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Research article

Double Marginalisation of the Communist Party: Ukraine's Decommunisation and the Russian-Backed Rebellion in Donbas

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Abstract

The article explains why the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) became marginalised during the insurgency in Donbas despite its ideological closeness to the rebel cause. The KPU was a popular pro-rebel party during the rebellion, but sharing the rebels' ideological background doesn't automatically mean the party will profit from the insurgency to expand or retain a share of power in rebel enclaves during the rebel state-building efforts. The KPU officials welcomed the protests against the new government in Kyiv and the onset of the anti-Ukrainian insurgency under the Russian patronage in the Donbas. Still, even despite this open support, the party descended into marginalisation.

Keywords: rebellion, Donbas, Russia, Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU)

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Introduction

The Russian-backed insurgency in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces had a local vocal ally among the structures of the Communist Party of Ukraine (*Kommunistychna partiya Ukraïny*, KPU), the second most popular political party in the Donbas after the dominant Party of Regions (*Partiya rehioniv*, PR). The KPU had been the main pro-Russian political party in the Ukrainian political system since the early 1990s. It had functioned as a legitimate political party with representation in the parliament since the first parliamentary elections in independent Ukraine held in 1994.

The party with political representation in regional and national elected political bodies may play a significant role in an insurgency. Still, it may also be relegated to political insignificance and marginalisation on both sides of the conflict. The concept of double marginalisation is tested in the case of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The party was caught between a rock and a hard place with the onset of the Russian-supported insurgency in Eastern Ukraine. The KPU regularly won up to 25 percent in their strongholds, where the insurgency broke out, but the party has been marginalised in the rebel-held territories. The Ukrainian authorities banned the party due to its support of the anti-Ukrainian insurgency during Ukraine's decommunisation process.

After explaining the party's marginalisation, the ideological background and its closeness to the insurgency in Donbas are explained. The participation of the Communist Party in the anti-Ukrainian insurgency in Donbas follows. The last parts of the text discuss the impacts of the marginalisation for the Communist Party in both the domestic political system and on the rebel-controlled territories. I use Ukrainian spelling for people with Ukrainian citizenship, including local rebel leaders and names of the organisations registered in Ukraine. Russian spelling is used for pro-Russian secessionist movements and rebel groups for better authenticity.

The process of the party's double marginalisation in a rebellion

In this text, political marginalisation is defined as the act or process of relegating relevant political actors to an unimportant, irrelevant or powerless position. I measure the marginalisation of the KPU by its position in both the Ukrainian political system and rebel-controlled territories. It means that with the onset of the insurgency, the party is not able to retain its representation in the parliament as it loses the votes in its strongholds that are under the control of the rebels, while the party faces the legal consequences from the support of the insurgency (banning, legal prosecutions).

Preexisting social ties often serve as the initial basis for insurgencies. Before a rebel group takes up arms, some members may have been involved with a polit-

ical party or social movement, but in the case of the marginalised political parties in territories under rebel control, I expect that such a party won't be invited to the rebel governance, defined as a 'governance system', which refers not only to the structures that provide certain public goods but also the practices of rule insurgents adopt (Mampilly & Stewart 2020; Mampilly 2011: 4; Péclard & Mechoulan 2015). Despite the party's embeddedness in the pre-existing social networks and institutions, it fails to participate in creating local rebel institutions. The party undergoing the process of political marginalisation fails to reconfigure, appropriate and convert for the new functions of insurgency (Staniland 2021: 149).

I introduce the concept of the double marginalisation, when the relevant political organisation or party with pro-rebel sympathies is marginalised in all territories held by rebels and the government. The marginalisation in rebel-controlled areas might result in the ousting of the party, or its successor's subjects, from any decision-making and share from the spoils of the insurgency. Their leaders are exposed to physical violence and intimidation by the rebel authorities, who engage in social service provision, diplomacy and local governance, trying to pursue legitimacy. As a precaution, rebel authorities may decide to sideline any potential competition to their governance, including other parties and movements, especially when rebels follow the authoritarian model of the administration. Rebels may even organise elections as a part of a broader, local-level legitimisation strategy that can be used alongside rebel social service provision to cultivate local support (Cunningham, Huang & Sawyer 2021). In this case, political parties in the process of double marginalisation are expectedly not allowed to participate in these elections.

Simultaneously, the domestic state can marginalise the party close to the rebel political cause. Its candidates and supporters might be harassed, threatened, arrested or even murdered. Having a link with rebels, often denounced as 'terrorists', automatically marginalises such a party in the electorate's eyes (Musil & Maze 2021). Repressions against the pro-rebel political parties or organisations are part of the counter-insurgency measures in authoritative regimes (Byman 2016; Ucko 2016). The repressive approach against pro-rebel (or extremist) political forces in democratic states is analysed within the concept of militant democracy, which Karl Loewenstein coined in the 1930s. He argued that attempts to establish democracy in Weimar Germany failed due to the lack of militancy against subversive movements (Tyulkina 2015).

Post-Maidan decommunisation advocates make a case for decommunisation/de-Sovietisation in Ukraine as a matter of national security and a prerequisite for the country's Europeanisation and democratisation (Mälksoo 2018). On the other hand, critics of such processes, such as Maria Mälksoo, draw on the analogy of militant democracy and criticise the decommunisation in the Ukrai-

nian context as a militant democracy or the governance of historical memory through a dense network of prescribing and proscribing memory laws and politics (Mälksoo 2021).

In this article, I analyse a set of potentially key factors that could facilitate the double marginalisation's process on the example of the Communist Party of Ukraine in the Russian-backed insurgency: a) Personal and financial resources of the party; b) The behaviour of the party leaders and local officials; c) Militancy of the party. Militancy is defined as direct involvement or material support for the armed struggle on the side of a rebel group (Kudelia 2019: 279). Relevant political actors in the rebellion should have the resources, competent leaders and commitment to fight against the incumbent government in order to avoid marginalisation or failure (Weinstein 2007). The concept of double marginalisation brings a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on insurgencies and political violence that tends to be either rebel-centric or state-centric (Woldemariam 2018; Eck 2010; Kenny 2010).

Case selection and data collection

I chose the KPU as the case of a relevant political party descending into double marginalisation on both sides of the frontlines. The party had been a relevant political actor with the potential to be the primary speaker of aggrieved people in Donbas. The KPU was traditionally one of the most popular and organised political parties in Ukraine, successful in the 1990s in monopolising Russo-phone Ukraine. The party constantly demanded official status of the Russian language in Ukraine. Symonenko said in an interview with the Russian media in 2012 that:

Our position remains unchanged: the Russian language should receive the status of a second state language. It should be reflected in the Constitution. Who does not agree, let us put this question to an all-Ukrainian referendum and let the people answer (Ria.ru 2012).

The support for the Russian language was one of the KPU's main political activities. KPU deputy Serhiy Khrapov stated in 2011 that he believes that granting Russian the status of a second state language would have an impact on improving relations with Russia: 'We, Communists, did not vote for it in 1996 [Constitution] precisely because the Russian language was not prescribed there as the state language' (LB.ua 2011). Although the support has declined since the 1990s, the KPU remained an integral part of the political system (Lassila & Nizhnikau 2018). The KPU later became the second most popular party in Donbas after the dominant party, the Party of Regions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Party of Regions (PR) and KPU in national elections and results in Donetsk and Luhansk Provinces

Elections	PR in total	Donetsk province	Luhansk province	KPU in total	Donetsk province	Luhansk province
1998	-	-	-	24.65 %	35.45 %	45.97 %
2002	coalition	coalition	coalition	19.98 %	29.78 %	39.68 %
2006	32.14 %	73.63 %	74.33 %	3.66 %	3.14 %	4.43 %
2007	34.37 %	72.05 %	73.53 %	5.39 %	6.05 %	8.48 %
2012	30 %	65.09 %	57.06 %	13.18 %	18.85 %	25.14 %
2014 (Oct.)	9.43 %*	38.59 %	36.59 %	3.88 %	10.25 %	11.88 %
2019	13.05 % + 3.03 %**	43.41 % + 10.77 %	49.83 % + 4.78 %	No participation	No participation	No participation

Source: Tsentralna vyborcha komisija Ukrainy

* PoR was transformed under the name Opposition Bloc

** Prior to 2019 elections, Opposition Bloc split into Opposition Platform – For Life (13.05 %) and Opposition Bloc (3.03 %).

I conducted thirty-two semi-structured interviews with the local pro-Ukrainian experts and representatives of civic society who lived in Donbas until the start of armed conflict: political analysts, bloggers, academics, journalists, local politicians, NGO workers. None of them has been a KPU member or sympathiser. The data was collected from interviews between August 2018 and May 2020. I made a choice to anonymise interviews so as not to compromise respondents' identities. I asked the respondents about the personal and financial resources of the KPU in both provinces, the party's militancy and the public behaviour of its leaders during the insurgency. My gatekeepers recommended the respondents during my long-standing research in Ukraine. When I refer to my interviews, respondent's positions are provided at the end of the article. I collected oral consent from the respondents and transcribed the data from the interviews to my personal computer.

Originally, I did many more interviews to support the arguments of the work. However, the scope of this text does not allow me to discuss them more in detail, but I listed all interviews I made on this topic. They relate mainly to the respondents from the cities occupied only for a couple of months before the liberation by the government forces in July 2014, such as Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, Mariupol, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Despite my efforts, I was unable to reach out to the representatives of the Communist Party and its successors in the rebel-controlled areas. The potential respondents refused to communicate with the author.

The thorough analysis of the KPU documents and statements is complicated by the fact that all websites related to the party have been down for the last

couple of years, including the party's newspaper, *The Communist (Kommunist)*¹. The only remaining option has been to search for printed materials in archives and libraries in Ukraine, which is also impossible in the current situation. That's why the analysis is limited to the statements of KPU leaders, especially Petro Symonenko.

I am aware that case studies based on conflict zones pose significant challenges. The data is often relatively limited, and its accuracy not always beyond doubt (Wolff 2020). However, the interviews were taken several years after the most intense fighting. Respondents were not in danger during the interviews and were not exposed to retribution. I take a positivist approach, considering collected interviews as reflections of the existing reality, but I mitigate the potential biases and incorrect facts or information by triangulation relying on collecting observations from different sources of the same type (interviewing different participants) and collecting observations across different types of sources from both sides of the conflict. The information provided has been checked and compared with other respondents' data, secondary empirical literature and media sources (Beach & Pedersen 2013).

The KPU's closeness to the rebel political cause

The ideological background of the party remained the same from the re-emergence of the party on the Ukrainian political landscape in 1993 up to its ban by state authorities. The KPU inherited an official Soviet historiography and view of Ukrainian national identity promoted in the Brezhnev era. The party inherited the Soviet linking of 'Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism' with fascism and World War II Nazi collaborators, and the fifth column acting with the support of Western intelligence agencies seeking to destroy the Soviet Union (Kuzio 2015a). Andrew Wilson calls the party extremely conservative, deriving much of its strength from its anti-national agenda. In his opinion, Ukrainian Communists have been even more unreformed than their Russian counterparts (Wilson 2009: 191).

Whereas Soviet nostalgia culture made Russian Communists natural allies of the Russian far right, in Ukraine right and left have been bitter enemies, and the left has gained strength from being the main de facto vehicle for Russophone protest at 'nationalising' policies in Ukraine. Ukraine should be a bilingual state, 'purged of the imposed language of the Ukrainian diaspora' and the influence of Ukrainian nationalism. The KPU is a party of the Soviet people and for the Soviet people, supranational and civil rather than ethnic. The Ukrainian Communists are in essence still Soviet nationalists, believing that Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians are one people (Wilson 2009: 189-193).

1 *Kommunist*, <accessed online: <http://www.komunist.com.ua/>>.

The party's ideology endorses a hardline anti-western conspiracy-prone mindset (Kuzio 2015a). The issues of the official status of the Russian language, 'oppression of Russian-speaking population', restoration of the USSR as panacea for all problems, convincing people that Ukrainians have no future without Russia – were the main arguments of the KPU from at least the Orange Revolution in 2004 (Torba 2016). The main political slogans of pro-Russian rebels in the most active stage of conflict in 2014-2015 were 'people's rule' (*narodovlastie*), anti-elitism, 'anti-fascism', social justice and fight against oligarchs, slogans identical to KPU ideology (Interview 9; Matveeva 2018: 115). Communist Party leadership supported these rebel narratives.

Communists, rebels and their foreign patron shared a similar ideological background based on fascist labeling and Soviet nostalgia, depicting the Ukrainian Euromaidan as fascist. It helped mobilise locals against the new government, which was presented as a Nazi junta. 'Anti-fascist' rhetoric was used extensively by the KPU against the national-democratic and nationalist parties prior to war in 2014. According to Taras Kuzio, the instigation of fear of alleged fascists was probably the decisive and most efficient element of mobilising the local population in Donbas and Crimea. It had a direct impact upon the slogans, discourse and ideology of pro-Russian separatists in Donbas (Kuzio 2015a; 2015b).

The 'anti-fascist' rhetoric has been supplemented by an anti-western tirade. The West, and more specifically the USA and NATO, are the main villains in the communist narratives: the USA and NATO deliberately use Ukrainian fascists as the tool in their plans to defeat and destroy Russia. Symonenko said in Portugal at a communist festival *Avante!* in 2015 that:

In order to spread its influence on the Eurasian space and create a hotbed of tension around Russia, gigantic efforts of the West, especially the U.S. and NATO, were aimed at reformatting the consciousness of Ukrainians, especially young people, to split our country along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines and to raise nationalism and Russophobia to the level of state ideology. . . . Special attention was paid to the glorification of accomplices of Hitler's fascists - insurgents of OUN-UPA, SS battalions 'Galicia', 'Roland' and other units that fought on Hitler's side (Putivlskii raionnyi komitet Kompartii Ukrainy 2015).

The Ukrainian Communists hold derogatory views and stereotypes of the Ukrainian language, culture and national identity. Local prejudices in Eastern Ukraine, instigated by local KPU officials, were based on feeding the negative stereotypes of people from Western Ukraine, depicting them as people who celebrate 'Nazi collaborator' Stepan Bandera, hate everything Russian and parasite

on the hard work of the Donbas people (Kuzio 2015a). Party officials frequently turned their stances into anti-Ukrainian hate speech similar to marginal secessionist pro-Russian groups, such as Donetsk Republic (*Donetskaya respublika*). Some KPU functionaries openly engaged in derogatory anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, for instance the former Luhansk councilwoman Natalia Maksymets, infamous with her statements in her blog that Ukrainians are not a nation, just a wild tribe, and scoffed at the victims of the Famine in 1932-33 (Kazansky 2014a).

In the communist narrative, the Ukrainian state, built on the ruins of the Soviet motherland, is solely blamed for the dire socio-economic conditions of working people suffering from inequality and injustice. The region's industrial potential was subjected to large-scale de-industrialisation as the consequence of the failed reforms of the 1990s. The Ukrainian government's ill-conceived actions and local elites' predation gave rise to numerous social-economic problems in the Donbas region. The closure of city-forming enterprises put entire cities on the brink of collapse. Whole neighbourhoods were abandoned due to a lack of livelihoods. Under these conditions, nostalgia for the Soviet times was projected onto contemporary Russia with its officially higher standard of living (Interview 9).

The communist electorate was usually represented by the older people, Russians rather than Ukrainians, poorly educated and unsatisfied with their lives (Khomenko 2014; Gentile 2015). A typical characteristic of the KPU electorate was their resilience to change as the Soviet régime had stifled independent initiatives and installed habits of dependence, creating a deeply held culture of paternalism. Some experts call them 'transition losers' in post-communist Ukraine, ready to back parties and politicians willing to pursue closer ties with Russia, perhaps even compromising Ukrainian sovereignty (Kubicek 2000: 282). The KPU voters looked to Russia as their substitute Soviet motherland and remained mired in Soviet nostalgia (Kuzio 2017).

Grievances had also been directed against any popularisation of Ukrainian national identity immediately denounced as 'violent Ukrainisation'. The communist arguments claimed that 'other' Ukrainians (people with this national identity) hated the inhabitants of Donbas (Interview 2; Kazansky 2017). One of KPU's leaders, Adam Martynyuk, said in 2007 that most of the residents of western Ukraine, who were deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities during and after the Second World War, deserved it (Censor.net 2007). Xenophobic othering preached by the KPU came at the line of hatred towards pro-national Ukrainians, complaining they see the Donbas people as second-class citizens. Communist supporters blamed 'other' Ukrainians for preferring heroes perceived as traitors and Nazi collaborators by the Soviets, which is also the traditional narrative of the Russian state propaganda (Interview 1; Kuzio 2015a).

Once the party becomes politically aligned with the rebel cause, it implies that its loyalty to the domestic state is dubious. A growing body of literature confirms that a vast share of rebel groups has had an explicit or widely accepted link with a foreign patron (Byman et al. 2001; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch & Cunningham 2011; Popovic 2017; Bapat 2012). The KPU had been the prominent advocate of Russian interests in the Ukrainian parliament, agitating for the vision of the USSR as a lost paradise, instigating local grievances and questioning the loyalty of the party to Ukraine as an independent state (Kuzio 2015a). Andrew Wilson describes the KPU as deriving much of its strength from its anti-national agenda, being the primary vehicle for Russophone protests against 'nationalising' policies in Ukraine (Wilson 2009: 191-193). It is obvious that the ideological principles of Ukrainian communists have a lot in common with the authoritarian regime in Russia due to their shared legacy rooted in the Soviet past.

Factors facilitating the KPU's marginalisation after Euromaidan

In the Donbas rebellion, domestic actors were mixed with both direct and indirect Russian military intervention (Åtland 2020; Kudelia & van Zyl 2019; Katchanovski 2016). Some scholars emphasise the role of the local elites linked to the Party of Regions in the onset of the rebellion in Ukraine's southeast (Portnov 2015; Stebelsky 2018; Buckholz 2017; Matsuzato 2017). Other authors claim that Russia exploited developments in Ukraine but did not play a determined role in them (Kudelia 2016). Several authors, such as Matveeva (2016; 2018), stress the leaderless essence of the pro-Russian rebellion and downsize the role of the local elites and the external actor. However, most experts agree on Russia's decisive role in the rebellion's breakout because incipient rebels had insufficient resources and were mostly not determined enough to engage in war (Kuzio 2020; Wilson 2014; Wynnyckyj 2019; Mitrokhin 2015).

Andrew Wilson noted that Euromaidan was an attempt at the anti-Soviet revolution that Ukraine never had in 1991 (Wilson 2014: viii-ix). The fight against Soviet symbols and heritage by Euromaidan supporters was perceived by Communists almost as a declaration of war. De-Sovietisation and decommunisation were interpreted as 'cultural genocide'. Euromaidan's victory, unleashing the delayed dismantling of the Soviet Union's burdening heritage, had been taken as a terrifying threat to these people's identity. Petro Symonenko constantly calls the Euromaidan an armed coup instigated by the USA to establish a fascist dictatorship:

The pro-American junta's attempts to establish a Nazi ideology and a fascist regime throughout Ukraine were met with rejection and protest by a significant portion of our country's population. As a result,

Ukraine lost Crimea, and a fratricidal war broke out in Donbas. The policy of inciting hatred and escalating violence pursued and imposed by reactionary and militaristic circles in the United States and NATO has sharply exacerbated all internal contradictions in Ukraine and led to a confrontation with Russia, severing economic and cultural ties with it' (Putivskii raionnyi komitet Kompartii Ukrainy 2015).

Many KPU members and their supporters organised voluntary groups to protect the Lenin statues in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in late February 2014, because as a culmination of the post-communist transition, Euromaidan brought about the so-called Leninfall, the spontaneous destruction of monuments to Lenin (Olszański 2017). The revolutionary period between November 2013 and February 2014 swept away more than five hundred Lenin statues in the central, southern and eastern parts of Ukraine (Fedinec & Cserniczko 2017). The removal of the remaining statues of Lenin has been of great importance. As a rule, they occupied key symbolic places. Thus, their absence removed one of the main tools of Soviet dominance in the public space in its symbolic aspect (Olszański 2017).

Communist supporters identify present-day Russia with the USSR. Their loyalty to Russia was strengthened when the demonstrators on the Maidan in Kyiv made their choice in favour of the West (Giuliano 2015). The KPU's othering of the rest of Ukraine contributed to the instigation of a full-scale campaign about the arrival of 'fascists' coming to punish local 'Soviet people' for not being proper Ukrainians. Local KPU structures supported the early stage of the insurgency when the protesters' demands reflected the main theses of its political programme: a referendum on federalisation, support for closer relations with Russia and declaration of the Russian language as the second state language (Interview 9; KPU 2014).

However, with the rising tensions, violent attacks against pro-Ukrainian activists and radicalisation fueled by the Russian state media's propaganda, the demands switched to open manifestations of secessionism and renunciation of Ukrainian statehood (Interview 1; 9). Pro-Russian protesters seized state buildings in early April 2014, and the militants led by the Russian citizen Igor Girkin seized Sloviansk on 12 April. Communist councilmen and supporters in Donbas felt the state's weakness, fueled by the sense of impunity and belief they had nothing to lose. Higher party officials in Kyiv profiting from participation in the domestic political system were not so decisive. The KPU leaders did not give any orders on what to do; party discipline declined.

When the anti-government protests turned into insurgency, from May 2014, the party definitively lost its breath through fragmentation and uncoordinated

activities. Kyiv party leaders, rhetorically siding with rebels, were unwilling to violently confront the government. Simultaneously, the KPU city deputies in Donbas supported the rebels enthusiastically, and some joined them as rebel fighters (Interview 9; Luganskiy informatsionnyi tsentr 2019; Kirillov & Der-gachev 2016). In the meantime, until summer 2014, the situation on the ground was chaotic with multiple centres of governance when some state buildings were occupied by the nascent rebel groups, which co-existed with the local self-government bodies controlled by the remnants of the disintegrated Party of Regions. Representatives of the executive power nominated by Kyiv lost the rest of their declining power relatively soon in early May 2014 (Matveeva 2018; Sakadynskiy 2020; Argument 2014).

Personal and financial resources

The KPU's electoral support has declined since the 1990s, but the party remained an integral part of the domestic political system until the onset of the insurgency in Donbas (Lassila & Nizhnikau 2018). From the early 2000s to 2014, the KPU was the second most popular party in Donbas after the party in power, the Party of Regions (PR). The party of the downtrodden proletariat functioned on the national scale as the junior satellite partner of the Party of Regions, being gradually co-opted in its governments and joining Party of Regions-led parliamentary coalitions in 2006-7 and 2010-14 (Kuzio 2015b; Kuzio & Kudelia 2015: 251).

The communist Party leaders allegedly received substantial financial resources from the Party of Regions and oligarchs for lobbying for their interests. Communist Party leader Petro Symonenko reportedly received vast amounts of money for 'correct' voting in parliamentary sessions or blocking initiatives harmful to the interests of the powerful Donetsk tycoons. Some sources talk about tens of millions of dollars going to Symonenko for selling political posts and votes in parliament (Interview 3; Censor.net 2014). The communist leaders proposed a return to the USSR to resolve social problems while living well on the back of a 'moribund capitalism' (Kovalskiy 2012). Other experts indicated that Symonenko could be financed from the Kremlin (Censor.net 2013).

Communists in Donbas had only a minor share of power because the PR had created a subnational authoritarian system in Donbas with an overwhelming majority in all the regional, city and district councils. The KPU in Donbas functioned as a fake opposition, fed by the local thuggish political structures, intended for capturing the protesting electorate unwilling to vote for the PR (Interview 1; 2; 4). The PR sucked out the resources from the communists and left them on the margins of local political life, making them useful only for some political deals, maintaining the appearance of opposition and taming the protest electorate (Interview 6). The communist leadership in the region became the

same 'bourgeois' elements they criticised in their speeches and newspapers. The discipline of the voters and Soviet nostalgia secured the communists the access to power they criticised. The KPU was often co-opted into the local economic schemes and did not do anything against prominent tycoons' exploitative practices in the coal industry and metallurgy (Interview 10; Kovalskiy 2012).

The involvement of some opportunistic, corrupted and openly criminal elements in the party activities further undermined the party's reputation. The KPU in the Luhansk region was reportedly financed by local tycoon Volodymyr Medianyuk, elected as KPU councilman in Luhansk in 2010. Medianyuk opportunistically started his political career in Yushchenko's pro-western and national-democratic bloc Our Ukraine (*Nasha Ukraina*). Later he sponsored Klinkarov's political campaign in 2010, after which he defected to the Party of Regions and became MP for this party (Kazansky 2013). Another local controversial figure was Volodymyr Kryvobokov, a criminal authority protecting local market-places (Kazansky 2011). Kryvobokov drew public attention to his short amateur movie about a civil war in Ukraine between Donbas and western Ukraine during the election campaign in 2012.

The leaders and local party officials

The KPU party leaders in Kyiv remained passive during the rebellion in 2014, although their sympathies were on the side of Russian-backed rebels. It had supported all the Russian propagandist narratives, but the leaders were not ready to go into an open armed confrontation with Kyiv (Interview 9). Communist leadership sat on the fence by avoiding an open call to arms against the Ukrainian state but overtly advocated for the secessionist agenda. Communist leader Petro Symonenko said in April 2014 that 'our people participating in protests in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and other cities are being accused of separatism and terrorism. . . . There are no extremists in Donetsk. There are no separatists. . . . We, the Communists, support them on the status of the Russian language. We support them to defend our interests by discussing all these issues in local referenda . . . and we support them in federalisation' (*Ukraiinska Pravda* 2014).

In another speech, Symonenko claimed that the KPU supports Ukraine's territorial integrity despite calling the counterinsurgency measures the terrorist war against own nation (YouTube 2014). All foremost party leaders remained passive during the insurgency in 2014, although it was clear that their sympathies were on the side of the Russian-backed rebels (112 *Ukraina* 2018). When the insurgency broke out, most of them were waiting for what was going to happen. Families of the leading party members like Symonenko or Kaletnik lived in luxurious mansions close to Kyiv. Kaletnik's family is an excellent example of the party leaders' clientelism and rent-seeking. Hryhorii Kaletnik, former governor of

Vynnytsia province, was Party of Regions deputy, while his niece Oksana and son Igor were KPU deputies until 2014. Ihor Kaletnik became the Customs Service director (2010-12) and the Ukrainian parliament's first vice-speaker (2012-14).

One of the most powerful party members was Spiridon Kilinkarov, the KPU leader in the Luhansk province and deputy of the Ukrainian parliament. His role in the insurgency is still not sufficiently clear. Kilinkarov had the ambition to replace Symonenko as the KPU leader prior to the war. During the spring of 2014 Kilinkarov dealt independently of him (Interview 3; 9). Kilinkarov did not openly call for Russian arms and dismemberment of Ukraine but stayed in occupied Luhansk until June 2014, probably waiting to see how things would turn out. When conflicts erupted between him and rebel leaders, he left the occupied city to be shortly arrested by Ukrainian volunteer fighters. Later he moved to Moscow, endorsing anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in Russian TV propaganda shows (Interview 5; *Večer s Vladimirom Solovevym* 2022; 60 minut 2020). The first secretary of the Donetsk regional KPU branch, Nikolai Kravchenko, was not caught red-handed in support of the insurgency. Later he moved to his weekend house in central Ukraine and quit political activities altogether (Kirillov & Dergachev 2016).

The KPU city secretaries acted on their own without any orders from their leaders in Kyiv. Many officials from the KPU regional leadership in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces stayed to support the 'people's republics'. The leader of the regional deputies in the Luhansk province, Oleksandr Andriyanov, declared in June 2014 that the whole communist faction in the regional council joined the parliament of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). Symonenko denied any such decision was authorised by the party (Informator.Media 2014). Kravchenko's deputy, Volodymyr Bidevka, was the KPU deputy in the Ukrainian parliament. When the riots started in Donetsk in March-April 2014, he sat in Kyiv and supported the moves of the new Ukrainian government. When the KPU did not enter parliament in October 2014, Bidevka returned to Donetsk to be politically active and enjoy the spoils of the so-called DNR becoming the parliamentary speaker in 2018.

In spring 2014, the KPU officials co-organised the pro-Russian meetings, the state administration buildings' violent seizures and the rebels' supplies with food and other material (Interview 5; Chernov 2015). At the beginning of the insurgency, the major anti-Ukrainian forces were the militant Luhansk Guard (*Luganskaya gvardiya*, LG) made up of the remnants of the marginal Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine (*Prohresyvna sotsialistychna partiya Ukrainy*, PSPU), a far-left group competitive with the KPU several years earlier. Later, LG was replaced by the militant Army of the South-East (*Armia yugovostoka*) led by Valerii Bolotov and the splinter group People's Militia of Luhansk Province (*Narodnoe opolchenie Luganshchiny*) of Oleksiy Mozgoi.

In Donetsk, the role of the Communists was similar. The KPU was the co-organiser of the anti-Maidan movement, setting up tents where it promoted federalisation and fundraising for the DNR (Interview 7; Ostrov 2014). More militant forces represented the vanguard of the secessionist movement in Donetsk. Some of them were traditionally marginal forces occasionally used by the Party of Regions' officials for political provocations. With the onset of insurgency, the local elites lost control over these unruly elements (Wilson 2014).

Since early March 2014, the KPU organised pro-Russian rallies in the towns as the sole organiser or with other radical forces, such as the Progressive Socialists (PSPU) or various local 'initiative groups'. The meetings were usually organised every week, attended by 100-300 people in cities with up to 100 thousand inhabitants. Oddly, this is quite a high number considering the demographic structure in provincial cities (mostly elderly people) and the local population's political passivity (Interview 4; Russkaya vesna 2014; Kramatorsk.info 2014).

During spring 2014, local bosses from the disintegrating PR outsourced the mobilisation to communists while remaining hidden from the public. The KPU's task was to mobilise people to the streets to create the image of a people's uprising. Communists became the secessionist forces' public face as an auxiliary force to local power-holders afraid to openly support the insurgency (Interview 8). The local Communist structures supported the 'referendum on the sovereignty of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics' (DNR and LNR) held simultaneously on 11 May 2014.

Luhansk province, more impoverished and smaller than Donetsk, was the main communist stronghold in Ukraine. KPU officials played a vital role in the insurgency in the northern chemical-industrial triangle Severodonetsk – Lysychansk – Rubizhne, the second-largest city Alchevsk and the border coal mining town of Dovzhansk, named Sverdlovsk from 1938-2016 (Interview 8; 11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17). The northern rural districts of the Luhansk province have never been occupied. The pro-Ukrainian identity is much stronger there, and, notwithstanding the efforts of the KPU, referendums were not organised there either. The southern 'rust belt' of the region (Khrustalnyi², Anratsyt) was a backwater where the former ruling party's structures organised separatist meetings without significant communist mobilisation. In Kadiivka, named Stakhanov from 1978-2016, pro-Russian meetings were organised by the third secretary of the local KPU party office Oleksandr Chulkov (Pavlik 2020).

The militancy

Rebels did not consider the local party leaders the honest believers in the cause for their involvement in corruption schemes and serving the Party of Regions'

2 Known as Krasnyi Luch in 1920-2016.

bosses' interests. Since the outbreak of insurgency in spring 2014, only the Russian intervention could stop the local communist leaders' gradual shifting to political marginality. Communist deputies on all levels claimed they were defending the interests of the local population, unlike militants appearing from nowhere without any political experience. After the initial legitimisation of the rebel demands, the communists were pushed aside because of their lack of militancy. The most passionate KPU supporters were pensioners, not militants ready to kill. A few idealistic people in the KPU ranks were unable to manage the whole process while the rest instead waited for the new posts in the rebel government (Interview 3).

There were only a few individuals who openly joined the rebel ranks on the battlefields. Viktor Kiselev (*Kommunist*), former second KPU secretary in the Kamennobrodskii district of Luhansk city, led the organisation Red East (*Krasnyi Vostok*), actively cooperating with the major rebel groups in the province. Red East assisted in supplies of weapons and food from Russia. Kiselev collaborated mainly with the Ghost (*Prizrak*), led by Mozgovoi. Kiselev eventually became deputy commander of LNR rebel forces in February 2015, but one year later he was arrested during purges organised by former LNR head Ihor Plotnitskyi. Kiselev was sentenced to 12.5 years for allegedly organising the coup against Plotnitskyi. Later he was freed when Leonid Pasechnik came to power in LNR in 2017. Among other KPU officials, who openly joined the rebel ranks was KPU press-secretary in Kadiivka Oleksandr Skidanov ('Krot'), active in the Volunteer Communist Unit (*Dobrovolcheskii kommunisticheskii otriad*, DKO)³, or LNR deputy and former KPU councilwoman in Krasnodon Tetyana Kalinina, who fought near Metallist in the rebel group Odessa (Lugansk_LG-UA 2015; Aleksandr 'Krot' Skidanov 2015). Other cases of communist functionaries turned into rebels involve Yuriy Sinenko and Oleh Popov,⁴ both former KPU city district deputies from Luhansk, and party functionaries from Lutuhyno.

The KPU councilman in Dovzhansk, Oleksander Haidei, became a local rebel commander controlling this city independently of LNR thanks to his alleged close ties to Russian intelligence services, presumably because of his leadership of the local Afghanistan War veterans' organisation (*Soyuz veteranov Afganistana*) (Interview 16; 17; Nykonorov 2015). Haidei presented himself as a Cossack chieftain during the chaotic fragmentation of the region into criminal enclaves controlled by local rebel commanders independent of the LNR. Due to conflicts with Plotnitskyi, Haidei left Dovzhansk in August 2015 for Russia (Stepova 2016;

3 DKO was structural part of Mozgovoi's 'Ghost'. It was founded in October 2014 by Russian communists from St.-Petersburg led by commander Petr Biriukov ('Arkadich'), alleged veteran of fighting in Transnistria.

4 Popov has been the head of LNR 'parliamentary committee' for national defense and security.

Svetikov 2014). Haidei was not the only communist official and leader of an Afghanistan War veterans' group at the same time. Other examples were the KPU first secretary in Starobilsk Aleksandr Miliutenko, Vadym Zaibert in Donetsk and Kostyantyn Beskorovainyi in Kostyantynivka. Afghanistan War veterans were often closely connected to Communist Party structures, like Volodymyr Hlushchenko in Rovenky or pro-Russian militants from veteran circles in Pokrovsk (Krasnoarmeisk from 1938-2016).

Other KPU leaders and functionaries have served in the rebel groups but did not physically engage in fights with Ukrainian forces. Usually, they helped with supplies, arms, humanitarian aid, or have been politically active as so-called political officers (or *politruks*). Most of them served in Ghost (*Prizrak*) in Alchevsk. These rebels evolved from the People's Militia of Lugansk Province (*Narodnoe opolchenie Luganshchiny*) after it retreated from Lysychansk to Alchevsk in July 2014 and was the bastion of communist militants (Garmata 2015). Ghost was led by local commander Olexiy Mozgovoi, who carefully built his Che Guevara-style revolutionary image with the assistance of several KPU officials. They assisted him in dealing with political affairs as he was seeking fame on an international level, eclectically merging sympathies for Soviet communism and Russian imperial-orthodox monarchism (Avakumov 2017).

Former KPU regional deputy Maksym Chalenko and other KPU officials helped Mozgovoi to organise the international conference on 8-9 May 2015 visited by communists from Southern Europe, followed by a military parade. Less than two weeks afterwards, Mozgovoi was killed in a car explosion during Plotnitskyi's consolidation of control over the occupied territories with the help of Russian private military companies and intelligence services (Crime 2016; Bukvoll & Ostensen 2020). After Mozgovoi's death, the first secretary of Alchevsk KPU, former city councilman Oleksandr Bebesheko ('Kommunarsk')⁵ became Ghost 'politruk' (Crime 2015).

The Communist Party's marginalisation

Since the onset of the insurgency in 2014, the Communist Party has been ostracised by both sides: for the voters in government-controlled territories the party has been too pro-separatist or unacceptable for other reasons, as the post-2014 electoral results suggest, and for rebels too soft and prone to compromises (Druz 2015).

KPU marginalised in the political system of the domestic state and the decommunisation process

The communists' marginalisation has been part of the wider processes undergoing in Ukraine, resulting in the adoption of the legislative package on decom-

⁵ Former name for Alchevsk in 1961-1991.

munisation to eliminate the Soviet legacy. The so-called decommunisation package, prohibiting all symbols and propaganda of Nazism and Communism in Ukraine, was approved by the Ukrainian Parliament on 9 April 2015 and signed by the President Poroshenko on 15 May. The ‘decommunisation package’ consists of four laws on: the condemnation of the communist and national socialist (Nazi) regimes, and prohibition of propaganda of their symbols; the legal status and honoring of fighters for Ukraine’s independence in the 20th century; remembering the victory over Nazism in the Second World War; access to the archives of repressive bodies of the communist totalitarian regime from 1917-1991 (Shevel 2016). Included in the laws are instructions on removing remnants of the communist past (monuments and street names), prescriptions on how to write the country’s history, as well as new measures to reconfigure the country’s archives (Marples and McBride 2015).

The laws resulted in a ban on the Communist Party of Ukraine by the Ministry of Justice, issued on 24 July 2015 and coming into effect four months later, prohibiting the KPU activities in the country. The parliamentary faction of the Communist Party was disbanded before in July 2014 by means of a procedural process. At the same time, based on a prosecution submission, legal proceedings began against the party (Fedinec & Csernicsko 2017). Petro Symonenko declared that he would appeal to the European Court of Human Rights to reverse the decision but was unable to get an appeal ratified by the Ukrainian court system. The party managed to participate in the 2014 autumn elections but did not reach the 5% parliamentary threshold (Marples 2018).

From the very beginning, a powerful debate broke out among Ukrainian intellectuals about the necessity and nature of the process of decommunisation in Ukraine (Hrynykha 2019). While the defenders of the laws argue similar measures were taken in other post-communist countries and they are necessary to win the current conflict with Russia, several scholars and other groups have questioned the impact on academic freedom, as well as freedom of speech more generally in Ukraine (Marples & McBride 2015). According to Volodymyr Viatrovych, the head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance and one of the key authors of the above-mentioned laws, the communist past is an important tool that Russia has used and will use again, and decommunisation has another important mission and task – the fewer the carriers of Soviet consciousness there are in Ukraine, the lower the danger of Russian aggression (Hrynykha 2019).

Most critics of decommunisation point out that the process of renaming and getting rid of Soviet heritage is chaotic, hasty and unprofessional. Ukrainian historian Georgiy Kasianov, probably the fiercest critic of decommunisation laws, has repeatedly reiterated that decommunisation in Ukraine is carried

out using Soviet methods, without discussion in society, when one version of the past is imposed on society as a single rule. Vasyl Rasevych, senior researcher at the Institute of Ukrainian Studies in Lviv, also criticises Ukrainian historical politics, since he believes that decommunisation resulted in a purely formal process – renaming streets and replacing some monuments with others (Hrynykha 2019). Critics have said that the laws will prohibit open discussion of Ukraine’s complex history and may deepen societal divisions. According to Oxana Shevel from Tufts University, Ukraine’s decommunisation efforts may turn out to have a modest yet significant effect: the successful shedding of the Soviet symbolic legacy (Shevel 2016).

Related to this process, the communist officials had been the subject of increasing pressure from the new government for their anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and local party officials’ support for the rebels in Eastern Ukraine. Although the state avoided open repression of Communist Party functionaries, some of them were investigated for activities that threatened the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian state, including Anna Aleksandrovskaia, parliamentary deputy and party leader in Kharkiv, for her involvement in creating a short-lived ‘people’s republic’ in the Kharkiv province, or Oksana Kaletnik for talking about the legitimacy of the DNR/LNR and their right to secede from Ukraine (Interfax Ukraina 2014).

Many party leaders like Oksana and Igor Kaletnik left the KPU parliamentary faction already in May-June 2014. Other deputies left in July 2014 because of their indignation with Symonenko, who, in turn, called them traitors (Interfax Ukraina 2014). The party faced an internal rebellion by several regional units against the central leadership. It lost many influential party members and grassroots activists who supported pro-Russian secessionist movements across the East of Ukraine or joined other political projects. The KPU’s participation in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 was seen as a betrayal of the pro-Russian rebel political cause. Moscow is not eager to support the KPU despite its pro-Russian rhetoric and promotion of other political forces in Ukraine (Lassila & Nizhnikau 2018).

Communist leader Symonenko has not abandoned his pro-rebel rhetoric: he calls the Euromaidan an armed coup, the seizure of power by Nazi-Oligarchs and the government is a fascist dictatorship, based on punitive battalions in an SA-fashioned style. Symonenko talks about the ‘violent Ukrainisation’ and the ‘anti-people and terrorist’ nature of the Ukrainian government’ (Pravda 2018). On the other hand, Symonenko had been publicly accused by other pro-Russian politicians, like Igor Markov from the Odesa-based Motherland party living in Russia, of being an agent of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) because he could freely walk in Kyiv. Markov indicated that Symonenko expelled from the

party all members actively participating in the Odesa anti-Maidan and that he received 5 million USD for betraying his party 'comrades' to support the 'Kyiv regime' (YouTube 2018).

The people who stayed with Symonenko hold the same pro-Russian political line. The second secretary of KPU and former vice-speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Adam Martyniuk said in 2018 that the Ukrainian government is solely to be blamed for the loss of Crimea and that he recognises the Crimean 'referendum' in 2014 as legal (112 Ukraina 2018). Ironically, if the Ukrainian state had controlled communist strongholds in industrial parts of both Donetsk and Luhansk provinces and Crimea during the parliamentary elections in October 2014, the KPU would almost certainly have made it to the parliament. The party received 3.88 percent, while the election threshold is five percent, and several million people living in the Communist strongholds could not vote. Only two years earlier, KPU obtained 13.18 percent and thirty-two seats in the parliament. Petro Symonenko won only 1.51 percent of votes in May 2014 presidential elections, compared to 22.24 percent in 1999, 4.97 percent in 2004, and 3.55 percent in 2010 (Tsentralna vyborcha komissiia)⁶.

As a result, the Ukrainian state did not repress the Communists for their involvement in the insurgency, but Symonenko, Martyniuk, the Kaletnik family and other leading figures lost the opportunity to make money in politics. Part of the party officials escaped or stayed in rebel enclaves. Some fled to Russia while the rest stayed in Ukrainian territory, either in Kyiv or in liberated parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. The party was banished from participating in parliamentary elections in 2019. However, even if they balloted under a different name, the KPU would hardly make it into the parliament because their electorate has been taken over by new pro-Russian political parties that emerged on the Party of Regions' remnants.

The Ukrainian state authorities have been hesitant to implement and apply the decommunisation laws to KPU's activities. The party held its congress in September 2020 under its communist symbolics or organised the rally on May Day in Kyiv in 2021 (KPU 2020; 2021b). The party leader Symonenko constantly called for the regime change on pro-Russian TV channels owned by pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk or his protégés up to mid-February 2022. In those public appearances, Symonenko agitated against president Zelenskyi and his government. He accused them of selling national interests to American imperialists and keeping Ukraine on the leash as the protectorate of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is the root of all social problems in Ukraine because 'foreign protectors do not care about the well-being of ordinary Ukrainian people' (KPU 2021a).

6 Tsentralna vyborcha komissiia Ukrainy, <accessed online: <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/>>.

Successor communist parties marginalised in rebel-controlled territories

The Communists have been marginalised by marionette rebel administrations. Despite the proclaimed people's republics' partial return to Soviet ideals and old communist rhetoric, the communists themselves have been marginalised (Nykonorov & Yermolenko 2017). The Communist Party might have been attractive for Russia because it could gather people to publicly demonstrate a social demand for the Russian intervention in spring 2014. Local communist officials mobilised the communist electorate, who called on Putin to invade Ukraine (Interview 1; 3; Torba 2016). However, this informal cooperation was short-lived. Moscow was in dire need of militants that the KPU could not deliver. The party supporters were suitable for news coverage in Russia's information war, demonstrating that the rebellion has widespread popular support, but they could not enforce the creation of a buffer proto-state necessary for controlling the Ukrainian territory (Interview 4).

Pragmatists, put in charge of the DNR and LNR by Moscow, who signed the Minsk Peace Accords in September 2014, conflicted with rebel hardliners – autonomous rebel commanders, such as Dremov or Mozgovoi – who opposed the DNR and LNR puppet leaders (Kikhtenko 2016; Vlad Triel 2014). Some communists gravitated towards Mozgovoi, who combined pro-Soviet communist and imperialist-right ideologies, while the local communist political structures, which were not affiliated with any particular rebel group, tried to be more or less loyal to the official rebel governance structures.

The lack of real leaders also undermined the Communists' position during the insurgency and the perspectives for the cooperation with Moscow. The communists did not have any ideological monopoly over the rebellion. Pro-Soviet communist ideas were just part of the political legitimisation of the rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. According to Wilson, the rebel narrative was a morphed Russian – Orthodox – Soviet absolutist nationalism, which absorbed different ideological ingredients from monarchism to 'Sovietism', reflecting the kaleidoscope of identities (Wilson 2014).

There were many defenders of the old Soviet values among rebels, but they considered themselves as participants in a broader so-called Russian World. They saw their war as a defense of Orthodox values against the advance of the corrupt West (Plokhly 2015: 343-352). Marlene Laruelle argues that the ideological background of the rebels was based on the convergence of three underlying paradigms – red (Soviet great-powerness, opposition to the West, and a socialist mission), white (Orthodox Christianity as a civilisational principle making Russia a distinct country with strong religious values) and brown (Fascist – national revolution of the 'Russian Spring') (Laruelle 2016). These anti-democratic ideological platforms eclectically mix political orthodoxy, Soviet imperialism and neo-fascist tendencies.

Although the KPU functionaries supported the rebel political agenda, they soon lost the drive to the new rebel elites. Consequently, local communists splintered from the KPU. They founded the new communist organisations in the rebel-controlled territories to legalise former KPU members due to the suspension of party activity in rebel enclaves. The organisations were entrusted with deliveries of humanitarian aid sent by their Russian comrades from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*Kommunisticheskaya partiya Rossiyskoi federatsii*, KPRF). The new local communist parties received legal status as the political movements but were not allowed to participate in the illegitimate elections in ‘people’s republics’ in fall 2014. They were simply not registered.

Rebel-controlled territories in the Donetsk Province (Donetsk People’s Republic, DNR)

The Communist Party of the DNR (*Kommunisticheskaya partiya DNR*) was founded in October 2014 and led by Borys Litvinov, pre-war KPU head of the Donetsk Kirov district cell. In May 2014, Litvinov became the secretary of the Council of Ministers of the DNR led by the Moscow spin doctor Alexander Borodai. From July to October 2014, Litvinov headed the People’s Council of the DNR. Then he was removed from his post, and in 2016 he was expelled from the so-called parliament of the DNR due to the ‘loss of credibility’ of the Donetsk Republic movement (Narodnyi soviet DNR 2016). One of the first things the new Communist Party did was seize the offices of the KPU registered personally to the former Donetsk leader Nikolai Kravchenko. The communist organisation supported the rebel leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko, although he mostly ignored this political subject (Lenta.ru 2014; Polukhina 2018).

The situation changed after the assassination of Aleksandr Zakharchenko in 2018 when the so-called presidential elections were set to legitimise the Moscow-ordered efforts to confirm Zakharchenko’s successor Denys Pushilin as the new head of this rebel enclave. Communists decided to run for this office, but the explosion shattered the congress of the Communist Party of the DNR in September 2018. Ihor Khakimzyanov, a communist candidate for the DNR head, was among the victims injured in the explosion. The information resources controlled by the rebel administration spread information that Khakimzyanov himself allegedly set up the blast. Eventually, Khakimzyanov, the first defense minister of the DNR in April-May 2014, was not allowed to participate in the ‘elections’ (Molchanova 2018).

Rebel-controlled territories in the Luhansk Province (Lugansk People’s Republic, LNR)

In the neighbouring LNR, the Communists of Luhansk Province (*Kommunisty Luganshchiny*) splintered from the Luhansk KPU branch. Several leading mem-

bers, such as former chairman of the KPU regional deputies Oleksandr Andriyanov and former KPU leader in Rubizhne Nelli Zadiraka, defected to the main rebel movement 'Peace to the Lugansk Province' (*Mir Luganshchine*) before the so-called elections in November 2014 in rebel-controlled territories were held. The Communists of Luhansk Province were in moderate opposition to the then LNR head Ihor Plotnitskyi. In August 2015, they transformed into the Union of Communists of Lugansk Province (*Soyuz kommunistov Luganshchiny*) with other marginal far-left subjects, and then jointly created the Communist Party of LNR (*Kommunisticheskaya partiya LNR*) in March 2016, led by Ihor Humenyuk.

Humenyuk was a former member of pro-Euromaidan and pro-Western national democratic parties Fatherland (*Batkivshchyna*) led by Yulia Tymoshenko and Front of Changes (*Front zmin*) of Arsenii Yatsenyuk. He was even city deputy for this party in the small town of Aleksandrovsk. Humenyuk fiercely criticised former KPU leader in Luhansk Spiridon Kilinkarov for an allegedly pro-Ukrainian position. He seized the KPU offices in the rebel-occupied territories and removed from the leadership positions people close to Kilinkarov. According to some information, Humenyuk profited from the humanitarian aid supplies from KPRF, organised by State Duma deputy Kazbek Taysayev, patron of the Donbas communists on behalf of the KPRF (Gorodenko 2015).

Conclusion

The communist electorate and KPU officials considered the Euromaidan a direct threat to their identity and values. However, the party's pro-rebel policy did not bring any success to the KPU on the national level nor in the rebel-held territories, despite the party's strong social ties in its strongholds, such as Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. The Euromaidan and toppling of Yanukovych's regime sparked off the decommunisation by banning the communist symbolic and renaming the streets and whole cities, especially in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.

Since 2014, the KPU has been marginalised in the domestic state due to the decommunisation process and people in government-controlled territories refused to vote for the party. In 2014, the KPU could not get into the national parliament for the first time since 1994, mainly because the main Communist strongholds have been out of the Ukrainian state's control. The party was banned from participation in the following parliamentary elections in 2019.

In the rebel-occupied territories, the marginalised party splinters became an unwanted competitor for the rebel political projects with the reputation of scammers involved in the 'dirty business' during the *ancien régime* when Donetsk oligarchs had ruled Donbas. The Communist Party of Ukraine had been strongly pro-Russian, but even the Russian authorities preferred the other actors for the rebel governance job.

The newly-founded communist organisations in the rebel enclaves were not allowed to participate in the illegitimate elections since the first ones in November 2014. The Russian-backed insurgency hypothetically presented a new opportunity for the lower ranks of the party officials in Donbas, but they did not use the window of opportunity because of the weak resources the party had after the years spent in the shadow of the dominant PR on both regional and national level.

The embeddedness of the party within the Ukrainian political system resulted in the leaders' indecisiveness during the political turmoil in Eastern Ukraine. The Communists paid for their collaboration with the Party of Regions and their regional leaders' behaviour seeking to be part of the local business elite. Being ideologically anti-Ukrainian, the KPU had been nevertheless tightly integrated into Ukrainian political life. Party leaders became reluctant to support raising arms against the Ukrainian state, feeling comfortable as the supposedly irreconcilable opposition against the new government but still within the Ukrainian political system.

The party started to become fragmented and members uncoordinated at the very moment when Russian authorities found proxies willing to serve their interests. Communists in both so-called people's republics lost any relevance as Russia wanted somebody more politically flexible and obedient for state-building efforts in the rebel enclaves. Communists, although still loyal to Russia, were seen by both anti-system radicals and Russia as a 'relic from the past', unable to adjust to the new political realities (Gorodenko 2015).

To conclude, the KPU has been double-marginalised due to weak financial and personal resources; the indecisiveness of the party leaders; lack of militancy when the party did not have any paramilitary structures and let itself to be ousted and sidelined by major rebel forces. The KPU never had any militant wing. Its main strength laid in mobilising crowds of committed electorate and transforming their votes into political capital in the Ukrainian parliament. Insufficient personal and financial resources; indecisive leaders unwilling to violently confront the incumbent; and the lack of militancy are also preliminary scope conditions that lead to the double-marginalisation of the pro-rebel political parties and organisations.



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Interviews:

- Interview 1, Head of NGO Ukrainian People's Council of Donetsk and Luhansk Provinces (UNRDL), Kyiv, March 2019.
- Interview 2, Donetsk journalist and blogger, Kyiv, August 2019.
- Interview 3, Former Party of Regions leader in Luhansk, Kyiv, August 2019.
- Interview 4, Writer and political activist living in Donetsk until 2014, Kyiv, August 2019.
- Interview 5, Chairman of volunteer organization SOS-Vostok from Luhansk, Kyiv, August 2019.
- Interview 6, Journalist from Luhansk, Kyiv, March 2019.
- Interview 7, Political and civil society activist from Donetsk, Online call, October 2019.
- Interview 8, City deputy in Severodonetsk, Online call, October 2019.
- Interview 9, Journalist from Luhansk, Online communication, June 2019.
- Interview 10, Political and military expert from Stakhanov/Kadiivka, August 2019, Kyiv.
- Interview 11, Civic society activist in Severodonetsk, October 2019.
- Interview 12, Former councilman in Alchevsk, Kyiv, March 2020
- Interview 13, Lawyer and civic activist in Lysychansk, November 2019.
- Interview 14, Journalist from Alchevsk, April 2020.
- Interview 15, Civic society activist in Rubizhne, October 2019.
- Interview 16, Blogger and political activist from Sverdlovsk, February 2019.
- Interview 17, Former entrepreneur, independent trade union and volunteer fighter from Sverdlovsk, Kyiv, March 2020

Listed interviews without direct reference in the text:

- Interview 18, Anonymous source living in part of the Luhansk region occupied since 2014, August 2019
- Interview 19, Local entrepreneur and civic activist in Kostiantynivka, October 2019.
- Interview 20, Journalist from Horlivka.
- Interview 21, Volunteer and civic activist in Kramatorsk, April 2020.
- Interview 22, Civic activist and volunteer in Kramatorsk, May 2020.
- Interview 23, Human rights activist from Antratsyt, April 2020.
- Interview 24, Journalist in Mariupol, August 2019.
- Interview 25, Political activist in Bakhmut, October 2019.

Interview 26, Civic society activist and entrepreneur from Pokrovsk, October 2019.

Interview 27, Civic society activist in Druzhkivka, August 2019.

Interview 28, Political activist in Mariupol, November 2019.

Interview 29, Donetsk political activist and editor-in-chief of online newspapers Ostrov, Kyiv, August 2019.

Interview 30, Luhansk journalist, political activist and chairman of volunteer organization SOS-Vostok, Kyiv, August 2019.

Interview 31, Luhansk journalist, now working for 'Den' newspaper, March 2019, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Interview 32, chairman of Donbas independent trade unions from Donetsk, Kyiv, August 2019.

