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Narrating Ukraine: A Crisis of Russian Identity?

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has precipitated the most serious deterioration in West-Russia relations since the Cold War. This paper analyses the extent to which notions of Russian identity affect Russia's perception of and response to the conflict in Ukraine. In Part II, I draw upon the concept of ontological security to develop a theoretical approach to analysis of the relationship between identity, security and the state. In Part III, I analyse public statements by Russian political actors to determine how they construct a 'meaning' of the conflict in terms of Russian identity. I analyse the period from September 2013 to September 2014. This follows events leading up the removal of Ukrainian President Yanukovych, until the apparent increase in Russian support for the rebel movement in the Donbass. I find that Russian political actors represented the Ukraine crisis in terms of its implications for Russian identity and that this had profound implications for the dynamics of the present conflict.

Acknowledgement

"*There is no such thing as a 'self-made' man. We are made up of thousands of others. Everyone who has ever done a kind deed for us, or spoken one word of encouragement to us, has entered into the make-up of our character and of our thoughts, as well as our success*."

George Matthew Adams

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About the Author

Ben graduated from Durham Global Security Institute (DGSi)'s MSc in Defence, Development and Diplomacy in 2015. This working paper is a revised version of his Master thesis.

Contents

Disclaimer 1
Abstract 2
Acknowledgement 3
About the Author 3
List of Figures 5
List of Abbreviations 6
1 Introduction 7
2 Theoretical Framework: Identity, Security and the State 9
2.1 Understanding the Ukraine Crisis – A Realist Response 9
2.2 Considering Identity - Ontological Security in International Relations 12
2.2.1 Ontological (In)Security and Crises of Identity 12
2.2.2 The Parameters of Biographic Narratives 14
2.2.3 Answering critics of ontological security 16
2.3 Identity and the Ukraine Crisis: Approach and Methodology 19
3 Russian Identity and the Ukraine Crisis 21
3.1 Post-Soviet Identities in Russia and Ukraine 21
3.1.1 Identity in the Russian Federation 21
3.1.2 Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Ukraine 24
3.2 Identity in Conflict: From 'Euromaidan' to War 26
3.2.1 The Euromaidan Movement (September 2013 – February 2014) 27
3.2.2 The Annexation of Crimea (March 2014) 30
3.2.3 The Donbass Uprising (March 2014 – September 2014) 33
4 Conclusion 38
4.1 Findings and Implications 39
5 Bibliography 43
Previous Working Papers 59

List of Figures

Figure 1: An image taken from the RMFA White Book shows the leader of the Svoboda! Party speaking at a rally in Maidan Square alongside an SS recruitment poster from wartime Ukraine (RMFA 2014a:67)...28

Figure 2: Image of a fallen Orthodox Cross in Donetsk. Published in the Russian Foreign Ministry White Book to illustrate widespread damage of Orthodox churches, allegedly as a result of the Ukrainian government's ATO (RMFA 2014c:103). 31

List of Abbreviations

ATO	Anti-Terror Operation
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DPR	Donetsk People's Republic
EU	Eurasian Economic Union
EUAA	European Union Association Agreement
LPR	Luhansk People's Republic
POR	Party of the Regions
PS	Pravda Sektor (Right Sector)
RF	Russian Federation
WW2	World War Two; 'Great Patriotic War' in Russia

1 Introduction

The decision of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to suspend the planned signing of Ukraine's European Union Association Agreement (EUAA) in November 2013 would have calamitous consequences. Following months of demonstrations opposing the decision, he would be ousted from the Presidency in February leading to the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (RF) and a brutal war in Eastern Ukraine which continues to this day (Sakwa 2015). The diagnosis of the situation in the West[1] was clear; a pro-European democratic movement had removed a corrupt Russian puppet, leading Russian President Vladimir Putin to seize Ukrainian territory and launch a proxy war in the East to sustain Russian hegemony and realise long-standing imperial ambitions (Sakwa 2015:46; Mearsheimer 2014). This reading of the situation has led to a severe deterioration in the relationship between Russia and the West, described by some as signalling a 'New Cold War' (Lucas 2014). But does such an account provide an accurate explanation of the conflict? Given its profound geopolitical implications and the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine, there is a strong case for critical assessment of the dominant understanding of the conflict in the West.

Since the end of the Cold War substantial academic attention has been paid to the role of identity in violent conflicts (Lapid 1996:3). Identity has important implications for the way in which conflict is understood. Differences in identity can alter how events are perceived, leading to divergent understandings of what is important or threatening, and shapes responses to international events (Steele 2008; Weldes 1999; Wendt 1996). Sustaining a coherent national identity can be an important source of legitimacy for state leaders and can therefore become a political objective itself (Steele, 2010). Ukraine has a tumultuous history of contested national identity (Sakwa 2015:7-25), with persistent differences in culture, language and political orientation between a nominally 'Ukrainian-West' and 'Russian-East' (Marples 2015). Russian political actors make consistent references to their shared history and culture (Hutchings & Szostek 2015). To fully understand the dynamics of the crisis in Ukraine, therefore, an analysis of the role of identity is crucial. A number of experts on the former-Soviet Union have argued that a failure to understand the deep socio-cultural roots of the conflict, or give proper

[1] Referring to 'the West' as a homogenous entity is clearly problematic. There exist clear and important differences between the perspectives of a number of Western states. Nevertheless, given the degree to which the response to the Ukraine crisis has been coordinated through NATO and the EU, I sustain its usage as a heuristic device in this case.

consideration to the discursive representation of the crisis by Russian political leaders, undermines the Western response to it (Sakwa 2015:6; Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2015:2). Indeed, comparing the accounts of the conflict prevalent in Russia and the West has led some to conclude that they are talking about "two different worlds" (Feklyunina 2014). This paper seeks to address this shortcoming and develop a better understanding of the way the conflict looks from the Russian perspective. In particular, it asks *'to what extent have notions of Russian identity shaped Russia's perception of and response to the conflict in Ukraine?'* Answering this question should provide a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict and of the policies needed to secure its de-escalation.

In the second part of this paper I argue that the Western perception of the crisis is deeply rooted in a realist approach to international relations, outlining what I perceive to be the shortcomings of this approach in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Having done so, I draw upon the concept of ontological security to build a theoretical approach better able to consider the way in which identity leads to divergent understandings of the conflict and the appropriate response to it. The insight provided by this approach significantly alters the calculus of interests at the heart of a 'rational' realist approach. In part three I apply this model to the present crisis. Having identified the major themes of contemporary Russian identity, I draw upon the public statements of Russian political actors during the formative period of the conflict, from September 2013 to September 2014, in order to analyse the discursive representation of the Ukraine crisis and Russian policy toward it. It should be emphasised that it is not my objective to ascertain the *factual* accuracy of the representation of the conflict in Russia. Rather, I examine how this interpretation of the conflict is shaped by Russian identity and, in turn, the impact this has on Russian policy in Ukraine.

2 Theoretical Framework: Identity, Security and the State

In this part of the paper I develop a theoretical approach able to consider the role of identity in the current crisis in Ukraine. I critically examine the way in which the Ukraine crisis has been understood by Western policymakers, arguing that this is grounded in a reductionist approach to international relations which masks important conflict dynamics (Section 2.1). I draw on the concept of ontological security to develop a theoretical approach able to analyse the impact of identity on the current crisis (Section 2.2). Finally, I outline how this approach will be applied to analyse the role of Russian identity in shaping Russia's perception of and response to the conflict in Ukraine (Section 2.3).

2.1 Understanding the Ukraine Crisis – A Realist Response

The primary accounts of the conflict in Western countries have been remarkable for the extent to which they reflect an analysis based on the tenets of offensive realism (Sakwa 2015:46). Realism has long been paradigmatic as an approach to understanding international relations. Whilst a number of schools offer competing emphases, they remain undergirded by a unifying set of "bedrock assumptions" (Snyder 2002:154; Glaser 2010:16). Realist analyses begin with the assumption that the dynamics of international affairs are driven by the actions of rational states in pursuit of their interests. Chief among these is the need to ensure their own survival (Glaser 2010:16-17). Offensive realism holds that, given the impossibility of ascertaining the intentions of their rivals, states rationally view the accumulation of power by others as threatening (Snyder 2002:155; Mercer 1995:231). The corollary of this is that states will themselves seek to maximise their own power and, ultimately, to establish hegemony in order to ensure their survival. Similarly, powerful states will, whenever possible, counter actions which increase the power of their rivals (Glaser 2010:22). Power is thought to be achieved primarily through territorial conquest and the accumulation of economic and military resources (Snyder 2002:156; Glaser 2010:17). Periods of non-expansionism are not a consequence of these impulses being quelled but, rather, the deterrent of an unfavourable balance of power (Snyder 2002:158). Such an approach removes from analyses the effect of domestic political processes and, more importantly, naturalises the state as a unit of analysis and assumes that political loyalties and communal identities are satisfactorily approximated by international borders (Ferguson & Mansbach 1996:34; Ringmar 1996:441). It is important to stress that these assumptions are not meant to reflect reality *per se*, but to enable analysts to simplify the complex phenomena under their consideration and produce reasonable, parsimonious and

therefore helpful accounts of them (Mercer 1995:232; Glaser 2010:16). Of equal importance, however, is a recognition that these assumptions necessarily lead to only partial accounts. In cases where they mask important dynamics of the conflict under study this partiality could be problematic (Snyder 2002:172; Wohlforth 2008:34). It is my contention here that the conflict in Ukraine is one such case.

Of the two primary accounts of the current conflict one in particular has gained pre-eminence in the narrative and policy responses of Western governments. This view claims that the conflict in Ukraine is essentially a result of Russian aggression, and the desire of the Kremlin to (re-)establish regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space (Mearsheimer 2014:77; Sakwa 2015:47; Lucas 2014:133-135). According to this view, Russia stoked domestic instability in Ukraine to pursue long-standing territorial ambitions, legitimised through a disingenuous pre-text of defending the region's Russian-speaking population (Mearsheimer 2014:77-78; Sakwa 2015:33). This view is captured by US Secretary of State John Kerry's now infamous condemnation of Russia's "incredible act of aggression… invading another country on a completely trumped up pre-text" (Walt 2015:1). Indeed, Russian actions in Ukraine are seen as being just the first stage in pursuit of a "desire to recreate the glories of the Soviet empire" (Obama 2015; Lucas 2014:133-136).

That Russian foreign policy is driven primarily by territorial expansionism, however, is far from clear. Putin has surrendered more Russian territory than any leader since Lenin; transferring territory to China, Japan, Estonia, Latvia and Norway (Sakwa 2015:116). Moreover, he has passed up previous opportunities to justify territorial expansion, ignoring a referendum in Moldova's breakaway Transnistrian region which, ostensibly at least, called overwhelmingly for accession to Russia in 2006 (Sakwa 2015:114). Characterising Russian actions as being in pursuit of territorial expansion is inconsistent with this record. Indeed, the argument that Russia is motivated by material interest seems difficult to sustain. The sanctions regime imposed by the West has posed serious challenges to an already vulnerable Russian economy, and consequently weakened the state's ability to sustain its patrimonial network inside Russia (Connoly 2015). Rational actors, according to the realist paradigm, should anticipate such reactions and integrate them into their strategic calculus (Snyder 2002:175). Moreover, for a number of years Putin made Russian integration into the global economy a key aspect of his foreign policy "hardly [missing] an opportunity to hammer home the point that integration is an intrinsic good and perhaps the most fundamental of foreign policy goals" (Lo 2003:57). Under his presidency, Russia secured membership of a host of international institutions including the G8, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade

Organization (Lo 2003:57-61; Sherr 2015:56). It seems deeply unsatisfactory, therefore, to base analyses of Russian policy in Ukraine on an *assumption* that it is motivated primarily by material interest. It is unable to explain why Putin would have so radically altered his perception of Russia's interests in the context of Ukraine. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that US President Obama has bemoaned Putin's alleged irrationality in responding to the conflict and Western sanctions regime (Rampton & Grove 2014).

The second explanation for Russian policy is equally problematic. This view holds that Russia perceived the Eastward expansion of NATO and the EU as a direct threat to Russia's security interests. The ascent of a government in Kyiv committed to closer association with both of these institutions raised the spectre of a "strategically important neighbour turned into a Western bastion" (Mearsheimer 2014:77). The Kremlin undertook military action in Crimea to secure the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol and helped provoke and sustain a rebellion in the Donbass to dissuade Kiev's Western-orientation (Mearsheimer 2014; Sakwa 2015:75). This view cannot explain why Putin would so fundamentally have altered his perception of threat, having instigated the NATO-Russia council and declared that an adversarial relationship with NATO was contrary to Russian interest (Sakwa 2015:45; Lo 2003:112; Sherr 2013:55-57). Indeed, Putin was instrumental in securing NATO's military access to the Central Asian states during the Afghanistan war, another region which is strategically important for Russia (Lo 2003:118; Sakwa 2015:33). Instrumental cooperation is explicable within a realist framework, however an analysis based on the constancy of state motives cannot account for such a dramatic shift from cooperation to adversarialism (Glaser 2010:25; Mercer 1995:232), particularly given Russia's continuing military weakness vis-à-vis NATO (Sakwa 2015:5).

In addition to these shortcomings, adopting a realist framework in Ukraine obscures important elements of the conflict's dynamics. At the root of this problem is the primacy given to state agency and the naturalisation of the state which defines the realist approach (Pasic 1996:89; Mercer 1995:250). The view that the political instability in Ukraine generally, and the violence in the Donbass in particular, is the product of Russian intervention is consistent throughout the commentary of Western policymakers (Sakwa 2015:163). Thus, US President Barack Obama described the Ukraine crisis as the result of "choices that *the Russian government* has made" (Obama 2014; italics added). Indeed, the West has often portrayed rebels in the Donbass as a proxy force constituting a *de facto* Russian invasion (Sakwa 2015:154). This pertains despite the fact that the rebellion "was primarily a home-grown [Ukrainian] phenomenon" (Sakwa 2015:154). This is not to suggest that Russia has no tangible

involvement in the Donbass uprising. Indeed, beyond the period analysed here there is clear evidence of substantial Russian involvement and a consolidation of Russia's control over the *de facto* authorities (Matveeva 2016:14-18). In the early stages of the conflict, however, Western states consistently underestimated the extent to which the rebels constituted a relatively autonomous non-state actor, without whose action's it is reasonable to doubt that Russian involvement would have reached its current extent. Further, the naturalisation of existing state borders glosses over long-standing challenges of national identity in the Ukrainian polity, which are central to the narratives of both the Russian government and the Donbass rebels (Sakwa 2015:14-25; Szporluk 2000:319-327; Laitin 1998:300).

Given the centrality of identity to the narratives of the belligerents and the well-documented influence of nationalist groups on the Russian government (Laruelle 2009a:1) a more comprehensive account of the current crisis demands a theoretical approach which can analyse the role of identity. It is to the task of providing such a framework which I now turn.

2.2 Considering Identity - Ontological Security in International Relations

A number of scholars have drawn on the concept of ontological security to analyse the role of identity in international relations (Steele 2008, 2010; Mitzen 2006; Manners 2002; Kinvall 2004). According to this approach, states seek not only physical but also ontological security; the ability to maintain a relatively stable sense of identity expressed through a 'biographic narrative'. The terms of this narrative shape the perception of crises and the appropriate policy responses to them. In this section I explore in greater depth the contours of an approach based on the concept of ontological security. Then I outline more fully what is meant by ontological security and the way in which certain crises can provoke ontological *insecurity* (Section 2.2.1). This is followed by a description of the elements of biographic narratives and their role in determining the 'meaning' of particular actions and events (Section 2.2.2). Finally, I address criticisms of the ontological security approach and justify a framework based on this model which overcomes these (Section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

2.2.1 Ontological (In)Security and Crises of Identity

The concept of ontological security finds its roots in the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens. According to Giddens (1991:36), the modern world is characterised by an "almost infinite range of possibilities" which overwhelms the ability of agents to systematically relate actions and events to their goals and interests. This has the effect of denying meaningful agency and producing 'existential anxiety', as the pervasiveness of potential threats becomes impossible

to control (Giddens 1991:2; see also Marlow 2002:243). In resolving this condition individuals establish a sense of self-identity expressed through a biographic narrative (Giddens 1991:54-55). The identity developed through this narrative helps to provide a "relatively stable cognitive environment" (Mitzen 2006:343) which shapes the subjective value of particular events and orders the perception of threats. Importantly, this narrative is not static but constantly evolves to incorporate new experiences as they unfold. Individuals engage in the 'reflexive monitoring' of their actions, in order to ensure that they are consistent with their understanding of self-identity (Giddens 1991:5; Steele 2010:73). Identity here is not reducible to behaviour *per se*, but is reflected by the manner in which events are interpreted and behaviour incorporated into the biography of self-identity. Ontological security can be considered, in essence, to be "the ability to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens 1991:54) through reflexive monitoring. Since maintaining this stable sense of identity is a pre-requisite for meaningful agency ontological security can be a compelling motive for behaviour itself (Mitzen 2006:343).

Biographic narratives are, while not wholly fictitious, necessarily constructed and partial, leading to images of self-identity which are in important ways "idealized" (Steele 2010:18; Fierke 1997:244-245). They are not conclusive but "only one 'story' among many other stories that could be told" (Giddens 1991:55). Consequently, notions of identity are vulnerable to challenge and identity crises (Steele 2010:18-19). International events are interpreted, rationalised and articulated by state leaders in relation to these constructed notions of self-identity (Steele 2008:70-71; Wendt 1996:49; Weldes 1999:35-62). This fact has two important implications: firstly, because crises are interpreted in terms of divergent notions of self-identity, "events that are ostensibly the same will in fact be constituted as different crises ... for states with different identities" (Weldes 1999:37). This makes an understanding of state identity a pre-requisite to an understanding of the *meaning* of any event to a particular state actor, which cannot be reduced to material interests alone. Secondly, given that policies must be reconcilable with the biographic narrative, particular crises may generate expectations that a state will respond in a particular way to "live up" (Steele 2010:19) to their constructed notion of self-identity; even when this includes physically-costly action (Mitzen 2006:341; Fierke 1997:244-245). Inaction in the face of certain crises can provoke ontological insecurity as it becomes impossible to reconcile with a state's understanding of its self-identity (Steele 2008:53-55). Crises are likely to pose such an identity threat when they are represented in terms which challenge or contradict elements of a state's biographic narrative. Such crises represent 'traumatic ruptures', in which the contradiction between real-world experience and the

idealised notion of self-identity becomes apparent (Steele 2010:47). Steele (2008:114-147), for example, has argued that inaction in the face of the Rwandan genocide jeopardised moralistic notions of self-identity in certain Western liberal states. This created a compelling incentive to intervene in the former-Yugoslavia to re-assert (and, indeed, re-create) their humanitarian credentials. A state which considers itself to play a prominent role in international affairs may be particularly vulnerable to identity threats as it is expected to respond to a broader range of international events (Steele 2008:69-70). Given that state actors do not hold a monopoly over the narration of political events, they may be vulnerable to alternative representations of crises which demand particular responses from them to maintain ontological security (Steele 2010:77; Krolikowski 2008:123-131). In order to identify when a particular event may constitute such an identity threat it is necessary to advance a deeper understanding of the constituent elements of state-identity. As already argued, such identities are expressed through a biographic narrative, thus, it is toward identifying the parameters of these narratives which I now turn.

2.2.2 The Parameters of Biographic Narratives

Biographic narratives tell a state "the relevant roles [it] occupies for a particular set of situations and creates the context through which action can take place" (Steele 2008:72). It is in relation to this narrative that particular events and actions are given *meaning*. Political actors construct the subjective value of events and responses to them through the terms of these narratives (Weldes 1999:37; Steele 2008:70-73; Wendt 1996:50). This is a discursive process in which political actors 'talk' about actions and events in terms of their identity in order to construct particular representations of them (Steele 2008:72). Whilst a necessary simplification, some common attributes of biographic narratives can be identified; these being broadly reducible to *relational, temporal* and *spatial* elements.

Relational: One of the most basic functions of a state's biographic narrative is to describe the community or group on whose behalf it acts; to delineate the boundaries of citizenship in order to naturalise processes of political inclusion and exclusion (Kratochwil 1996:196; see also Fierke 1997:244-245). National identity is perhaps the most prevalent form of communal identification in the contemporary world, often becoming an integral part of the way in which individuals understand their own identity (Kinnvall 2004:742; Storey 2012:79). It is, ostensibly, on behalf of these national communities that states conduct their foreign policies (Lapid & Kratochwil 1996:105). Membership of the group is represented through various

‘identity markers’, which represent the shared attributes of the collective and symbolise other elements of the narrative to bind the collective to a particular political community. These markers may take a variety of forms including shared linguistic-, religious- or cultural-similarities. The use of certain symbols such as flags or insignia are also means through which identification with the collective is represented (Storey 2012:79-88; Kratochwil 1996:181-186). Members of such groups often come to understand their own wellbeing as intricately related to that of the group (Wendt 1996:53; Steele 2008:30-32; Mercer 1995:241). Collective identities are constructed as much through external differentiation as they are from recognition of internal similarities (Campbell 1998:9; Mercer 1995:248). State authority is often justified on the basis that it is required to defend against some shared external threat (Huysmans 1998). Indeed, David Campbell (1998:2) argues that “the very domains of inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign ... are constituted through the writing of a threat”. This threatening ‘other’ may be described as the very antithesis of the community and is often identified as the root cause of social-ills and political problems in a society (Huysmans 1998:241; Kinnvall 2004:754). Crises which affect those with whom one shares a collective identity will often carry greater significance. We care more about what happens to *us* than what happens to *them,* the complex and multifaceted ways these terms are understood notwithstanding. Conversely, action understood to have been initiated by some significant-other may be assumed to be inherently threatening to the wellbeing of the community (Wendt 1996:52).

Temporal: Biographic narratives tell a story about the nation’s history which naturalises and justifies the ‘nation’ as a coherent political community in the present. Indeed, this historical narrative is often described as the *sine qua non* of national identity (Kinnvall 2004:756; Storey 2012:78). It builds a shared memory which draws selectively on particular interpretations of historic events, understood to have been formative for the nation’s character (Berenskoetter 2014:271). Commonly, such events will be moments of glory or trauma which *we* achieved together and wish to recreate, or endured and must avoid repetition of (Kinnvall 2004:755; Berenskoetter 2014:271). Most national biographies also include a ‘story of birth’ regarding the origins of the community (Berenskoetter 2014:272). Such events and individuals associated with them are mythologised and these stories are invoked in order to establish a sense of continuity with the past and express the identity of the collective (Storey 2012:88-94). In addition, these memories are used by political actors in response to current events to provide a point of reference or rationalise certain responses (Berenskoetter 2014:272; Steele 2008:55-

57). Thus, British Prime-Minister David Cameron's comparison of Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler creates a particular interpretation of Russian policy which holds historic resonance for the British public (Traynor 2014). Temporal narratives also include a future-oriented component, which forms the vision for the future of the group. Such visionary narratives often include utopic and dystopic elements. These articulate the potential which the nation possesses and wishes to realise or, conversely, the dystopic past which must be overcome. Identity in the EU, for example, has often been formed around the need to overcome the 'dystopic' shared experience of World War Two (WW2) (Manners 2002). It is in pursuit (or avoidance) of these visions that actions are rationalised, explaining *why* a state is motivated toward particular behaviour and what the state's role or purpose in the international system is (Berenskoetter 2014:279-282; Giddens 1991:66-69).

Spatial: The spatial dimension of a biographic narrative is intimately related to its temporal elements (Storey 2012:111). Spatial dimensions of identity do not necessarily reflect the actual possession of territory and, thus, are different to the territorial calculus of states in the realist framework. Rather, they are territories imbued with meaning because of their relation to the temporal aspects of self-identity. They represent 'known' spaces in which members of the nation are at 'home', functioning as an "anchor which provides a sense of cognitive and emotional grounding" (Berenskoetter 2014:275). National identities are likely to envision some territorial space which is *theirs* and for which gaining, or losing, political authority over contributes to the visionary narrative (Storey 2012:129; Kinnvall 2004:759; Berenskoetter 2014:276). Particular places often become symbolic of other elements of self-identity. "Attachment to land ... can be particularly powerful when historic memories of fighting over this space forms part of the collective narrative" (Storey 2012:74). The territories gained or lost as a result can become important reminders of the past 'glories' or 'traumas' which form the historic narrative (Steele 2010:173; Berenskoetter 2014:278). Serb nationalists, for example, were exceptionally sensitive to perceived marginalisation in Kosovo on account of it being the site of their 'heroic' defeat by the Turks in 1389 (Storey 2012:120; Denich 1994). Thus, the value of particular territories to states are likely to be more representative of their place within the biographic narrative than a reflection of any intrinsic value (Storey 2012:116).

2.2.3 Answering critics of ontological security

Before outlining in greater detail the way in which the concepts of identity threats and biographic narratives can be utilised in an analysis of the Ukraine crisis, some criticisms of the

ontological security approach must be addressed. Many scholars have raised concerns regarding the ascription of *identity* to states, arguing that such anthropomorphic treatment is wrong-footed (Steele 2008:15-20; Krolikowski 2008:109; Neumann 2004; Mercer 1995). Pluralists point out that the 'state' is in reality an aggregation of various subnational institutions and bureaucratic departments, and consider any approach which treats the state as a more or less unitary actor capable of defining interests in and of itself as problematic (Ringmar 1996:442; Hudson 2005:1). Similarly, many scholars have voiced fundamental concerns about applying psychological theories to state behaviour (Mercer 1995:237). Indeed, ascribing identity to states *uncritically* falls into the same trap of naturalising the state, which I argued earlier was a shortcoming of the realist approach. In this section, I seek to demonstrate that a critical examination of the state highlights that attention to 'state-identity' is not only justified but necessary, given the apparent legitimacy with which such actors conduct foreign policy on behalf of their citizens.

The assumption that states are a more or less natural reflection of territorial organisation among pre-existing social communities is commonplace in international relations scholarship (Lapid & Kratochwil 1996:105). As a swathe of recent historical analyses have shown, however, this assumption is problematic given the processes of state-formation which gave rise to the contemporary nation-state system (Campbell 1998:10-12). Perhaps most notably, Charles Tilly (1990) and Benedict Anderson (2006) have convincingly argued that the emergence of states as the dominant source of political authority (in Europe at least) pre-dated the existence of consolidated communal identities. Rather, the construction of such 'imagined communities' was a political project through which the consolidation of power by state authorities was justified (Ringmar 1996:455-458; Steele 2010:18; Campbell 1998:14; Neumann 2004:261; Berenskoetter 2014:263; Krolikowski 2008). Without a degree of mutual-identification between society and state the authority of the state is deeply compromised. The centrality of this mutual-identification to state legitimacy is reflected in the recurrent challenge of 'nation-building' in a swathe of post-colonial states, where its absence is widely identified as a driver of violent conflict (Lemay-Hébert 2009). Thus, states *necessarily* construct a narrative of communal identity which binds the society they govern (Ringmar 1996:455-458; Berenskoetter 2014:263). Moreover, national identity can be a means through which individuals resolve their own ontological insecurity, a phenomena reflected in the fact that nationalist sentiments commonly increase during periods of uncertainty and insecurity (Kinnvall 2004). Indeed, to some extent it can be argued that a primary function of modern

government is to resolve conditions of ontological insecurity in society (Marlow 2002). As has already been argued, this relies upon the construction of a stable and coherent narrative of identity. On this basis I argue that ascribing an identity to states is justifiable. Whether these sentiments of identity are '*real'* or politically-motivated, state leaders must be able to demonstrate the coherence of their foreign policy actions with them in order to maintain their legitimacy (Prizel 1998:2). It is important, therefore, to recognise that narratives of state identity are often directed at a domestic audience and, thus, the influence of domestic actors must be an important consideration in analyses of states' foreign policies (Krolikowski 2008:131).

The argument that 'national identities' are not naturally-occurring phenomena, but political constructs which legitimise state authority has two further implications. Firstly, if narrating action and events in terms of state-identity is a *political act* it follows that political actors may seek to challenge or reconstruct these narratives for political purposes (Steele 2008:163). As argued earlier, such narratives are only one of many possible versions of the same story. Consequently, other political actors may invoke competing narratives of a crisis in order to challenge the legitimacy of a state's actions or to provoke a particular response; a practice Steele terms 'counterpower' (2010:4). This means that attention must be given to the way in which competing representations of crises draw upon a state's biographic narrative in order to alter the political calculus of authorities. Secondly, if states are not a naturally-occurring phenomena reflecting pre-existing communities then one must accept that notions of communal identity may not necessarily correspond to state borders. Rather, they overlap and cross borders creating 'frontier zones' in which divergent understanding of collective belonging coexist (Ferguson & Mansbach 1996:21-25; Pasic 1996:98). Often, such identities may not be mutually-exclusive, leading to self-perceived "cultural hybridity" (Storey 2012:83). Certain events or contexts may reconstruct such identities into mutually-exclusive forms, forcing individuals to choose between them. Indeed, it is these "contests for loyalties and the changes in affiliation they produce [which] are the stuff of history" (Ferguson & Mansbach 1996:35). One must accept, therefore, that different narratives of identity may inform divergent interpretations of the conflict within Ukraine itself. With these observations in place, I am now ready to advance a methodology through which this theoretical insight may be applied to improve our understanding of the current conflict in Ukraine.

2.3 Identity and the Ukraine Crisis: Approach and Methodology

This part of the paper has argued that states legitimise their authority through the construction of an identity that is captured in an idealised biographic narrative. The subjective *meaning* of any crisis or policy is a product of the way in which it is discursively represented with reference to this narrative. State actors must ensure their policies are consistent with it in order to avoid 'ontological insecurity'. Particular representations of crises may pose an identity threat which necessitates physically-costly action in order to reassert notions of identity. In order to answer *'to what extent notions of Russian identity affect Russia's perception of and policy response to the conflict in Ukraine',* therefore, it is important to examine the way in which Russian political actors have drawn on the Russian biographic narrative to construct a particular meaning for the conflict. Thus, in Part III I examine:

- What biographic narrative is used to construct an 'identity' for the Russian Federation (RF)?
- How are these narratives used in the representation of the Ukraine crisis articulated by political actors in Russia?
- How are these narratives used to construct a meaning for Russian policy in Ukraine?

In order to answer these questions I employ the 'interpretivist' methodology used by Steele (2008:6-7) in his examination of ontological (in)security. Through this approach I seek to 'reconstruct' the Ukraine crisis, with emphasis placed on those elements which have particular salience within the Russian social context. Such an approach inevitably suffers from limited generalisability and often places too little emphasis on the role of power and material considerations in structuring policy responses (Steele 2008:8). It is not my intention here to offer a *complete* account of the Ukraine crisis nor of the role of identity in conflict elsewhere. Rather, I seek to offer an understanding of the particular dynamics of identity and conflict in Ukraine which can *complement* those based on material considerations.

In order to do so, I draw upon the wealth of secondary literature on national identity in Russia to understand the narrative used to express Russian identity. I use this to provide the basis from which I can identify elements of the narrative which are invoked to construct a particular representation of the Ukraine crisis. I draw upon public statements of political actors and media reports to elucidate the *meaning* of the Ukraine crisis, and the Russian response to it in terms of Russian identity. I am, regretfully, somewhat constrained in the sources I am able to consult by a lack of proficiency in the Russian language. Nevertheless, the global importance

of the crisis means that sufficient English-language material is available in order to achieve my task satisfactorily.

3 Russian Identity and the Ukraine Crisis

In the third part of this paper I apply the theoretical model developed previously to analyse the way in which the Ukraine crisis has been discursively interpreted by political actors in Russia. In doing so, I seek to develop an understanding of the way in which notions of Russian identity have shaped Russia's perception of the crisis and its policy response to it. I begin by identifying the major elements of the narrative which constitute contemporary Russian identity (Section 3.1.1). It is important to note that identity is an inherently complex phenomena and it is impossible to give full coverage to the many nuances and debates within it here. Rather, I draw out the major themes of Russian identity that have implications for foreign policy and the perception of the conflict in Ukraine. I contextualise the onset of the current crisis by providing an overview of the relationship between politics and identity in post-Soviet Ukraine (Section 3.1.2). Using these analyses as a base, I provide an account of the Ukraine conflict as seen through the prism of Russian identity, and analyse the way in which this has affected the 'meaning' of the crisis to Russia and its policy in Ukraine (Section 3.2) .

3.1 Post-Soviet Identities in Russia and Ukraine

3.1.1 Identity in the Russian Federation

Russian identity has always been a complex phenomenon and since the emergence of the Muscovite state in the fifteenth-century its consolidation has been a political priority for Russian leaders. This task was complicated by the fact that state-building occurred in parallel to a multi-ethnic imperial project, and thus the basis for an ethno-national identity was weak (Tuminez 2000:25-26; Robinson 2002:20-29). A number of features of Russian identity from this imperial past endure today. The contemporary Russian state is held to be the successor of the *Kyivan-Rus*; a confederation of East-Slavic tribes which ruled substantial territory from its capital in Kyiv (modern-day Ukraine) until their subjugation by the Mongol empire (Franklin 2004a:13; see also p. 3). The early stages of Tsarist empire-building were thus understood as the re-construction of this earlier political community; the "regathering of the Rus" (Tolz 2001:161). The Tsarist-state was also seen to possess a unique civilizational inheritance. The collapse of the Byzantine Empire led Moscow to become the seat of Orthodox-Christendom, described as a 'Third Rome' with responsibility for leading and protecting Orthodoxy (Grier 2003:30; Plokhy 2006:251). Consequently, one of the defining historical memories of contemporary Russian identity is the 'baptism of the Rus' by Vladimir the Great, a leader of

the *Kyivan-Rus* in 988AD, near modern-day Sevastopol (Tolz 2001:10). Russian empire-building was legitimised by the preservation and spread of Orthodox values, and led to the development of what was understood to be a unique cultural space; the *Russky Mir* (Russian World;Lo 2003:13). The 'Russification' of local populations pursued through linguistic- and religio-cultural assimilation was a key policy of the Tsarist-empires (Tuminez 2000:39). The concept of the *Russky Mir* continues to be a principle of Russian foreign policymaking today (Laruelle 2015:93) and has two primary implications. Firstly, the cultural community of the *Russky Mir* is broadly defined to include 'Russified' populations, with linguistic and religious identity markers being used to delineate an expansive definition of 'Russian people' (Sherr 2013:87-89; Melvin 1995:22; Gasparov 2004). Secondly, it justifies what is held to be Russia's *derzhavnost,* its rightful status as a global power (Lo 2003:13) and as the "sacred centre" (Averintsev 1991:17) of a unique Orthodox civilisation.

The belief in the distinctiveness of 'Russian' civilisation is supported by a process of differentiation from 'the West', which constitutes Russia's 'significant-Other' (Clowes 2011:4; Shaw 1999:280). This relationship is complex and often contradictory toa number of competing interpretations co-existing simultaneously (see Neumann 1996:28-39). Given the current adversarial context I focus on the 'Slavophile' tendency, which emphasises the superior and embattled nature of Russian cultural-identity. According to this understanding, Russia's historic underdevelopment vis-à-vis Western European nations is a direct result of the West's desire to undermine Russia and deny its global status (Sperling 2009:221). Russians are thus "besieged" (Molchanov 2015:207) by the threat of Western invasion and "intellectual colonisation" (Laruelle 2009a:4) which seek to undermine Russian exceptionalism. Consequently, Russia remains incredibly sensitive to perceived external interference by the West (Tolz 2001:209; Clowes 2011).

The memory of repelling successive 'Western' invasions – by the Polish Empire, Napoleonic France and Nazi Germany – provides a basis for seeing Russians as a 'special' people who have a role in protecting the *Russky Mir* (Laruelle 2009b:221; Neumann 1996:199). This self-constructed role as the 'guardian' of a unique cultural space has led to the development of a "big-brother mentality" (Szporluk 2000:73) toward other 'Russian' nationalities; in particular in Ukraine and Belarus. Indeed, Ukraine is commonly referred to as 'Little Russia' (*Malorossiya*) in the Russian lexicon, a term Putin himself has frequently used (Sherr 2013:24). This 'fraternal' relationship was consolidated during the Soviet-era, and continues to serve as the "main historical storehouse from which a usable Russian past can be constructed" (Vujačić 2009:51). No memory from this period is more important than WW2,

known as the 'Great Patriotic War' in Russia. Perhaps due to its ability to unite those with disparate memories of the Soviet-era more generally, the repulsion of fascism by Russia in defence of the 'fraternal' Soviet nations is one of the defining moments in the contemporary Russian narrative (Laruelle 2009b:36; Vujačić 2009:60). Speaking in May 2000 at a WW2 memorial service in Ukraine, Putin said: "We are one family. We vanquished when we stood together. We have common historic roots, a common fate, history, culture" (Admiraal 2009:221).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a profound identity crisis for the Russian Federation, which was struggling to define its interests and global purpose (Chebankova 2015:178; Robinson 2002:69). The results of this struggle have implications for contemporary Russian foreign policy. Informed by the concepts of the *Russky Mir* and fraternal relations with nearby nations, post-Soviet political leaders determined that an important principle of foreign policy would be Russia's responsibility for the welfare of 'Russians' living beyond its borders (Galeotti 1995:130; Melvin 1995:20). This allowed Russia to construct an image of itself as the historic homeland of the *vykhdotsy* ('those who have left'), and in many ways this image provides the *raison-d'être* of the contemporary Russian state (Melvin 1995:18-21). Indeed, this responsibility has become "an uncontested principle of Russian foreign policy" (Melvin 1995:22). Secondly, the political and economic uncertainty which characterised the Yeltsin-era is seen as a consequence of the inappropriate import of 'Western' liberal market-democracy. This is understood as further evidence of both Russian exceptionalism and the determination of Western nations to subjugate Russia (Robinson 2002:75-90; Lo 2003:14). Upon coming to power, Putin drew upon this 'dystopic' past to construct a 'vision' for the future; promising to overcome the 'humiliation' of the Yeltsin-era and re-establish respect for Russia on the global stage (Chebankova 2015:179; Lo 2003:4-8). More recent events have also modified the identity propagated by the Russian state. Domestic nationalists played a central role in the protest movement which emerged against Putin in 2011; particularly the 'White' and 'Red' movements which reflect Tsarist- and Soviet-nostalgia respectively (Laruelle 2016:58-66). Since this time, Putin has largely co-opted the narratives of these movements in order to control the political threat they once posed (Laruelle 2015). Thus, symbolism related to the Russian Empire or Soviet Union have become more politically relevant for the Russian state. The contemporary Russian flag, for example, bears the Imperial eagle whilst the national anthem retains the Soviet-era melody (Chaisty & Whitefield 2015:166). It is a common overstatement to claim that Putin is "beholden" (Kuzio 2015:117) to nationalists in Russia,

however, it is certainly the case that their influence has increased and state patriotism has become a more pronounced means through which his legitimacy is maintained since 2011 (Laruelle 2015).

3.1.2 Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Ukraine

Ukraine gained statehood in 1991 for only the second time in its history. For most of the period since the fall of the *Kyivan-Rus* in the thirteenth-century, Ukraine has been a subject of numerous Empires. The bulk of its territory formed the Russian imperial regions of *Malorossiya* and *Novorossiya* (New Russia), whilst the Western 'Galicia' region was ruled by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Sakwa 2015:12-13; Petro 2015:20-28; see also p. 3). These divergent historical experiences are reflected in the multifaceted nature of contemporary Ukrainian identity.

Across much of South-East Ukraine communities express a strong historical, cultural and linguistic identification with Russia. These regions, in particular Crimea and the Donbass, played an important political and economic role in both the Tsarist- and Soviet-eras and thus a degree of nostalgia for them is evident (Sakwa 2015:18-20). Moreover, Russian is widely spoken and in some regions is more commonly understood than Ukrainian. This linguistic divide is an important feature of Ukrainian politics and it should be emphasised that, in Ukraine, linguistic-identification serves as the primary means through which "the line between 'us' and 'them' is drawn" (Kiryukhin 2015:63). Nevertheless, it is overly simplistic to describe the East as reflecting a purely 'Russian' identity. Rather, it is best described as being "bi-cultural" (Shulman 1998:621; Pogrebinskiy 2015:91). These communities tend to support the principle of Ukrainian sovereignty, albeit with an enduring 'special relationship' with Russia (Onuch 2015:37). This contrasts markedly with the conception of Ukrainian identity expressed by Western Ukrainian nationalists, largely from the Galicia region, and Lviv in particular. This 'Ukrainian-nationalist' identity is constructed "in opposition to [Russia]" (Kiryukhin 2015:63). For such communities, Ukrainian history is held to be one of colonial subjugation, with Ukraine a "country enslaved by Russia. Its people, culture ... and language ... perceived primarily as [its] victims" (Kiryukhin 2015:63). In this conception, 'Russian' identities in Ukraine are seen as product of the colonial past and thus, Russophone communities have been described in nationalist publications as being "*infected* by a Russian mentality" (Shulman 1998:613; italics added). Russia itself is commonly seen as the source of all "misfortunes of the Ukrainian people" (Molchanov 2015:210). Ukrainian nationalists tend to favour a Western geopolitical orientation, perceiving membership of European institutions as a means through which

Ukrainian sovereignty can be preserved in the face of Russian imperialism. Domestically, they favour efforts to homogenise Ukrainian identity (Szporluk 2000:325-327). Memories of resistance to Russian rule are an important theme in the expression of Ukrainian nationalism. Most notably, the Ukrainian Patriotic Army and its leader Stephen Bandera are mythologised as freedom fighters in Western Ukraine. This memory differs markedly from that in the East, where Bandera is remembered instead for his collaboration with Nazi Germany in WW2 (Prizel 1994:122; Sakwa 2015:19).

Politics in post-Soviet Ukraine have largely been characterised by a balancing act between these competing identities, particularly through the pursuit of a 'multi-vectored' foreign policy which courted strong diplomatic relationships with both Russia and Western states (Kiryuchin 2015:65; Sakwa 2015:57). Voting patterns in Ukraine are striking for the degree to which they are 'regionalised', with Russophone communities tending to vote overwhelmingly for Yanukovych's Party of the Regions (POR; Marples 2015). The balance between these competing political sentiments was dramatically upset by the 2004 'Orange Revolution', in which Yanukovych's election was overturned in favour of Viktor Yuschenko, marking a "seismic Westward shift in the geopolitics of the region" (Karatnycky 2005:35). Yuschenko's support came overwhelmingly from Western Ukraine, and his 'Our Ukraine' coalition included a number of Ukrainian nationalist parties (Sakwa 2015:52-56). The Kremlin perceived the 'revolution' as a "political Stalingrad ... a planned *strike against Russia"* orchestrated by the West (Herd 2005:18). Yuschenko pursued a number of policies seen as problematic for Russian-Ukrainian communities, most notably declaring Bandera a 'national hero of Ukraine' in 2010 (Sakwa 2015:138). Forebodingly, Crimean MPs formally requested that the constitutional court reverse the decision, warning that the award jeopardised "the territorial integrity ... of Ukraine by promoting extremism and fascism" (Masalkova 2010). The pendulum of Ukrainian political identity swung back in 2011 with the election of Viktor Yanukovych. During the Yuschenko period, the POR platform had become increasingly pre-occupied with the defence of Russophone communities in Ukraine (Marples 2015:13) and, thus, Yanukovych pursued a number of policies which railed Ukrainian nationalists. In 2012, he introduced a law allowing Russophone regions to declare Russian an official language and, throughout his Presidency, pursued closer relations with the Kremlin (Sakwa 2015:84-86; Pogrebinskiy 2015:83). Typifying the 'multi-vectored' approach to Ukrainian foreign policy, however, he also maintained Yuschenko's pursuit of the EUAA. In 2013 this foreign policy

approach would backfire dramatically, unleashing the tinderbox of contested identity in Ukraine and sparking the current conflict (Sakwa 2015:68-69).

3.2 Identity in Conflict: From 'Euromaidan' to War

The decision of Yanukovych on 21st November 2013 to postpone the signing of the EUAA prompted large-scale protests, with an epicentre in Kiev's 'Maidan Square', leading to them being dubbed the 'Euromaidan' movement. Violent clashes between police and protesters in February 2014 led to a massive deterioration of the political situation, and on 22nd February Yanukovych was stripped of the Presidency after protestors took control of several key government buildings (Sakwa 2014:81-89). In response, 'anti-Maidan' demonstrations erupted across Russophone Ukraine and a number of regional governments refused to recognise the Kyiv government. The response was particularly pronounced in Crimea, where pro-Russian demonstrators, supported by Russian military personnel, took control of the regional government and held a contentious referendum leading to the peninsula's *de facto* accession to Russia on 14th March (Sakwa 2014:100; Mearsheimer 2014:82). The Kyiv authorities clamped down on 'pro-Russian' protests in Eastern Ukraine, leading to the formation of two self-proclaimed independent entities in April; the 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DPR) and the 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LPR), which combined to form the 'Federation of Novorossiya' in May (Sakwa 2014:149-150). The Ukrainian government deemed the republic's authorities as terrorists and launched an extensive military operation to re-establish their authority. The rebels, lacking the Russian military support provided to Crimea, were on the verge of defeat by the end of July (Sakwa 2014:152). In August, Russian policy in the Donbass took an interventionist course, facilitating a rebel counter-attack which allowed them to negotiate a ceasefire in Minsk from a position of strength in September 2014 (Sakwa 2014:171). The resultant 'Minsk Agreement' continues to form the basis of subsequent ceasefires, which remain at least nominally in force today.

From this brief account it appears that it is possible to speak broadly of the conflict as having four defining moments: firstly, the rejection of the EUAA and the 'Euromaidan' protests which culminated in the removal of President Yanukovych in February; secondly, the annexation of Crimea by the RF in March; thirdly, the formation of the DPR and the LPR in April and the period leading to their near-defeat in July; and fourthly, the supposed increase in Russian support from August/September 2014, which prevented the outright defeat of the rebels and set the course for the current dynamic of the conflict. In what follows, I analyse the way in which key political actors have narrated the period from September 2013 and the events

leading up to the protests, until what appears to be the beginning of Russia's more active role in the Donbass from September 2014. In doing so I seek to evaluate the role that Russian identity has played in shaping the RF's perception of the Ukraine crisis and the 'meaning' given to its policy response.

3.2.1 The Euromaidan Movement (September 2013 – February 2014)

During the negotiations leading up the scheduled signing of the EUAA at the 26th November Vilinius Summit, President Yanukovych courted offers from the EU and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) simultaneously (Sakwa 2015:78-79). Due to the divergent narratives of identity in Ukraine, the decision was increasingly defined as the country's "civilizational choice" (Tsygankov 2015:289). Given the 'fraternal' relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and the centrality of the *Kyivan-Rus* to the historic narrative of the Russian state, this had stark implications for Russia. Senior advisors to the Kremlin warned that statements by Yanukovych showed that "Kyiv no longer views itself as part of the Russian cultural world" (Goble 2013). This was evidently in Putin's mind when he spoke at a conference on the issue in Kyiv:

"This is not just Ukraine's civilizational choice ... Here ... a choice was made for the whole of Holy Rus, for all our people ... the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people. We must remember this brotherhood and preserve our ancestor's traditions." (Putin 2013a)

These remarks show that Russia saw Ukraine's potential association with the EU not only in materialistic terms, but as having deep implications for the concept of the *Russky Mir* and Russia's self-constructed identity as a unique civilizational centre. The identity threat this posed was exacerbated by the perception that EU negotiators sought to marginalise Russia's role, with Putin complaining that "we were told it was none of our business ... we were told where to go" (Putin 2014a; Sawka 2015:32-33). Ukraine's EUAA thus assumed symbolic importance for Russia, representing both denial of a shared cultural legacy with Ukraine and the marginalisation of Russia from European politics; anathema to Putin's future-vision of Russia (re-)assuming its 'natural' place as a global power (Sakwa 2015:76; Laruelle 2015:94). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that, as the Vilnius Summit approached, Moscow put substantial pressure on Yanukovych not to sign the EUAA, threatening to inflict dire economic consequences on the country by ending joint-projects and placing restrictions on Ukrainian exports (Filatova 2013; Sakwa 2015:77). With mounting pressure from both sides and elections

only a year away, on 21st November Yanukovych announced that Ukraine would postpone the signing of the EUAA; a decision which would turn out to have disastrous consequences (Sakwa 2015:79).

The decision not to sign the EUAA prompted the largest protests in Kiev since the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004. The use of force by police at the end of November 2013 led to an escalation in the demonstrations and provided the pre-text for the formation of *Pravda Sektor* (Right Sector; PS), a coalition of ultranationalist groups including the Stephen Bandera Trident Organization and others who frequently use Nazi-era symbols (Sakwa 2015:84-86; RMFA 2014a:9). PS assumed the unofficial role as the Euromaidan movement's security services and were widely implicated in the destruction of Soviet-era monuments in Kiev and across Western Ukraine; perceived in Moscow as an attempt to effect "de-Russification" (Krainova 2014; RMFA 2014a; Choursina 2013). An uninspiring moderate leadership allowed far-right elements to assume disproportionate influence in the Euromaidan movement, fuelling a consistent Russian narrative equating the protestors with fascists (Hutchings & Szostek 2015:194; Marples 2013). This connection is symbolically represented in the Russian Foreign Ministry's *White Book,* which includes images of protest leaders

Figure 1: An image taken from the RMFA White Book shows the leader of the Svoboda! Party speaking at a rally in Maidan Square alongside an SS recruitment poster from wartime Ukraine (RMFA 2014a:67).

juxtaposed with war-time recruitment posters for the 'Galicia SS' and photographs of Nazi-parades in Kiev (see Figure 1; RMFA 2014a:67). Similarly, Putin described the protestors as the "ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's accomplice during WW2" (Putin 2014c). Indeed, in December a Ukrainian academic warned that ultra-nationalists were disproportionately influential in the protest movement and that the heroisation of Bandera, the prominence of nationalist 'blood-and-soil flags', and the adoption of the UPA's *"Glory to Ukraine, Glory to the Heroes!"* battle-cry as the movement's slogan were deeply divisive and excluded the Russophone-Ukrainian communities for whom this symbolism carried a threatening historical meaning (Umland 2013; also Kasonta 2014:7-10).

A second major element of the Russian narrative was that the demonstrations were "directed by the US State Department through government controlled NGOs" (RMFA 2014a:32). The attendance of a number of Western politicians at the anti-government demonstrations in Kiev, along with the bugged phone conversation in which the US Ambassador to Ukraine and Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland are seen to discuss the preferred make-up of a post-Yanukovych government, are held as evidence of Western interference (RMFA 2014a; Hutchings & Szostek 2015:185). Indeed, the accusations go further, with the RMFA's *White Book* implicitly alleging that foreign diplomats provided arms to PS militias (RMFA 2014a:34). The perceived involvement of the West spoke closely to Russia's understanding of its 'significant-Other' and its constant efforts to undermine Russia's global status. The Head of Russia's International Affairs Committee characterised violence in Ukraine as a Western attempt to "strike a blow against Russia" (RIA Novosti 2014a), whilst Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister described the West as the "curators ... of the Ukrainian opposition" (Interfax 2014a). This sentiment was echoed by Putin who said he "understood [that] these actions were aimed against Russia ... the infamous policy of containment continues today.... They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner" (Putin 2014c).

On 23rd January, protestors in Kyiv rejected a request from moderate protest leaders to extend their mandate to negotiate with Yanukovych on their behalf (Kasonta 2014:10). A day later a number of Yanukovych-appointed governors were violently expelled from their offices across Western Ukraine. The ultranationalist *Svoboda!* (Freedom!) Party were seen to be particularly influential in organising these events, which Putin quipped "reminded [him] less of a revolution than of a pogrom" (Putin 2013b; Stack 2014a), drawing further parallels between the Euromaidan movement and fascists. The resonance of Russia's 'fascist' narrative for Russophone communities within Ukraine was reflected in the formation of the 'Ukrainian

Front', which took its name from the Red Army's WW2 operation against Nazi-Germany in Ukraine (Stack 2014b). Speaking at its inception in February 2014, the governor of Kharkov said "70 years on ... a new Ukrainian Front is starting, the participants ... will follow their fathers' and grandfathers' example in freeing our land" (Stack 2014b). On 22nd February, protestors took control of the government and stripped Yanukovych of the Presidency. These events were perceived in the West as the triumph of a pro-democracy movement. In Russia and many Russian-Ukrainian communities, however, it was seen as a Western-orchestrated "rampage of Nazi, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces" (Putin 2014b; Hutchings & Szostek 2015:191; RMFA 2014a). This perception of the crisis drew on memories of Russia's role in repelling Nazism during WW2, and served as a reminder of the need for an assertive foreign policy which would counter the threat posed to Russia's great power status by hostile Western nations (Tsygankov 2015:280).

3.2.2 The Annexation of Crimea (March 2014)

The interim government formed in the wake of Yanukovych's ouster included a number of politicians with links to ultranationalist Ukrainian groups. Most notably Andriy Parubiy, the founder of *Svoboda* who "had a long history of ultra-nationalist activism" (Sakwa 2015:95), was given control over Ukraine's security policy. The government did little to allay the concern among Russophone communities, evident at large-scale demonstrations across South-East Ukraine calling for the country's federalisation (Coalson 2014). The first act of government was to revoke the 2012 language laws which had given legal status to Russian in a number of Eastern regions, while Russian-language broadcasts were banned in Ukraine shortly after (Putin 2014c; Pogrebinskiy 2015:94; RIA Novosti 2014b). They also purportedly considered legislation which would ban Ukrainians from holding dual-citizenship (RMFA 2014b:19) and outlaw ideologies associated with the 'accursed past'; a reference to the Ukrainian Communist Party whose offices were frequently targeted by PS militias, with the alleged acquiescence of authorities (Lukyanov 2014). Ukraine's UN Envoy claimed that Bandera's collaboration with Nazi-Germany was fabricated by the Soviet Union; a claim which elicited an emphatic response from his Russian counterpart, who described the open support of Bandera and the influence of so-called 'Banderites' in government as "deeply disturbing" (Churkin 2014). Further, a number of holy sites of the 'Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate', were targeted by nationalist groups seeking to transfer control to an unrecognised 'Kyiv Patriarchate' which rejected Moscow's authority (RMFA 2014b:60; Interfax 2014b). Efforts to divorce Ukrainian Orthodoxy from Moscow jeopardised Russia's mantle as a 'Third

Figure 2: Image of a fallen Orthodox Cross in Donetsk. Published in the Russian Foreign Ministry White Book *to illustrate widespread damage of Orthodox churches, allegedly as a result of the Ukrainian government's ATO (RMFA 2014c:103).*

Rome' and 'sacred centre' of the *Russky Mir;* a threat symbolically depicted by the Russian Foreign Ministry's *White Book*, shown in Figure 2. Whether or not these policies were supported by a majority in the Ukrainian government, they fuelled a perception that Ukrainian identity was being re-constructed into a form which excluded the bi-cultural identity of Russophone communities in the South-East (Pogrebinskiy 2015:94). Indeed, a senior Russian politician warned Kyiv against imposing "views and approaches ... based on de-Russification and openly anti-Russian moods" (Krainova 2014) across the whole of Ukraine. Putin, meanwhile, claimed that the Euromaidan movement sought "to deprive Russians of their historical memory, [and] even of their language" (Putin 2014c).

On 24th February a large rally in Sevastopol denounced the Kyiv authorities, with protestors carrying the Russian flag to elicit their identification with 'Russia' (Interfax 2014c). Speaking at the rally, the Chair of Russia's Committee for CIS Countries vowed that "Russians cannot be evacuated from ... where they have lived from times immemorial ... If the life and health of our compatriots is under threat, we will not stand to one side" (Interfax 2014d). On 27th pro-Russian demonstrators stormed the Crimean Parliament and installed a new administration. On 29th armed forces, later identified as Russian military personnel, occupied key strategic points throughout the peninsula. On 1st March the Russian Duma authorised the

use of force to oppose "threats to ... Russian citizens and compatriots", whom Putin later defined as being those "who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community" (Sakwa 2015:103-104; Putin 2014d). Finally, the new Crimean government held a highly contentious referendum on the region's status leading to its accession to Russia on 14th March. It has become commonplace in the West to deride Russia's justification to use force by emphasising that there was, in reality, little physical threat to Russian citizens in Crimea prior to its annexation (Walt 2015; Sakwa 2015:114). An examination of Putin's definition of the threat, however, reveals that it is explicitly understood in terms of identity: "at threat were our compatriots ... *their language, history, culture and legal rights"* (Putin 2014d; italics added). Moreover, in speeches following the annexation Putin constructs a subjective value for the action in terms of Russian identity. In describing it as a "return to the motherland" (Putin 2014e), Putin draws parallels with the 'regathering of the Rus' and seeks to re-assert the historic basis of Russian identity in Ukraine, saying:

"Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history .... This is the location of ancient Kehrosones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His [adoption] of Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the... civilisation ... that unite the peoples of Russia [and] Ukraine .... In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia ..... It pains our hearts to see what is happening in Ukraine ... we are one people ... Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other" (Putin 2014c).

In doing so, Putin created a 'meaning' for Crimea's annexation as being representative of the defence of Russian identity in Ukraine more broadly. Moreover, he invokes memory of Russia's 'glorious' past and specific sites associated with this: "Sevastopol, a legendary city with an outstanding history .... Crimea is Baklava and Kerch ..... Each of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding valour" (Putin 2014c). Losing Crimea, he warns, would be akin to "giving up everything that Russia had fought for since the times of Peter the Great" (Putin 2014d). By drawing upon these 'memories', Putin develops an understanding of the annexation of Crimea as a defining moment in the history of the Russian people. In doing so, he uses it to represent Russia's overcoming of the dystopic 'humiliation' of the Yeltsin-era, in which Crimea had been "humbly" handed over to Ukraine by a Russia that "was going through such hard times [that] it was incapable of protecting its interests" (Putin 2014c). In contrast, he warns 'the West' that today "Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs [whose interests] must be taken into account and respected" (Putin 2014c). The annexation of Crimea is thus given symbolic meaning for Russian identity; serving to re-assert Russian roots in a Ukraine where Russian identity was

perceived to be denied by a hostile 'fascist' regime (Suslov 2014:594). Policies implemented following the annexation are consistent with this observation; the Ukrainian language has been removed from the curricula whilst Russian Orthodox churches have escaped the scrutiny directed toward mosques and those associated with the unrecognised Kyiv Patriarchate (Uehling 2015:75). In addition, the annexation served to symbolise the restoration of Russia's global power status through its ability to assert itself in defiance of those who are believed to seek its diminishment (Biersack & O'Lear 2014:248).

3.2.3 The Donbass Uprising (March 2014 – September 2014)

Following the annexation of Crimea, tensions across Ukraine rose as the expression of Ukrainian nationalism and Russophobic attitudes became more commonplace. This frequently boiled over into violence between pro- and anti-Maidan demonstrators in Eastern Ukraine, particularly in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Pogrebinskiy 2015:96). These regions differed significantly from Crimea; the majority continued to support their membership of the Ukrainian state and a far greater proportion of the populations identified as 'Ukrainian' (Sakwa 2015:12). Whilst demonstrators condemned the removal of Yanukovych as unconstitutional, they demanded the federalisation of Ukraine rather than outright separation. Nevertheless, pro-Russian demonstrators stormed government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, proclaiming the formation of the DPR and the LPR on the 7th and the 27th April respectively (Sakwa 2015:149-153).

The republics were perceived as a precursor for a repetition of Russia's annexation of Crimea, particularly following Putin's remark that "under the Tsars, this region was called *Novorossiya*" (Putin 2014f). The historic term was widely seen as laying territorial claims to South-East Ukraine through reference to an area of the Russian Empire conquered in the eighteenth-century during wars with the Ottoman-Turks (Caryl 2014:3). Indeed, both republics drew deeply on Russian symbolism and memory. The DPR adopted a Soviet naval tricolour emblazoned with the Tsarist eagle as its flag. The design is thought to be drawn from the short-lived 'Donetsk Kriyov-Rog People's Soviet Republic', which was formed in opposition to Ukraine's first independence bid in 1914 (Edwards 2014). Similarly, the LPR used the yellow-white-black tricolour which had been the flag of Imperial Russia. The LPR authorities explicitly stated that its use was intended to "integrate their own history into the historical course of the Russian state" (Laruelle 2016:63). Following referenda on 11th May, the two republics joined the new 'Federation of Novorossiya', echoing Putin's use of the term in order

to “capitalise on the emotional power of the concept” (Sakwa 2015:150). The republics also drew upon memories of WW2 to give meaning to their conflict with the Kyiv government. In the DPR it is reported that loudspeakers played a song designed to rally Soviet troops during WW2 with the lyrics *‘our huge country is rising ... against the dark fascist horde’* (Carroll 2014). Similarly, the insignia of both republic’s armed forces included the ‘St. George’s Ribbon’, a symbol used in Russia to commemorate WW2 and which became a prominent marker of Russian identity in Ukraine over the course of the present crisis (Vostok Cable 2015). The use of these memories and symbols in the DPR and LPR served two functions. Firstly, to echo the narrative of the crisis used by the Russian state and to invoke memory of Russia’s role in protecting compatriots in Eastern Ukraine from ‘fascists’ in WW2, represented in the present by the Kyiv authorities. Secondly, to legitimise their own authority by drawing upon memories of the Donbass’ economic and political importance in the Soviet- and Tsarist-eras, which contrasted markedly with perceived marginalisation and disenfranchisement following two consecutive ‘revolutions’ which led the East’s preferred candidate to be dispossessed of the Presidency (Sakwa 2015:155).

The Kyivan government launched an ‘anti-terror operation’ (ATO) against the Donbass rebels in April, using force from an early stage to restore their authority in Eastern Ukraine. The PS forces, which had played a prominent role in the Euromaidan protest, were integrated into a ‘national guard’ which was deployed to the front-lines; notably including the Azov battalion, who were widely documented to use Nazi symbolism in their insignia and battle-standards (Sakwa 2015:151-152; Luhn 2014). Ukrainian nationalists evidently saw the ATO as a historically significant event, representing the reclamation of sovereignty from areas dominated by hegemonic Russia. Thus, the leader of PS purportedly said in April that the operation “fulfilled the dream of many Ukrainians ... the Bandera Army [has] at last crossed the Dnieper [River]” (RMFA 2014b:14). The offensive escalated significantly in May, particularly following the election of Peter Poroshenko as Ukrainian President on 25th. Throughout this period, the Russian narrative was decidedly more cautious than it had been during the Crimean annexation and the Kremlin appeared reluctant to provide significant support to rebels (Sakwa 2015:155-156; Nechepurenko 2014). Most notably, senior Russian politicians avoided referring to the rebels as ‘Russian-speakers’ or ‘compatriots’ as they had in Crimea, preferring instead to use identity-neutral terms such as “protestors” or “residents of the South-East” (see, for example, Lavrov in Interfax 2014e; RIA Novosti 2014c). Similarly, with the exception of Putin’s *Novorossiya* comment in April there was no repetition from official sources of the historic term for the region (Laruelle 2016:57). This shift in narrative

was accompanied by a more conciliatory position from Russia; both NATO and Ukraine confirmed that Russian troops were withdrawn from border areas and in June the Russian Federation Council rescinded its authorisation for the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine (Aris 2014; Sakwa 2015:162). Putin called on the DPR and LPR to cancel the 11th May referenda and, following the 25th May elections, recognised the legitimacy of the Kyiv authorities (Sakwa 2015:150; Interfax 2014f). It is likely this occurred for a number of reasons. First and foremost, as was argued in Part II, Putin had long recognised the benefits of Russian integration into international economic and political institutions and pursued these goals vigorously. The sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the Crimea annexation, and the curtailment of cooperation in combating international terrorism and drugs trafficking, were clearly contrary to what Putin had long perceived as being in Russia's interest (Aris 2015; Croft 2014). Moreover, the Donbass was significantly different from Crimea. Occupation of the region presented a far greater strategic challenge than it had in Crimea and their remained serious doubts about support for such action from the local population (Sakwa 2015:163). By avoiding a narrative of the Donbass rebellion which drew significantly on aspects of Russian identity, the Kremlin sought to limit its pertinence for Russia and reduce domestic pressure to intervene in the region or pursue its annexation as it had in Crimea.

Whilst little direct support from the Russian state was forthcoming in the first months of the Donbass uprising, there was substantial mobilisation on the part of neo-Soviet and Orthodox nationalists within Russia. Various nationalist groups began actively fundraising for the rebels and some organised volunteer fighters to assist the rebels, often being prevented from doing so by Russian border guards (Laruelle 2014). The Izborsky Club, a prominent network of neo-soviet nationalist ideologues, provided political support to the DPR and even contributed to the writing of the republic's constitution (Sakwa 2015:155). Particularly influential in this regard was Vitaliy Averyanov, who described Novorossiya as "the answer of the Russian civilization to Western aggression" (Laruelle 2016:61) and said the region's ideology would be based on "Russian identity – brotherhood of Eastern Slavs, Orthodoxy, and an *avant-garde* socialism" (Laruelle 2016:61). A number of Orthodox volunteer groups were active in providing military support to the rebels including the 'Russian Orthodox Army', whose battle-flag mimics the Tsarist-era tricolour used in the LPR with the addition of an Orthodox cross (Laruelle 2016:62). Its leaders have described the Euromaidan revolution as a "diabolical action against Holy Russia" and their own as "a patriotic movement of Orthodox Christians created in order to bring the rebirth of Holy Russia" (Laruelle 2016:62), constructing

a meaning for their campaign akin to the historic 'regathering of the Rus'. The presence of these groups in the Donbass not only demonstrates the pertinence of the rebel narrative of the conflict for Russian nationalists, but also ensured that this narrative remained prominent inside Russia, even as the Kremlin sought to distance itself from the rebels.

By July, the rebels' position was becoming indefensible and the Ukrainian military appeared to be entering the final phase of its ATO. Following the capture of Slavyansk, a key rebel stronghold, they were able to encircle the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk themselves. By the end of July, Ukrainian military officials said they were preparing to take the cities by "storm" (Choursina & Verbyany 2014; Sakwa 2015:164). As the rebels' position neared collapse, Putin faced mounting criticism from both rebel leaders and domestic nationalists "who felt ... betrayed by the Kremlin's ... withdrawal from the *Novorossiya* project" (Arutunyan 2015; Sakwa 2015:165). A statement by one rebel who was preparing to flee Luhansk ahead of the government assault provides a particularly pertinent reflection of this perspective: "they warned us of the Banderites, and now they have come. But where is Russia? Putin has betrayed us" (Stack 2014c). Meanwhile, inside Russia prominent nationalists said that Russia had "lost control of the process" (Goble 2014) and drew comparisons between Ukraine and Tsar Nicholas II's 'short victorious war' against Japan, which ultimately led to the Bolshevik Revolution. It is in this context that the Kremlin appears to have (re-)adopted a narrative of the conflict in terms of Russian identity. At the end of July, a state-run polling agency announced that 88% of the public believed that there was a threat to '*Russian-speaking people*' in Donbass and that the Russian government should take action to support them (Interfax 2014g). In August, a Kremlin advisor referred to them as "militias in *Novorossiya"* (Interfax 2014h) resuscitating the historic term which had not been used by state officials since April (Laruelle 2016:57). Most dramatically, in September, Russia's 'Investigative Committee' declared Ukraine's ATO as a "genocide of the Russian-speaking populations in the territory of the DPR and LPR" (RMFA 2014c:31). Concurrent with this shift in narrative was an apparent increase in Russia's military involvement. At the end of August, Russian paratroopers were caught in Ukrainian territory and NATO cited evidence of Russian military hardware entering Ukraine. Despite their previously desperate position rebels were able to launch a successful counter-offensive and regain defensible positions, reportedly with the support of artillery from within Russia (Sakwa 2015:167). Shortly thereafter, negotiations in Minsk led to a ceasefire being signed in September. Although this later collapsed, the agreement would form the basis for the current ceasefire which remains nominally in place at the time of writing (Sakwa 2015:180).

The characterisation of the Euromaidan movement as the rise of ultranationalist 'fascism' in Ukraine prompted deep insecurity in Russian-Ukrainian communities. Indeed, the early policies of the Kyiv authorities and the use of divisive symbolism by PS militia 'confirmed' the accuracy of this narrative. In order to counter the identity threat posed to Russian communities, rebels in the Donbass invoked a range of historical memory and symbolism, drawing in particular on Russia's role in defeating Nazism in WW2. The Kremlin, however, sought to distance itself from this narrative to reduce its perceived responsibility for the Donbass rebels. The pertinence of the rebel-narrative for domestic nationalist groups within Russia ensured, however, that it remained politically relevant. This led to an expectation that the state would fulfil its historic role in defending 'fraternal' communities in the *Russky Mir* from 'fascist' aggression. The near-defeat of the rebels in August thus posed an identity threat to the Russian state and created an impulse for the Kremlin to intervene in order to avoid their outright defeat. Russian intervention in the Donbass can, therefore, be at least partially understood as a response to the use of 'counterpower' by domestic nationalists to provoke ontological insecurity.

4 Conclusion

This paper argued that the predominant understanding of the Ukraine crisis in Western states is reliant on an overly reductionist reading of the motives behind Russian policy. Russia is held to be pursuing territorial expansion in a bid to re-establish hegemony in the post-Soviet space. This account is inconsistent with the perceived national interest pursued by Putin in the earlier years of his presidency. In particular, the entirely foreseeable sanctions and political isolation which followed the annexation of Crimea are contrary to Putin's expressed desire to further Russian integration into global institutions. Given the deep historical socio-cultural connections between Ukraine and Russia, an account which excludes such factors is inadequate. Moreover, the state centrism of this framework is problematic given the countries' integrated political history, the role of non-state actors in the conflict, and the existence of a large Ukrainian population who identify strongly with Russian history and culture. An approach able to consider *'to what extent notions of Russian identity have influenced Russia's perception of and response to the crisis*' is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Such an account should complement rather than replace the material considerations which, at present, have provided the sole basis for evaluation of Russian policy in Ukraine.

In order to provide such an understanding, I began by developing a theoretical model better able to consider the role of identity in influencing political decision-making. To do so, I drew upon the concept of ontological security to argue that maintaining a consistent sense of identity is central to the political legitimacy of the state. This identity is articulated through a biographic narrative which contains temporal, relational and spatial elements. This narrative informs a state's responsibilities and roles in any given context and, more importantly, forms the basis through which the subjective value of political events and policy actions are determined. The integration of events and actions into the biographic narrative is a "discursive act" (Steele 2008:72) in which political leaders construct a particular meaning for them, with reference to elements of the biographic narrative. Importantly, state actors do not hold a monopoly on the discursive representation of particular events and, furthermore, particular representations may have salience for communal groups which do not correspond to contemporary state borders. Political actors must be able to incorporate their policies into their biographic narrative in a relatively coherent manner. A failure to do so can constitute an identity threat and prompt ontological (in)security, rendering states vulnerable to particular representations of crises.

4.1 Findings and Implications

In the third part of this paper I applied this model to the current conflict in Ukraine. I began by identifying the central elements of the Russian state's biographical narrative. Russia is held to be the successor to the *Kyivan-Rus* and, as such, events in Ukraine have political salience in Russia regardless of their direct material consequences. This 'birth story' also informs Russia's self-perception as the centre of the *Russky Mir*, a global civilizational community symbolically represented by the Orthodox Church. Consequently, the baptism of the *Rus* in Crimea is held to be a defining moment of the Russian people. In addition, this civilizational status informs both a perception of Russia's natural status as a global power and responsibility for a broadly-defined Russian community, identified in linguistic- and quasi-religious-terms. The 'West' constitutes Russia's significant-other and has historically been perceived as seeking to undermine Russia's global influence; making Russia vulnerable to perceived Western interference in the *Russky Mir*. Ukraine holds particular importance in this cultural space and Ukrainians are perceived as a fraternal people. Russia's "big brother" (Szporluk 2000:73) relationship with Ukraine is memorialised through Russia's role in 'liberating' Ukraine from fascism in WW2. Much of this narrative is shared by a substantial 'Russian-Ukrainian' community in South-East Ukraine. Ukraine's post-Soviet history has been marked by problematic relations between this bi-cultural community and Western-Ukrainian nationalists whom perceive Russian identity in Ukraine to be a consequence of Russian colonialism and source of political ills. Moreover, this nationalist community celebrates numerous symbols of Ukrainian 'independence', perceived in Russian-Ukrainian communities as the celebration of 'fascism'. These contradictory identity narratives have had explosive consequences in the course of the current conflict.

The deliberation over the signing of the EUAA was articulated in terms of Ukraine's 'civilizational choice' and thus had implications for the Russian concept of a unique *Russky Mir*. Russian political actors represented Ukraine's 'European-turn' as a threat to Russian identity and narrated the decision in these terms from an early stage. This railed Ukrainian nationalists who saw the eventual postponement of the signing as a consequence of Russia's continuing hegemonic influence in Ukraine. The subsequent use of nationalist symbology by some elements of the 'Euromaidan' movement, and the presence of far-right militia groups associated with fascist ideology, alienated the Russian-Ukrainian communities in South-East Ukraine. This effect was amplified by Russia's representation of the Euromaidan movement as a Western-orchestrated neo-fascist revolution directed deliberately against Russia. As a

consequence, pro-Russian demonstrations erupted across South-East Ukraine. It should be emphasised that these demonstrations were pro-Russian in a *socio-cultural* rather than purely *political* sense. In other words, they were motivated by a perceived identity threat. The expression of insecurity by 'Russian' populations in Ukraine generated an expectation that the Russian state would respond, given its self-constructed identity as the guardian of the *Russkiy Mir*. Russian political leaders represented the annexation of Crimea as a symbolic act illustrating both the preservation of Russian identity and demonstrating the restoration of Russia's 'Great Power' credentials. Following the annexation, however, Russian political leaders sought to distance themselves from this narrative and did not represent the uprising in the Donbass in terms of Russian identity; despite the invocation of Russian symbolism and memories by the rebels themselves.

The differential representation of the crises in the Donbass and Crimea suggest that material interests continue to play a role in Russian political calculations. Crimea was also home to the Black Sea Fleet and Russia's strategic interests may have been threatened by a hostile political regime with authority over the peninsula (Mearsheimer 2014). In contrast, securing the Donbass posed a costly strategic challenge and had fewer material benefits for Russia. Whilst this *suggests* that Russian leaders deployed identity narratives strategically to mobilise public support for interventionist policies it is far from conclusive in this regard. Aside from its strategic utility, Crimea was also more important to Russia in terms of ontological security due to its special status in the temporal and spatial narratives of Russian identity. Moreover, Russia's political leaders had narrated the conflict in terms of identity *prior* to the emergence of the Euromaidan movement. It remains plausible therefore that, given Ukraine and Crimea's centrality to the narrative of Russian identity, a failure to respond to the events of February 2014 would have provoked deep ontological (in)security in the Russian state. The annexation of Crimea could thus be seen as ontological security-seeking behaviour. It is simply not possible, on the basis of the evidence here, to conclude definitively which account should be preferred. Indeed, the two are not mutually-exclusive. It could well be the case that Russia was willing to suffer graver physical consequences to secure strategic assets, given the additional ontological motivation for a response to the Ukraine crisis. This possibility should be borne in mind by Western policymakers seeking to gain leverage over Russia by manipulating its strategic calculus.

It is, perhaps, a little easier to reach firm conclusions regarding the ongoing war in the Donbass. The post-Euromaidan authorities in Kyiv were perceived by some Russian-Ukrainian communities as posing an identity threat. The uprising which emerged in the Donbass in

March/April 2014 can be seen as a response to the ontological insecurity this posed. Thus, the rebels have drawn upon narratives of Russian identity to re-assert its historic presence in some regions of Ukraine. If this observation is correct then it is imperative that the Ukrainian authorities develop a political response which encourages an inclusive polity in which the expression of Russian identity is secure. Indeed, the pursuit of this goal by Western powers is entirely consistent with their own proffered values of pluralism, tolerance and diversity. It should be noted that the 'de-Communization' laws introduced in Ukraine during 2015 are not helpful in this regard (Soroka 2015).

The increase in Russian support for rebels and the (re-)adoption of a narrative which described the conflict in terms of Russian-identity since August 2014 seems to be an outcome of pressure from Russian nationalist groups. The representation of the annexation of Crimea by the Kremlin substantially strengthened the ability of Russian nationalists to mobilise political support and resources within Russia. This "seriously constrained" (Eremenko 2014) Putin's ability to distance himself from the rebels, in spite of an apparent recognition that doing so was in Russia's national interest (Laruelle 2014). The rebels shared the narrative of the crisis in Ukraine which the Kremlin had used to legitimise its annexation of Crimea, and sustained this throughout their conflict with Kyiv. Russian nationalist groups ensured that it remained politically salient within Russia, even as Russian politicians sought to distance themselves from it. As the rebels neared defeat in July, this led to mounting pressure on Putin to intervene. Given that the Kremlin had previously described Ukraine's conflict by drawing upon memories of Russia's role on 'liberating' the fraternal Ukraine during WW2, a failure to do so would have been anathema to a Russian identity defined in these terms. Indeed, the problem was exacerbated by the presence of quasi-official Ukrainian forces who frequently used Nazi symbolism during the ATO. Inaction in the face of a 'fascist' assault on rebel 'compatriots' in the Donbass would have been inconsistent with the narrative of Russian identity. Thus, the Kremlin faced incredible incentives to intervene in order to avoid the 'traumatic rupture' which their outright defeat may have posed. This assessment challenges the view that Moscow's main motivation in intervening in Eastern Ukraine was to re-establish the Soviet Union. Rather, it sought to avoid the defeat of Donbass rebels which would fundamentally jeopardise Putin's ability to sustain the national-patriotic narrative he has used to provide an identity for the Russian state.

Given the deep-rooted Russian perception that Western powers are determined to undermine Russia, policies seeking to isolate the country further may prompt greater

belligerence rather than acquiescence from the Kremlin (Laruelle 2014). In order to de-escalate the conflict Western political leaders ought to engage with Russia on a pragmatic, collaborative basis through institutions which are not perceived by Russia as being fundamentally 'Western-centric'. Doing so is an urgent task given the global implications of the deterioration in the relationship between Russia and the West; the substantial shared interests between them; and the inherent danger of an uncommunicative adversarial relationship between states in possession of large nuclear arsenals (Aragona 2015). The degree to which policy is currently coordinated through NATO and the EU should therefore be evaluated and revised, with alternative forums such as the OSCE being utilised more extensively. Our understanding of the current confrontation could be improved by a further study which examines the way in which 'Western' identities shape our own perception of Russia. Many scholars have argued that Russia constitutes the West's own 'significant-other' (Shaw 1999) and such a relationship may have implications for the ways in which Western nations engage with Moscow.

In addition to the policy implications noted above, the findings of this study have some theoretical implications. At a basic level, they provide support for the claim that political actors draw upon pre-existing narratives of state identity to shape perceptions of them. A particularly interesting element of this case is the way in which divergent narratives of identity have interacted with each another. The differential interpretation of the same historical memories and symbols by Ukrainian nationalists and Russian-Ukrainian communities seems to have contributed to the conflict's escalation. An examination of such contradictory narratives in other conflicts could provide a fruitful avenue for future research. Additionally, the role of non-state actors, and the salience of the Russian narrative beyond its own borders, confirms the value of analyses which move beyond state-centric paradigms of international affairs and critically examine state actors. The ability of the rebels and Russian nationalists to draw upon narratives of Russian identity in order to exert pressure on state policymaking shows that, even in a relatively centralised state such as Russia, state authorities cannot maintain a monopoly over foreign policy decisions. Finally, the manner in which identities in Ukraine have been 'reconstructed' toward more exclusive forms provides further evidence of the dynamic interaction of identity and politics. This ought to caution those who persist in treating such phenomena as primordial drivers of conflict and motivate further study into the dynamic interaction of identity, threat and conflict.

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