Yekelchyk 2015).

Mark Teramae (University of Helsinki) sees the causes of the secessionist armed conflict in the Donbas in the phenomenon of Subnational Authoritarianism, which flourished there in the 2000s after the consolidation of regional power in the hands of the Party of Regions, which was based there and expressed the interests of the regional oligarchy headed by billionaire Rinat Akhmetov (Teramae 2017). The Party nominated his protégé Viktor Yanukovych to the post of Governor of the Donetsk region, then Prime Minister of Ukraine (2002–2004 and 2006–2007), and then President of Ukraine (2010–2014). It is noteworthy in this regard that according to the interpretation of most of mainland China’s political scientists and experts, Russia’s role in the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine may be understood rather as the catalyst and support force of the regional secessionism (Lilei 2015; Saalman 2017).

Serhy Yekelchyk argues that the 2013–14 Ukrainian revolution presented authoritarian powers in Russia with both a democratic and a geopolitical challenge (Yekelchyk 2015). Nevertheless, he characterizes Ukraine’s socio-economic system as “crony capitalism” (Yekelchyk 2015: 77) while recognizing the extreme right’s significant role in the Euromaidan mass protests (Yekelchyk 2015: 105).
A leading Ukrainian researcher of political radicalism and extremism, Yevhen Vasylchuk, based on a thorough study of the array of facts, concludes that in recent years the growing popularity of right-wing ideas and practices, including those of radical ethno-nationalism, has become an important trend of social and political life in Ukraine (Vasylchuk 2018: 219).

At the same time, a number of Ukrainian scholars believe that the result of Euromaidan has been the strengthening of the Ukrainian political (civil) nation based on universal human, European and patriotic values, while Ukrainian ethnic nationalism cannot be considered an essential determinant of the post-Maidan political transformations and political regime in Ukraine (Golovko, & Yakubova 2016: 754-755; Riabchuk 2016: 82–83; Sviatnenko 2014: 57; Zhurzhenko 2014: 264).

In our opinion, the matter lies in the principles on which the Ukrainian civil nation and Ukrainian civil nationalism will be based: either on the multicultural model of Canada (the “cultural mosaic”), on the ”melting pot” model more intrinsic to the US, or on the model of civil nation formation in France, adopted since the French Revolution, suggesting French as the sole language of public communication and common culture for all citizens of the country.

Meanwhile, the joint Geneva Statement on Ukraine by high representatives of the European Union, the United States, Ukraine and the Russian Federation (at the level of Foreign Ministers) issued on April 17, 2014 provided the following political commitment by the Ukrainian government:

“The announced constitutional process will be inclusive, transparent and accountable. It will include the immediate establishment of a broad national dialogue, with outreach to all of Ukraine’s regions and political constituencies […]” (Geneva Statement 2014).

Article 7 of the Minsk Protocol signed by representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), and the self-proclaimed Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) on September 5, 2014 under the auspices of the OSCE also provides “to continue the inclusive national dialogue” (Chairperson-in-Office welcomes Minsk agreement 2014) that clearly demonstrates the civil component of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, in the post-bipolar era, Western countries, unlike the post-Soviet states, have managed to peacefully cope with secessionist challenges due to mature democratic institutions—as testified by a successful democratic control of separatist movements in Northern Ireland (since the 1998 Belfast Agreement) and Scotland (in Great Britain), Quebec (Canada), Basque Country and Catalonia (both in Spain), Corsica (France), and the Flemish region of Belgium, et al. The central authorities have managed to effectively control the problematic region by impeding the separatist elites’ full capture of regional power as well as intervention from abroad.

However, Ukraine’s political regime before and after the Euromaidan is far different from those of the country’s Western partners.
Ukrainian political scientist Yuriy Matsiyevsky, having analyzed the political regime in his country for the last three decades, comes to a conclusion that after independence proclaimed in 1991 “the regime in Ukraine changed only once and this change lasted from the late 80s to the mid 90s. Since that time, the political regime in Ukraine has been hybrid” (Matsiyevsky 2018: 357). He admits thereby that the crises of power in Kyiv widely known as the 2004 “Orange Revolution” and the 2013–2014 “Revolution of Dignity”, or Euromaidan, were not real social revolutions and no actual changes of political regime in Ukraine occurred.

Instead, to our mind, both the “Orange Revolution” and Euromaidan have become turning-points in the history and quality of Ukraine’s political regime. We may agree with Tadeusz Olszański (2017: 7) that “the ‘revolution of dignity’ and the war [in the Donbas] have brought about a massive expansion of social initiatives [...] which have revealed great potential for the self-organization of Ukrainian society”. As a result, the Ukrainian democracy, while still being far from the standards characteristic of democracy in the West, has come the closest of all the post-Soviet states, save the Baltic ones, to meeting those standards (Olszański 2017: 6).

If one considers a social revolution not as the Marxist “locomotive of history” but in Walter Benjamin’s perception as perhaps “the grasp for the emergency brake” by some society or a nation travelling on the “train of history” (Leslie 2000: 173), then, according to Valeriy Smoliy:

“The Orange Revolution became a safeguard against the probable curtailment of democratic processes and turned on the green light to liberalization of social and economic life. The Revolution of Dignity made it impossible to form an authoritarian political regime and defended state sovereignty after the November 2013 foreign policy reversal. (Smoliy 2016: 7)”

Thus, both these crucial events in the history of independent Ukraine mentioned above may be interpreted as two stages of an anti-authoritarian revolution. However, as Olszański soundly substantiates, ‘The ‘Revolution of Dignity’ nonetheless failed to create a new elite capable of taking power, as a result of which the ‘oligarchic-bureaucratic opposition’ took over in Ukraine” (Olszański 2017: 107) so that “Ukraine will remain a democratic oligarchic-bureaucratic state for the foreseeable future, disinclined to implement radical reforms without pressure from the outside” (Olszański 2017: 7). The first months that have passed since the reboot of the highest echelons of Ukrainian power after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, in our opinion, have basically confirmed these conclusions.

In contrast to today’s Ukrainian economy (which is predominantly neo-feudal, though with a dynamically developing segment of European-style capitalist relations), in Putin’s Russia one can observe the phenomenon of a two-tier property system characteristic of politar societies (i.e., societies in which ownership of property, although officially registered to legal entities and individuals, actually belongs to the top brass of the state bureaucracy acting on behalf of the entire ruling class). Thus, the socio-political and economic system of contemporary Russia may be identified as palace-neopolitar (i.e., a system wherein the top bureaucratic oligarchy has usurped power and the country’s
core economic resources and assets, controlling and redistributing them with the purpose of its own utmost enrichment). Moreover, due to the escalation of Russia’s systemic conflict with the West and, more broadly, with the modern world, a further consolidation of the palace-neopolitar power and economic system is taking place, bringing under its control the segment of competitive market relations and increasingly distorting it (Piliaiev 2016).

The analysis of the quality and characteristics of political regimes allows one to substantially explain the behavior of the subjects representing them in the international arena, which is beyond the power of political-realistic analysis. The prominent Taiwanese political thinker Yu-Shan Wu gives an example by pointing out “a major difference between Russia and China: the lack of electoral competition and hence the need to whip up anti-Western sentiment in China” (Wu 2009).

However, the normative order and political regime approach does not take into account the actual patterns of current development of the global and Eurasian continental systems. The relativism of such a conceptual approach is clearly visible from the reverse dynamics of democratization (in the Western liberal sense) in today’s world: as of 2018 compared with 2013, the number of full democracies in the world (of 167 countries ranked) has decreased from 25 to 20 (Democracy Index 2018—World Democracy Report 2019).

The international globalized community is moving away from doctrinal and messianic thinking (including the belief in the global triumph of liberal democracy and the alleged “end of history”)—the legacy of the two World Wars, the Cold War and the Unipolar world.

Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states have experienced less than 30 years of independence since the Communist regime’s fall—still a very short historical period for peaceful social transformations.

Let us consider how long some of today’s successfully modernized leaders of the democratic community have lived under pluralist democracy: East Germany, including the Eastern part of Berlin—less than 45 years; South Korea—about 40 years; Taiwan—about a total of 40 years (whereas from 1949 to 1987, or for 38 years, there was a strongly authoritarian rule).

For a little perspective: the average age of Taiwan’s population is 39.6, the average age of Germany’s population is 45.9 (World Population Prospects 2019). It means that for today approximately a half of all Taiwanese were born under authoritarian rule, and more than a half of Germany’s population are older than the total age of democracy in the East of their capital and their country.

Let us recall that the Political Guardianship Program (as part of the 1928 Constitution of the Republic of China adopted under Chiang Kei-shek) developed Sun Yat-sen’s ideas about the three stages of China’s revolutionary transition to democracy, namely: 1) The stage of military rule, which is necessary to get rid of foreign dependence and political fragmentation, to unite China into a single sovereign state; 2) The period of political tutelage, during which Chinese society, under the control of a gradually
democratizing national sovereign state, is being prepared for participation in political life;
3) The period of constitutional rule, manifested as Chinese democracy containing the
European features of constitutionalism and parliamentarism as well as taking Chinese
specifics into account (Sun Yat-sen 1918).

In fact, the Republic of China under Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kei-shek passed
through only the first two periods, so the transition to pluralist liberal democracy took
nearly 80 years (since 1911).

Thus, the first approach—ignoring significant political regime, normative-value,
cultural and civilizational differences among countries—analyzes the purely mechanical
balance of forces (economic, military, sometimes taking “soft power” into account)
between states or their alliances (wherein great powers dominate). The second approach
analyzes the conflicting parties’ normative-value orders (hierarchies) and political
regimes without a comprehensive balance sheet of power and interaction among
respective regimes (orders) advancing, for instance, the West-centric (Euro-Atlantic) order
by axiom as a system of neoliberal values (Bogdanov 2017: 39–40). The second approach
is also inclined not to take into consideration historical, cultural and civilizational
foundations of the normative and value orders.

Cultures and Value Conflicts (Axiology)

The third, the most profound level of analysis dealing with cultural grounds and causes
of conflict implies and integrates the levels of politico-(neo)realistic, normative-ordinal
and politico-regime analysis, since “culture controls everybody” (Wu 2015: 191).

A number of researchers of the Ukrainian crisis are turning to its cultural roots,
moving from a comparison of conflicting normative orders to deeper historical, cultural,
and mentally valuable root causes that gave rise to those orders (Olzacka 2017;
Rytövouri–Apunen 2017; Riabchuk 2016; Sviatnenko 2014; Zajać 2016; Zhurzenko 2014,
et al.). Following Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, in his most recent study, accepts
as “undeniably true” Huntington’s conclusion that for a successful democracy “the culture
is important, not the ethnic or religious identities of those who take part in it” (Fukuyama
2018: 161). Only real culture ultimately determines effective values. Thus, we are talking
about the role and influence of cultural phenomena and instruments on regional and
continental geopolitics, especially in the east of Ukraine as a new (post-Cold war) border
region of Eurasia (Matsuzato 2010).

It is indicative in this regard that analysts examining the conflict at a deeper level
of cultural identities, historical and cultural patterns, and values of respective countries
and regions in an attempt to get to the complex root causes and thereby grasp the hybrid
nature of the Donbas armed conflict by combining “intercultural conflict, interstate war,
and authoritarian experiments” (Minakov 2018: 313) are naturally not inclined to lay the
blame for the armed conflict on only one of its parties. Such a political and cultural
analysis goes as far back as Nikolai Danilevsky, the founder of civilization theory and his
famous work titled Russia and Europe, first published in 1869.
But the problem is that civilizationists (Huntington 1996, Panarin 2002, Pavlenko 2002 et al.) consider the problem of the conflict of cultural orders from the viewpoint of a certain isolated logic of development and even antagonism of individual civilization-cultural worlds (systems). In this context, each of the civilizations and the historical cultures that determine them is self-valued, while convergent trans-civilization trends are actually ignored. In contrast, we consider cultural, value and civilizational dichotomy in its fractal reification, in close historical interaction and complementarity of East and West at all levels—from macro-regional to local and individual.

The conflict in the east of Ukraine clearly highlighted, as Lev Gumilyov emphasizes, how commonality or similarity of cultural tradition, the heredity and continuity of certain memorial-museum forms do not in any way determine the unity of the behavior of living people, as evidenced, for example, by the opposite models of behavior and values of Muscovy and Veliky Novgorod of the 15th century (Gumilyov 2004: 377). This conclusion is important for understanding the essentially different patterns of behavior during Euromaidan of widely Russophone but strongly pro-European Kyiv, on the one hand, and Donetsk or Luhansk, on the other.

As Lilia A. Arakelyan points out, “mentality was always present in Western powers’ relations with Moscow even before the annexation of Crimea” (Arakelyan 2017: 80). Cheng-Chi Kuang and Jenn-Jaw Soong (2016) consider the traditional culture approach—especially political culture—to Russian history and present politics as “an important instrument for the comprehension of some salient factors behind Russia’s changing priorities and behavior in the international arena” (p. 75), emphasizing that “the ‘political culture’ approach to studies of Russian foreign policy becomes increasingly popular” (p. 76).

Nowadays “Russia […] sits uncomfortably on the periphery of both Europe and Asia...” (Trenin 2010: 188). Post-communist Russia faced a lack of organic cultural foundation for modernization, outdated basic principles and ethics, and the rapid destruction of traditional institutions and values without the appearance of new ones. Meanwhile, social institutions and strata antithetical to modernization (i.e., the Russian Orthodox Church, the bureaucracy and bourgeoisie living on raw material rent and extensive reproduction of the military-industrial complex, the anti-modernization part of the Russian intelligentsia appealing to the anti-democratic and traditional elements, like the so-called “patriotic conservatives” Izborsk Club (Galstyan 2016), etc.) began to reproduce, along with a geopolitical doctrine based on the Eurasian leadership ambitions (Golovko, & Yakubova 2016: 729). One may discover that under the facade of the “managed democracy” there hides, in a mitigated form, the regime of despotic power traditionally characteristic of the Russian state history (Merezhko 2012).

In fact, the post-colonial and post-imperial phantom pains of Russia’s political elite and society have become the main external driver of the armed conflict in the Donbas. As Mykola Riabchuk (2016: 76) shrewdly emphasizes: “An independent, ‘Europeanized’ Ukraine poses a strategic threat not so much to Russian national security as to Russian premodern, imperial identity”. Moreover,
“Ukraine proved to be a much greater heir to the traditions of Russian humanism and democracy of the late 19th–early 20th centuries than Putin’s Russia. Against the backdrop of the total degradation of mass political culture in Russia, Ukraine will remain the ground for the future-oriented reproduction of Russian democratic culture” (Golovko & Yakubova 2016: 754).

Rytövuori-Apunen quite accurately indicates the socio-psychological roots of the conflict which lie deep in the layers of spiritual and material culture, historical memory and mode of life. She further comes to the value “friend-foe” substrate, which rejects any rational arguments, acting as a powerful irrational force:

“[…] The deeper dividing lines can be unfolded by asking what it is that Russia and the EU represent for these people in relation to the opportunities that they have in their lives and the sense of belonging that gives them a history and a culture. This border has no fixed points on land but exists because it is sustained by some previous experience, both personal and stored in the memory of generations. It becomes actual when people in their ‘new’ encounters with the empirical world can recognize something with which they feel familiarity or what, contrarily, feels alien, and in its practical implications means discontinuity with their ways of existence” (Rytövuori-Apunen 2017: 190).

Culture is virtually the substrate and driver of ideational/value civil and international conflicts. The organic interconnection and interaction between culture and democracy (being the determining modernization criterion of political regime and normative order) deserve special attention. However, the black-and-white dichotomy is not relevant in analyzing the above complex relationship.

As Shufang Wu from Central China Normal University (PRC) argues:

“Democracy has also become a component of Chinese culture ever since the early 20th century. Although the development of democracy has lagged far behind that of science and the progress of economic development, it has been rooted in the soil of Chinese society and is comprehensively admired by Chinese people, especially liberal intellectuals” (Wu 2015: 191).

That is why any analysis of cultural roots of a conflict, either civil or international, should take into consideration the development of democracy with regard to the concerned parties’ political regimes.

Yue Yin draws attention to the fact that “direct democracy with Chinese characteristics” occupies an important and independent position in public perceptions of democracy in China, which reveals the limitation in using the binary categories “guardianship” vs. “liberal democracy” to explore what is on the minds of Chinese citizens when they think about democracy (Yue 2018).

I argue that fundamental principles of modern Western society, such as pluralism and the rule of law, have their traditional conformities among core values of the Chinese and broader Confucian social culture, although in substantially converted forms (Marmazov & Pliliaiev 2018).

In contrast to Confucianism where there is no fundamental difference between ours and others, since relationships with all require harmonization, in the Western
discourse of the Alien (Other), the imperative of harmonizing relations is absent. Moreover, relations with the Other imply permanent conflict due to the immanent insolubility of the deep contradictions of identity, a certain estrangement in relations, distrust of a partner acting in the status of the “Other”—such a Protestant value-civilizational approach especially manifested in the concept of the “Other” developed by Norwegian political scientist Iver Neumann (1999), is especially characteristic of the Protestant worldview (conceptual and doctrinal thinking). Such (permanent or wavy) forcing tension in relations with the Other implies corresponding doctrines, such as brinkmanship, nuclear deterrence, containment, etc. (practiced, for example, in the US-USSR relations).

The fundamental problem for settling the strategic conflicts of value in Eurasia is the conviction of Western exceptionalism.

Olena Lyubchenko, while living in multicultural and ethnically tolerant Canada, has researched the substantial interaction between pro-Western liberals and the anti-Russian radical right forces during and after the victory of Euromaidan rally protests in Ukraine. She posits that within Carl Schmitt’s classic friend-enemy mental distinction, which is “no longer geographically defined, those who have not embraced ‘Europe’ for ideological or socio-economic reasons are deemed irretrievably backward and, virtually, ethnically different” (Lyubchenko 2017: 54). Such an essentialized and, ultimately, irrationalized cultural argument refutes and delegitimizes any opposite opinion with regard to national geopolitical choice, economic policy or cultural policy.

To our mind, the lack of progress in settling the Ukraine crisis is just due to the dominance in Western, Ukrainian and Russian political discourse of the culturally Alien (Other), relations with whom are doomed to conflict because of antagonistic values. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, since the conflict with Russia, “New Orientalism” is growing (Lyubchenko 2017) delegitimizing the “East” from the cultural standpoint as the Europe’s Other.3

Predominantly inter-ethnic (including ethno-linguistic) or inter-confessional conflicts are characterized by confrontation between traditional ethnic or religious identities (which are, as a rule, rather stable for many generations) and their corresponding values. By contrast, mainly ideological (ideationally) value conflicts are characterized by “fluidity”, vagueness, hybrid identity and opposition of ideological values (dependent on propaganda, information wars and manipulations), primarily relating to the population’s political, historical and cultural orientations and preferences.

Serhy Yekelchyk (2015: 20) points out that the three-fourths of Ukraine outside of its westernmost part are “diverse and fluid”. In fact, it is difficult to say something about a Ukrainian until you know how he feels about Russia as his country’s historically main “Other”.

3Carl Schmitt in probably his most influential work titled The Concept of the Political (first published in 1932) grounds his conception of state sovereignty (or autonomy) upon the friend-enemy distinction. The latter is to be determined subjectively, “existentially”, i.e. the enemy is whoever may be “the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible.” (Schmitt 2007: 27). This concept was further developed by contemporary Norwegian political scientist Iver Brynild Neumann (1999).
Paradoxes are also associated with the Ukrainian “Piedmont”—Western Ukraine’s historical land of Halychyna (Galicia), which is traditionally considered to be the region of the “most conscious Ukrainians” and the bastion of Ukrainian ethno-nationalism. Nevertheless, in this region, as in most other regions of Western Ukraine, there have never been any Cossacks or Hetmans—who have historically been the main actors and symbols of the Ukrainian ethno-national and state identity (moreover, the Hetmanate is probably the principal cornerstone of the Ukrainian political and state construction), a kind of “reference point” for the formation of the Ukrainian ethnic nation and state-building. Also, if compared with the central part of Ukraine (Naddniprianschina—literally “lands on the Dniipro”), those regions transitioned much later from the Ruthenian to the Ukrainian ethnic identity and language (in practice, this happened there only in the first half of the 20th century).

As Verena Fritz (2006: 114–115) posits:

“The eastern part of Ukraine, the central part and the western part of the country have great differences in economic structure, proportion of ethnic population and historical and cultural memory. This has led to a large burden on the country’s nation-construction process after independence, and it is difficult for the Ukrainian national identity to seek common ground.”

A vision absolutizing the political significance of some natural, historical or cultural frontiers (borders) and striving to draw some symbolic and distinct dividing line in Ukraine is characteristic of some European (especially Polish) and North American political scientists (Huntington 1996; Katchanovski 2006; Petro 2015: 31; Wolchik & Zviglyanich 1999; Zając 2016: 137). For example, Justyna Zając (2016: 137) argues:

“Politically and culturally, Ukraine is divided almost in half, with a pro-Western orientation prevailing in the western part of the country, and a pro-Russian outlook being predominant in its eastern part.”

In fact, the dividing lines in Ukraine are fractal at all levels, not only along the Dnipro (Dnieper) line. Of course, if we compare the most politically radical regions of Galicia and the Donbas in their respective pro-European and pro-Russian sympathies, then the correlation between ethnic, linguistic and religious identity, on the one hand, and the indicated geopolitical sympathies, on the other, is obvious. However, in general, Ukraine is a continuum with fractally distributed dividing lines. And the splits are determined not so much by external formal identities as by mental-value categories, largely dependent on the ideological, axiological and moral choices within each community and every citizen. In this sense, Edward Said’s conclusion from his well-known book *Culture and Imperialism* helps to better understand the nature of the Ukraine crisis:

“No one today is purely one thing. [...] No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness...” (Said 1994: 336).

Unlike the frozen post-Soviet conflicts in the Caucasus and Transnistria or post-communist wars in the former Yugoslavia, the course of the armed conflict in the Donbas
since 2014 indicates that it is more axiological, ideological and geopolitical than ethnic. In other words, it manifests in the absence of any ethnically based transversal splits in political loyalties of the civilian population in the conflict zone, and in the mainly economically motivated geographical destination of the Donbas’ refugees and displaced persons. One should distinguish between ethnic identification and political sympathy for Putin’s multiethnic Russia on the part of some inhabitants of the Donbas, or nostalgia for Russian Imperial and/or Soviet times, in which there was a sharing of respectively “non-ethnic Russian Imperial and supra-ethnic Soviet identities” (Minakov 2018: 284).

According to Mikhail Minakov’s 2018 empirical study of the ideological motivations of separatists who supported the April 2014 revolt and the subsequent war against Ukraine, adherents to the Novorossiya myth, which has become “one of several guiding ideas behind the separatist movement in southeastern Ukraine” (275), are particularly “attentive to the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups,” (280−281) emphasizing that their political culture is based on a “non-ethnic statehood” (280). As Minakov concludes, their identity “is usually not ethnically coded” (284).

It is noteworthy how an ethnic Russian writer and ethno-politologist Alexander Karevin, living in Ukraine, characterizes its ordinary citizens’ attitudes to the conflict in the Donbas:

“Who is one of us, who is a stranger? This is not determined by formal grounds. Neither origin, nor place of birth, nor even the spoken language is of decisive importance” (Karevin 2019).

In contrast to essentially inter-ethnic or inter-confessional interstate conflicts, which may last indefinitely—e.g., the Arab-Israeli, the Armenian-Turkish, and the India-Pakistan (in Kashmir) conflicts, etc.—ideological conflicts tend to attenuate and transform along with the ideological transformation of their public actors, due to objective processes in the world and regional transformations.

Although the present conflict is not generated or determined by ethnic confrontation (Fischer 2019: 31), it is, as Lodewijk Smoor sustains (2017: 73), “rooted in ethnic tensions”. Prominent Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Paniotto argues that if the principles of Ukrainization were more flexible, they would not be so painful for the East.

---

5 Though about ¾ of the Donbas pre-war population were Russian-speaking (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2003-2004), numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons from the region as a result of the armed conflict, respectively, into the territory of Russia (1.1 million pers.) and into the territory controlled by the Government of Ukraine (0.8-1.0 million pers.) have been, as of February 2016, approximately balanced (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016: 7), and the author has no evidence of the ethnic homogeneity, or at least any clear ethnic trends of such flows.

6 The separatist project of unification of the mainly Russian-speaking “Novorossiya” (8 regions of southeastern Ukraine, namely the Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolayiv and Odessa oblasts) with the Russian Federation (Minakov 2017).

7 As an example, Aleksandr Etkind, Dirk Uffelmann and Ilya Kukulin (2016) have revealed the mechanism of transforming social cleavages into cultural cleavages and then (sub-)ethnic identities in the Russian Empire (save indigenous population) when “social groups were nominated and treated as sub-ethnic groups” (p. 122).
Russian-speaking Ukrainians, however, have been treated not quite as full citizens (Sudakova 2019).

Nor does the conflict in the east of Ukraine “represent a clash of two civilizations. It is rather a clash of interpretations of history and values and a sign of a deepening cultural divide between Russia and Ukraine” (Smoor 2017: 73).

One may conclude that the armed conflict in the Donbas is geopolitical and determined by values; but the values themselves are largely influenced by the ethno-national and linguistic identity of the population. In this context, one may talk about value identity, since, according to the extant Ukrainian legislation, nationality and mother tongue are subjects of voluntary conscious choice of every citizen. Another factor of value identity may also be an administrative-territorial entity’s historical affiliation to a certain polity, which varies in its cultural and civilizational nature.

With regard to the Donbas’ various territories’ historical affiliation one may recall that the former lands of the Zaporizhian Cossack Host (around the territory of the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia regions) are located at the intersection of the Baltic-Black Sea and Azov-Black Sea geopolitical massifs, and it is there that “one of the key geopolitical centers of modern Ukrainian statehood” is located (Gorbulin 2015: 23). Accordingly, the historical belonging to the Don Cossack Host may be considered, in terms of the fractal-value dichotomy, as a cultural-historical indicator of the Eurasian (pro-Russian) identity.

Thus, one may observe that the fractal dichotomy of values and geopolitical orientations throughout a vast steppe between the Dniester and the Don Rivers, inhabited by the Cossacks, acquired throughout history the institutional format of Ukrainian and Don Cossack autonomies. Although intersecting closely in language, customs and culture, they in fact personify, respectively, the extreme eastern boundary of the axiological-behavioral Europe and the extreme western boundary of the axiological-behavioral Eurasia (Piliaiev 2015).

The armed conflict in the Donbas, in its deepest worldview-value dimension, is the clash between the postmodern “rhizome” structure of state and society, which denies the dominant core and is based on an uncentered multiplicity of heterogeneous and diverse social phenomena (for example, a bizarre combination and non-conflict interaction at Euromaidan of libertarians and radical ethno-nationalists, both protesting against Yanukovych’s corrupt regime) and the “tree-like” linear hierarchy of a clan-oligarchic state corporation (post-Soviet/pre-Modern) with a clearly defined main trunk of “the Father’s family” (be it the Yeltsin, Putin or Yanukovych clan) and many regional and local branches of the same tree having an indispensable hierarchical relationship with the main trunk—or, by another analogy, as cogs in a single mega-corruption wheel for converting power into property. Moreover, the conflict in the Donbas takes place simultaneously in the geopolitical, international, transnational, and regional scales, being fractally broken into many local, interpersonal, and even intrapersonal conflicts. The same worldview and value conflict between the “tree” and “rhizomes”, but already in the Confucian dimension, is present in the conflict between the “red” modernity of mainland China and the “white” Taiwan, with Hong Kong embraced by the relativistic values of postmodernism. Moreover,
the ultra-modern megacities characteristic of the East Asian “dragons” and the deindustrialized, depopulated new “Wild Field” typical of many areas of the modern Donbas fit equally into the concept of such a conflict.

The results of a sociological survey with regard to the link between national identity and foreign policy preferences funded by Umee University (Sweden) and conducted by Michael Gentile in the city of Luhansk in late 2013, on the eve of the armed conflict in the Donbas, testified that “geopolitical identities in Luhansk have a complex political stratigraphy that includes demographic, socio-economic, cultural and attitudinal components” (Gentile 2015: 13). Gentile rightly claims:

“Luhansk is one of (currently) two main hubs in the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas, meaning that an in-depth understanding of the political stratigraphy of the geopolitical identities in this city provides the key to a better understanding of the specific context upon which the Russo-Ukrainian war—let us call things by their name—has been projected. (Gentile 2015: 13)"

Below we will apply our analysis to the entire Luhansk oblast disaggregated into various raions.

Let us consider—at least conditionally and for the purposes of the local fractal-value analysis of the Luhansk region as an inter-civilizational borderland zone actualized by geopolitical armed conflict—Ukrainian ethnicity, Ukrainian language, and historical affiliation to the Yekaterinoslav\(^8\) or Kharkiv\(^9\) provinces to be indicators of European identity; and Russian ethnicity, Russian language as well as belonging to the region of the Don Cossacks to be indicators of the pro-Russian (pro-Eurasian) historical and cultural identity. Respectively, we may consider ethnicity, native language, territorial affiliation and historical memory as determinants of some relatively stable value identities, even though the latter may be changeable under crucial circumstances.

According to the results of the last All-Ukrainian Population Census held in 2001 (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2003-2004), Ukrainians make up 58.0% of the national composition of Luhansk oblast, with Russians at 39.0%. Ethnic Ukrainians constituted the majority in all raions of the oblast, except for the Stanychno-Luhanske and Sorokine (former Krasnodon) raions, and in the cities of oblast subordination—Sorokine (former Krasnodon), Dolzhansk (former Sverdlovsk), Khrustalny (former Krasny Luch) and Kadievka (former Stakhanov)—in which Russians predominate. At the same time, the Sorokine raion and all the above-mentioned cities have been on the territory that is not actually controlled by the Ukrainian authorities since the spring of 2014. By contrast, in 2001, only 30% of Luhansk oblast’s population considered

---

\(^8\) In the second half of the 16th and first half of the 17th centuries most of the future territory of the Yekaterinoslav province was controlled by the Zaporizhian Host (Sich) a polity of Cossacks having been at those times under the sovereignty of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Markova & Khvedchenya 2007).

\(^9\) Kharkiv province is the province that existed from the 18th to the early 20th centuries on the territory of Sloboda Ukraine (Slobozhanschina). Those lands from the second half of the 13th century until the 16th century were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and during the 17th and 18th centuries the Ukrainian population, especially the Cossacks, of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth seeking for free land was resettling en masse to that newly formed border region of tsarist Russia (Markova 2013).
Ukrainian to be their native language, specifically 63.8% of the rural inhabitants and 25.5% of the urban dwellers. In 8 of the 12 raions of Luhansk oblast where the Ukrainian authorities exercise powers, the Ukrainian language is considered native by anywhere from 93.8% (the Markivka raion) to 62.8% (the Troitske raion) population, while from 6 raions where the state authorities of Ukraine temporarily do not exercise their powers, only in one—the Dolzhansk (former Sverdlovsk)—did more than half of the population (56.0%) indicate Ukrainian as their native language. 

The author has carried out a fractal analysis of the cities of oblast subordination (regional significance) and raions of Luhansk oblast according to three criteria: ethno-national (the population’s absolute majority having Ukrainian ethnic identity—2E, or Russian ethnic identity—2A, the population’s simple majority having Ukrainian ethnic identity—E, the population’s simple majority having Russian ethnic identity—A, no absolute or simple majority—AE); language identity (Ukrainian-speaking absolute majority—2E, Russian-speaking absolute majority—2A; Ukrainian-speaking simple majority—E, Russian-speaking simple majority—A, no absolute or simple majority—AE); and pre-revolutionary (pre-Soviet) belonging to the Yekaterinoslav and Kharkiv provinces.
(respectively E) or the Don Host (respectively A). The author’s analysis has shown that the most conflicting sense of identity is found in cities of oblast subordination—Bryanka, Alchevsk, Golubivka (former Kirovsk), Kadijevka (former Stakhansky), Severodonetsk—and the Perevalsk raion (2E-2A). The strongest pro-Ukrainian identity is mainly in the northern mostly rural raions (the historical Slobozhanschina and the Zaporizhian Host's historical lands): Bilovodsk, Bilokurakyn, Kreminna, Markivka, Milove, Novopskov, Svatove, Starobilsk (all 5E), Popasna and Troitske raions (both 4E). The strongest pro-Eurasian (pro-Russian) identity is present in the raions of Sorokine (former Krasnodon)—4A, Antratsit, Dovzhansk, Khrustalny (former Krasniy Luch)—all 1E–4B, and the Stanychno-Luhanske district—4A; the latter, unlike the cities listed above, is now controlled by the Ukrainian authorities (see map below).

In this context, the formation of interactive fractal maps (tables) of value identity in the context of regions (oblasts), raions and administrative-territorial units of local self-government seems relevant. Accordingly, the maps (tables) should zoom in fractally even further—to the level of individual settlements, their historical and functional parts, streets, micro-districts—and then zoom out fractally—to the level of the regions, Ukraine, countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the whole of Europe, Eurasia, and so on. Searching for “red” (problem) indicators should be carried out in the automatic search mode throughout the entire fractal depth for each indicator (index).

On the basis of recent scientific achievements regarding the fractal nature of the universe and society, and taking into account the relativity and fractality of the East-West dichotomy, as well as other value paradigms, it seems appropriate to create in the future, in contrast to a discrete-dichotomous approach, a computer model of the value continuum to the full depth of fractal analysis—from the world system to local levels—searching for a dynamic equilibrium of value parameters in the conflict zone. We see this as an important task of modern conflictology.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ukraine crisis is in its essence primarily a value conflict (rather than inter-ethnic or inter-confessional one). As such, it is the first armed conflict of this kind in the post-Soviet space. Ultimately, it is a continental crisis, reflecting fundamental problems in the present East-West relations.

The value conflict in the Donbas, blurred with the ethnic and language identity cleavages, has its origins in the Cold War era and its legacy (in particular, in political psychology, in attitudes of political elites in the West, in the CEE and in the post-Soviet space). That is why the whole Ukraine crisis is really “the product of residual Cold War mentality” (The Trilateral Commission 2014: 27). Thus, it may be classified as the post-Cold War syndrome, like the analogous ideological, (geo)political and cultural value conflicts around Taiwan and on the Korean Peninsula.

The armed conflict in the Donbas may be better understood through localizing the East-West fractal dichotomy in the conflict as national, pluralistic and competitively democratic European Rus-Ukraine versus pro-empire, multinational, strongly
authoritarian Eurasian Rus-Russia. The latter’s political values and aspirations completely deny the rhizome principle while absolutizing the centric tree principle with regard to state, society and individual. From this viewpoint the historically, linguistically, confessionally and culturally diverse Ukraine should be analyzed as a continuum of fractal differences and oppositions from the national to local levels.

As our analysis shows, a long-term settlement of the Ukraine crisis is possible only with the combination of an international political settlement and a domestic political settlement. That is why it is necessary—in parallel with rethinking and restructuring the European and Eurasian collective security architecture in a possibly more inclusive way, and with the assistance of the international community—to launch a process of comprehensive internal political settlement of the Ukraine crisis, an integral component of which should be, in accordance with the Minsk agreements, “inclusive national dialogue” (OSCE Secretariat 2014).

The Ukraine crisis cannot be settled until Ukraine, according to the concept of fractality and the fractal nature of society, represents a certain balance (dynamic as well as geographically and value-varied in space) between East and West. Transforming Ukraine into a “pure East” or “pure West” without destroying the "polluting" parameters of the East-West dichotomy organically is not possible. That is why the one-sided intervention of Western power factors in Ukraine would not bring the desired result, just as it did not bring it in the course of "humanitarian interventions" in Iraq or Syria.

The only way for global actors to avoid hot confrontation and global nuclear catastrophe is to avoid doctrinal or fatally messianic thinking by mastering planetary (or noospheric according to Vladimir Vernadsky 1943 and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin 1959) postnonclassical thinking that opens a way to the global civilization of the future, bridging and transcending the East-West and Self-Other dichotomies.

Without the formation of an inclusive cooperative model of security in Europe and Eurasia, which includes the institutional participation of Russia, even more dangerous and terrible conflicts may follow the Ukraine crisis. Reasonable compromises should be found regarding sensitive political issues, thus elaborating win-win strategies of implementing global and regional cooperation initiatives. For its part, Ukraine may have a crucial significance for a success of the Asia-Europe transcontinental dialogue.

Thus, the most efficient and lasting settlement of the Ukraine crisis can be seen in the inclusive multilateral dialogue on the new institutional and legal framework of European and Eurasian continental security and cooperation with the participation of Ukraine as a pivot, or bridge, between the Euro-Atlantic (Western) and various Eurasian normative orders.

Bibliography:


Spil'nyy vysnovok ukrayins'kykh ta pol's'kykh istorikiv za pidsumkamy IX-X mizhnarodnykh naukovykh seminav. [Joint conclusion of Ukrainian and Polish historians according to the results of the IX-X international scientific seminars.] (2003). In Dokumenty z vidznachennya 60-iy richnytsy trahichnykh podiy na Volyni 1943 roku (zvernennya, zayavy, lsty). [Documents commemorating the 60th anniversary of the tragic events in Volyn in 1943 (appeals, statements, letters)]. *Voyennaistoriya. [Military History]*. No. 3-4, http://warhistory.ukrlife.org/3_4_03_2.htm


