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TRACING THE DONBAS MINER MOVEMENT'S ROLE IN UKRAINE'S TRANSITION BETWEEN 1989 AND 1994

■ INTRODUCTION

This essay is about the influence of the miner strike movement in Donbas on the post-communist transition in Ukraine between the years 1989 and 1994. In the first chapter, I will present theories of post-communist transition, the formation of political cleavages and the emergence of cultural cleavages that shaped Ukrainian politics. In the second chapter, I will discuss the history of the Donbas strike movement in the context of its relationship with the nationalist intelligentsia and the impact of their cooperation on Ukraine's independence. The third chapter will showcase the process of co-optation of the strike's mobilizing potential, its usage by regional elites in Donbas, and the effect it had on the Ukrainian political system and the transition process.

Three main points are discussed: firstly, in contrast to bulk of transitology literature, I argue that the agency and influence of bottom-up social forces should be included in the understanding of transition in Ukraine. Secondly, I argue that the socio-cultural diversity of Ukraine was politicized by regional elites in Donbas, shaping the political culture of Ukrainian politics, which was accompanied by the fragmentation and political marginalization of the strike movement. Finally, I argue that this process contributed to strengthening and reinforcing the Donbas identity.

Theoretical background. „Quadruple transition” in Ukraine

To many foreign and even domestic observers, the dissolution of the Soviet Union came as a shock. The state that just until recently had been challenging the position of global leader crumbled suddenly and unexpectedly. This posed a challenge to social scientists, who struggled to understand the unravelling events, while also

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striving to create a blueprint of optimal transition scenarios – the problem Claus Offe compared to „rebuilding the ship on the open sea” (Elster, Offe, Preuß 2000). The challenge was exacerbated by the inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks. As Offe (1994: 504) argued, the modernization theory didn’t provide adequate solutions for the task at hand. Its focus on legal and institutional framework diverts attention from two additional dimensions: the rapid reshaping of class relations coupled with a dire need to establish a unifying, civic identity of a newly emerged state with a population strongly divided by ethnic, linguistic, cultural and regional lines. To answer the problem, he coined the term „triple transition”, stressing the simultaneous and intertwined nature of transition occurring on three levels: marketisation, democratization and state building.

The transition from a centrally planned to the market economy doesn’t necessarily have to be successful – as the example of early years of the post-Soviet Ukraine shows. The transition may also lead to the emergence of hybrid forms, among which „political capitalism” (Staniszki 1991) stands out. It is characterized by the growing importance of linkages between political and economic capital, allowing former *nomenklatura* members to translate their privileged position in the state or industrial administration into tangible economic benefits. With an underdeveloped private sector and lack of capital, access to information and means of communication turn out to be the most important resources for solidifying one’s position in the transitioning state. Thanks to that, the *de iure* state-owned assets are used by *nomenklatura* members for their own profits. Influencing the decision-making process can allow them to legally appropriate the state property, monopolize the most lucrative sectors of the economy and prevent the emergence of competitive market-actors.

As Taras Kuzio (2001) argues, the application of „triple transition” framework to former USSR republics requires refinement and should be expanded by another dimension, resulting in a „quadruple transition”. Apart from the Russian Federation, republics did not inherit a metropolitan political system, but had to build it from scratch. Moreover, in many regions (such as the eastern Ukraine), the modernization processes weren’t coupled with the formation of a national identity, shaped in conditions comparable to that of colonial dependency (Riabczuk 2015b). This means that the problem of state-building must be separated into two phenomena: stateness and civic identity.

To make matters even more complicated, the post-communist transition was largely influenced by historical legacies of emerging post-communist states, thereby making it impossible to implement a „one-size-fits-all” formula. According to Herbert Kitschelt et al. (1999: 23), the differences could be understood by looking at two key factors: the level of formalization of bureaucracy and the mode of compliance. Building on this two-dimensional typology, he then classified post-communist countries into three categories: bureaucratic-authoritarian,

national-accommodative and patrimonial communism. The differences are attributed to their pre-communist legacies of social, political and economic modernization such as levels of industrialization, urbanization, class formation and political system. Except for Baltic states, he classifies all post-Soviet countries as patrimonial communism. This means that typically, the transition would be started by a reform-oriented faction of the communist party. Thanks to that, the incumbent elite would be able to hold to their position of power and influence the process of institutional design. This results in a trend towards the personalization of the political system (ex. through the preference for the majoritarian electoral system and broad presidential prerogatives) (Kitschelt et al. 1999: 32).

Kitschelt (2000) also argues for understanding the formation of a political system that goes beyond the examination of its formal qualities. Because of that, he directs researchers' attention to the linkages that emerge at the intersection of the political system and its environment, which in a case of democratic politics means studying the linkages between political parties and their voters.

The shape of emerging linkages depends on the solution of two problems – that of a collective action and a social choice. Usually both problems are resolved by the establishment of political programs, i.e., the hierarchy of preferences on particular politically salient issues. This also requires the creation of an intra-party decision-making infrastructure. This leads to the establishment of programmatic linkages, which tend to stabilize over time resulting in the formation of relatively stable political cleavages. However, programmatic linkages are not the only type of linkages prevalent in democratic political systems. A party may choose to invest only in the administrative-technical infrastructure, which allows them to build linkages *through direct, personal, and typically material side payments*, resulting in clientelistic linkages. Conversely, charismatic linkages emerge when both types of infrastructures are underdeveloped, and the support of a party is rooted in its charismatic leaders (Kitschelt 2000: 848–851).

The disintegration of patrimonial communism creates conditions in which parties may be incentivized to choose clientelistic linkages over programmatic ones (Kitschelt 2000: 858). The repression of the opposition hinders their institutionalization, while former elites retain their influence and ability to shape the rules of the game according to their interests. With no professional civil service, the incumbents are incentivized to personalize the political system allowing them to capitalize on their recognizability and position. Moreover, the political-economic infrastructure inherited by the state socialism can be utilized to establish and strengthen linkages with voters through privatization of state-owned enterprises (Kitschelt 2000: 853). The appearance of clientelistic linkages is especially likely in a case of social separation of voters, such as labor market segmentation, area of residence, or more broadly – diverse ethno-cultural identities (Kitschelt 1995: 467).

Ukraine and its socio-cultural diversity

An important aspect of the Ukrainian transition is connected to the growing significance of its regions – both in economic and cultural sense. This can be attributed to the legacy of the USSR. As many other republics, the Ukrainian SSR was predominantly an administrative entity, whose economic integration into the Soviet Union was mediated through Moscow, largely omitting the level of the national republic (Kononov, Hobta, Šudlo 2008: 79). The heritage of loose interregional economic integration hindered the solidification of the newly independent state. This context served as a basis for the rapid reinterpretation and reconstruction of regional identities occurring in the post-Soviet Ukraine – a process which can be observed in the mass media from the transition period. As Oleksandr Androshchuk (Androšuk 2018: 36 – own translation) notes: „thanks to the media, new images of the regions, which emphasized the common past of these territories, focused on the peculiarities of the mentality of regional communities, were becoming more and more widespread in the public space”.

The center-periphery dynamic which characterized the political structure of the Soviet Union in the 1980s was also one of the factors which ultimately contributed to its dissolution. As its economic performance worsened, the disenchantment with communist ideas of Soviet citizens (even among CPSU² leadership) started becoming more and more apparent. The hegemonic status of Moscow had started being questioned by emerging national movements, whose increasing strength was spiraling out of Moscow's control (Kuzio 2000: 103 and 104). As the failed coup transpired on the streets of Moscow, on 24th August 1991 the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada had adopted the declaration of independence. It was followed shortly by a landslide victory of pro-independence forces in the referendum on 1st December 1991, where 90% of voters at the turnout of 84% had expressed their support for the independence. The support was high not only in the west and centre of the country, but also in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, where 84% voted in favor. For the first time in its history, the borders of the independent Ukraine included both Galicia and Donbas.

According to Kononov, both regions form „two poles” of the Ukrainian regional system. The accompanying „regional projects” which are formulated in both regions create a dynamics which shapes the Ukrainian party and political system (Kononov 2021: 23). While such regional projects did appear in other parts of the country, the most influential were the ones formulated in Galicia and Donbas (Kononov, Hobta, Šudlo 2008). In this conceptualization, it is the peripheries of the Ukrainian political system that decide the shape of the center, rather than the other way round. In terms of their characteristics, the Donbas project can be viewed as a „co-citizenship project”, which understands nationality in political terms,

² Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

while ethnicity is seen as a private matter of every citizen. In contrast, the Galician project prioritizes ethnic and cultural affiliations (Kononov, Hobta, Šudlo 2008: 83). As Studenna-Skrucka notes: „These concepts are constructed at opposite ends of the state, in regions with the greatest extrapolation potential [...] where two incompatible formulas of Ukrainianness have been reproduced since 1991” (Studenna-Skrucka 2014: 72 – own translation). Furthermore, it is the clash of these two projects, employed by politically motivated actors in order to mobilize voters, to which Kononov attributes the prevalence of following societal divisions. As he argues, the attitudes, values and beliefs of residents from both Galicia and Donbas are ultimately very similar, while their mutual images are built on false stereotypes (Kononov, Hobta, Šudlo 2008: 88).

To some extent his perspective coincides with that of Mykola Riabchuk (Riabczuk 2015a: 5) – the author of the concept of „two Ukraines”, although according to him, the emergent political cleavage should be understood in cultural rather than socio-economic terms. It is a clash of western and eastern identity, that plays out in each citizen. The remnants of Soviet ideology manifest themselves to the fullest in the form of *homo sovieticus* – somebody apathetic, complacent and devoid of any initiative. This attitude is contrasted with pro-European oriented nationalism. According to Riabchuk, both positions are represented by ca. 50–66% of the Ukrainian population, with the rest finding themselves in between. In his view, the prevalence of *homo sovieticus* in the Ukrainian society is a result of its rapid social transformation. The presence of such attitudes isn't a problem in-itself – it's expected in the context of rapid transition. As the society learns to navigate the new reality, dysfunctional attitudes would gradually fade away. Unfortunately, as politicians employ Soviet nostalgia for their own personal gains, the conflict is elevated from the individual to the societal level.

While the emergence of the conflicting political projects can be traced back to self-interested actions of politicians, their development is fueled not only by uses of the disparate histories of Galicia and Donbas, but also by the actual divergence of their pre-communist histories. This, as Kitschelt argues, plays an important role in the formation of post-communist polity. According to Hrytsak (see Studenna-Skrucka 2014: 76), the differences can be traced to the different paths of modernization of both regions. The Galician national project developed in the context of „modernization through bureaucratization”. Lax national policies of the Habsburg Empire and rapid urbanization of Lviv coupled with its growing role as a cultural and administrative center and provided fertile ground for constitution and dissemination of Ukrainian national ideas. As was the case for many societies of the XIX-century East-Central Europe, the movement was driven by *Bildungsbürgertum* – a strata of well-educated bureaucrats possessing cultural and social capital, but not economic capital (Eyal 1998: 26). In light of low industrialization and lesser significance of class-based cleavages, Galician nationalism defined Ukrainianness in

terms of ethno-cultural unity, recognizing countryside culture as a reservoir of the Ukrainian national heritage.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in Donbas, modernization processes were driven by two other factors: colonization and industrialization (Studenna-Skrucka 2014: 75). Up until XVIII century, the scarcely populated steppe of the modern-day Donbas was under control of the independent Cossack state, which was integrated into Russian administrative structures after 1774 (Wilson 1995: 274). At that time, Donbas was inhabited mostly by a Ukrainian-speaking population, while also attracting run-away peasants and criminals, gaining a reputation for its *freedom and unmanageability* (Kuromiya 2008: 98). Given low population density and economic potential (both agricultural and industrial), Russian authorities focused on colonizing and industrializing the region (Studenna-Skrucka 2014: 105). The ethnic structure of the region started to change, as more and more Russians started settling in the region (Kuromiya 2002: 70). Moreover, the inefficiency of state-led industrialization efforts coupled with high demand for industrial output led to entrusting the task to the foreign capital (Friedgut 1989: 20), which further contributed to diversity of the ethnic structure of Donbas – although it still consisted mostly of Russians and Ukrainians. Rapid industrialization of Donbas wasn't followed by the region's urbanization – the cities forming around emerging factories lacked cultural or sanitary infrastructure, resembling *a conglomerate of villages scattered around a large metallurgical plant* (Studenna-Skrucka 2014: 75). According to Kononov (2021), the specificities of the modernization process in Donbas led to the formation of „ukraino-russian domineering coalition” – a shared sense of belonging and identity rooted in the experience of working together in mines and metallurgy plants.

■ THE FALL OF USSR FROM UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVE

1989 – emergence of Rukh and miner strike movement

On 16th February 1989, a group of Ukrainian intellectuals and anti-communist dissidents published the document under the auspices of Narodnyi Rukh Ukrainy, where the plan for the re-construction (*perebudova*) of Ukraine was proposed (Gončaruk 1997: 18). The ranks of the movement were also joined by reform-oriented members of the CPU³. By questioning the dominant historical narratives of the Soviet liberation of Ukraine, Rukh sought to provide a platform for mass mobilization of the Ukrainian society against Moscow authorities. The efforts were successful – in January 1990, 750 000 participants formed a human-chain from Kyiv to Lviv (Kuzio 2000: 110). The evident popular support of the anti-communist coalition translated into political capital. Thanks to the 1989 glasnost'

³ Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

era election law that allowed public organizations to field their candidates in regional elections, non-communist forces were able to secure 102 out of 450 seats in Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada. In spite of an alleged electoral fraud and a relatively low support for the opposition in the countryside, the results were an important step on the path to independence (Kuzio 2000: 131–133).

From the perspective of waning legitimacy of the Moscow rule, another major blow was dealt by a sudden outbreak of miner strikes in Donbas and Kuzbas coal basins in July 1989. Soviet propaganda portrayed miners as model citizens, whose courageous and dangerous work was crucial for development of the Soviet economy. The elevated status of miners (and by extension, Donbas) contributed to their sense of self-importance (see Walkowitz 1995; Zimmer 2007; Abibok 2018). After all, Donbas was home of Alexey Stakhanov, the most famous Soviet laborer, who prompted the emergence of Stakhanovite movement all across the Soviet Union. To commemorate the achievement, his hometown of Kadyivka was renamed to Stakhanov in 1978.

Perhaps it is this sense of uniqueness that prompted the miners to participate in the strike. The strikes in Donbas began on 15th July in Donetsk and Makiivka, with miners from all across the region (including Stakhanov) joining them (Liholobova, Kuzina 2009: 162). Out of 226 mines in Donbas, 176 were involved in the strikes (Mykhnenko 2005: 98). As coal reserves in Donbas were depleting, the miners were forced to work at greater depths, increasing the cost of extraction and exacerbating the dangers. On top of that, the mines have suffered from lack of adequate financing, resulting in low levels of investments and deteriorating wages (Friedgut, Siegelbaum 1990: 8). Although the economic grievances dominated, they were quickly followed by political ones. While calls for higher wages, social welfare and workplace safety don't necessarily imply political demands, the context of Soviet economy made it impossible to think of them in isolation. The management positions in the enterprises were occupied by communist party members, while existing trade unions were reduced to the role of a provider of scarce goods and services. For a growing number of protesters, improving the economic situation became synonymous with workplace autonomy (Siegelbaum, Walkowitz 1995: 136).

The response from the authorities was swift. The first officials from Moscow started arriving in Donetsk as soon as 19th July, including high ranking All-Soviet Trade Union members, the deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers and the minister of Coal Industry. At the same time, at the invitation of Gorbachev, representatives of the strike committee went to Moscow to negotiate conditions of the termination of the strikes. This resulted in the adoption of a resolution aimed at fulfilling the demands of strikers. Moreover, in a televised interview, Gorbachev recognized the legitimacy of the strikes, calling it a positive sign of „working classes readiness to take matters in their own hands” (Liholobova, Kuzina 2009: 168).

Institutionalization and first contacts with the national intelligentsia

Although the settlement didn't resolve the underlying issues that plagued the mining industry, it was a first step towards the institutionalization of the independent trade union movement in Ukraine. As a result, „Donbas became the center of the labor movement” (Kovalenko et al. 2023: 17). The newly formed strike committee was responsible for monitoring the implementation of the agreement struck with the authorities. As its implementation was continuously delayed, the patience of miners started running out. In March 1990, the miners renewed their protests, this time emphasizing the political demands. Although smaller in scope, their character was much more radical – calls for resignation of some government officials and most importantly annulment of 6th article of the Soviet constitution, in which the leading role of the Communist Party was proclaimed (Gorban', Kocur 2012: 300).

When the strikes started, miners were visited by a person that introduced himself as a member of UHU⁴. At that time, he was met with distrust from the miners, who perceived him as an instigator. The mix of distrust and interest was reciprocal – just as the inaugurating congress of Rukh in 1989 was visited by a delegation of Donbas miners, intellectuals from Kyiv and Galicia started paying more attention to Donbas miners. Inspired by Polish Solidarność, they tried to establish nationally oriented independent trade union movement. According to Iurii Zhyzhko, member of UHU, the plan failed because of a political immaturity of „simple citizens”:

As events have shown, workers have exhibited solidarity in protests against the Party apparatus, but not yet all workers connect their employment and societal poverty to the social system and Communist ideology, because not all have been convinced of the idea of Ukrainian state independence. The simple citizen is directed by a salami psychology, he resembles a hypnotized rabbit not ready to undertake independent steps and always glancing at the almighty state (Kuzio 2000: 111).

In spite of difficulties at creating a common, pro-independence platform, the institutionalization of the miner protest movement has continued. On the 2nd All-Union Congress of Miners held in Donetsk between October 22–26, the Independent Trade Union of Miners has been established (NPGU).

However, the union they established was not the first „independent” trade union in Ukraine. On the 16th July 1990 Verkhovna Rada declared Ukrainian sovereignty. As a result, on 6th October, just three weeks before the congress in Donbas, Ukrprofrada withdrew from the structures of the official Soviet trade union organization, renaming itself to Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Ukraine (FNPU), which was changed in 1992 into Federation of Trade Unions (FPU). It declared independence

⁴ Ukrainian Helsinki Union (UHU) – an organization formed in 1976 by anti-communist Ukrainian dissidents, that legitimized its resistance to the Soviet regime on the grounds of monitoring their implementation of Helsinki Accords.

from both state and industrial organizations, with a new stated goal of „protecting socio-economic rights and interests of Ukrainian citizens”. As a legal successor of Ukrprofrada, FNPU was able to take over its assets, worth around 3 billion dollars. Thanks to that, FNPU became „one of the richest collective owners in the country” (Traub-Merz, Volynets 2014: 238; Kovalenko et al. 2023: 18). As the biggest and by far richest trade union organization in the country, it was able to provide the workers with access to many scarce goods and services.

Apart from available material resources, the main difference between NPGU and FNPU relates to their propensity to strike. While FNPU discouraged their members from taking part in strikes, the strategy of NPGU was centered around mass mobilization through strike actions (Traub-Merz, Volynets 2014: 247), forming the institutional framework for the development of the miner strike movement.

Throughout the Ukrainian transition miners (especially from Donbas) became the most conflict-prone occupational group. This is evidenced by the scale and intensity of the strikes in the mining sector. Between 1991 and 2000, half of all striking workers in the country worked in mining. The data also show the greater intensity of mining strikes – they accounted for 2/3 of all days spent on strike during this period (see Table 1 and 2), with significant striking activity also in education sector (Traub-Merz, Volynets 2014: 248).

Table 1. Workers on strike in Ukraine (1989–2000) (in thousands)

Year	Mining sector	All sectors	Mining sector/All sectors (in %)
1989	–	293	–
1990	–	131	–
1991	106	176	60
1992	9	182	5
1993	173	260	66
1994	24	126	19
1995	48	58	84
1996	109	171	64
1997	49	116	42
1998	51	99	52
1999	25	42	60
2000	19	21	90
Total (1991–2000)	613	1251	49

Source: Ilostat (2023).

Table 2. Days spent on strike in Ukraine (1989–2000) (in thousands)

Year	Mining sector	All sectors	Mining sector/All sectors (in %)
1989	–	972	–
1990	–	126	–
1991	1651	1873	88
1992	19	866	2
1993	1943	2676	73
1994	71	353	20
1995	178	202	88
1996	1584	2134	74
1997	696	1229	57
1998	854	1311	65
1999	352	443	80
2000	270	281	96
Total (1991–2000)	7618	11368	67

Source: Ilostat (2023).

While the data points to the strength of the miner movement, it also draws attention to their failure of mobilizing workers from other sectors – both in Donbas and the rest of Ukraine. As Stephen Crowley (1995: 49, 53) argues, the low participation in strikes of workers from other sectors could have been caused by two factors. Firstly, the state-owned enterprises served not only as a workplace, but also as the main institution responsible for the reproduction of the labor force, which wasn't restricted to basic products, but also included operating educational institutions, providing access to housing etc. The ability to exploit linkages between the administration, management of the enterprise and other enterprises allowed the „red directors” to curb the strike activities, conditioning the access to scarce resources on complacency. The second factor has to do with the perception of miners, who were oftentimes seen as a relatively wealthy group, focused on securing their privileged position.

1991 – a „historical compromise”

In 1991, the weakness of central authorities and their inability to improve the worsening economic situation of the state became apparent. As the economic crisis deepened, and the payment of wages all across Donbas had been suspended, the new wave of strikes organized by NPGU began at the beginning of March 1991.

Miners called for „the resignation of the Ukrainian government, the liquidation of CPU cells and the nationalization of CPU property” (Kuzio 2000: 116). At the end of March, the miners at Stakhanov mine raised the stakes – not only did they demand the fulfillment of their economic demands, but also called for recognition of the constitutionality of the Ukrainian declaration of sovereignty. As they appealed to nationalist sentiments, the protests were met with support from Rukh and UHU (Gorban', Kocur 2012: 302). According to Kravchenko, such a formulation of their demands was linked to the cooperation with Lvivian miners, more sympathetic to the idea of Ukrainian independence (Siegelbaum, Crowley 2007: 47).

Yet it would be a mistake to consider this sudden change as a symptom of national awakening of Donbas miners. Andreas Wittkowsky (1998) argues that the origins of Ukrainian independence are to be found in the „historical compromise” of three groups: Rukh national movement, Donbas miner strike movement and the reform-oriented *nomenklatura* members. The unlikely alliance was grounded in very different reasons. For intelligentsia in „Rukh”, the priority was given to political and cultural demands, while economic hardships were treated as a mere side effect, the remedy for which was an independent Ukraine (Kuzio 2000: 111–113). Striking miners, on the other hand, supported Ukraine's independence conditionally – only as long as it contributed to the much more important cause of economic revitalization. For national communists, Ukrainian independence provided an opportunity to expand their power and exert control over nationalized assets of Ukraine.

Regardless of their reasoning, in 1991 all three groups perceived their interests to be aligned with an independent Ukrainian statehood. Thus, when on the morning of 19th August 1991, hardline communists opposing the direction of Gorbachev's decentralization reforms tried to overthrow him, the pro-independence alliance had sufficient political influence and societal legitimacy to pass a declaration of Ukrainian independence on 24th August.

POST-SOVIET DONBAS – DOUBLE DISAPPOINTMENT AND FORMATION OF POLITICAL CLEAVAGES

Economic grievances

The miner strikes in Donbas between 1989 and 1991 were instrumental to achieving the goal of independence from the Moscow centre, thus enabling the process of independent state-building. It did not, however, solve the persisting economic problems. Between 1990 and 1993, the real wages in Ukraine dropped by a staggering 70%, translating into an average wage of 19 US dollars in April 1994 (Wittkowsky 1998: 580), which was largely a result of hyperinflation (13,000% between 1991 and 1993), the accumulation of foreign debt and the collapse of trade with the former USSR.

The deteriorating economic situation of the independent Ukraine was particularly pressing in Donbas. At that time, Russia was the main trading partner

for as much as 80% of enterprises in South-Eastern Ukraine – a legacy of Moscow's control of the Donbas economy during the Soviet era (Crowley 1995: 63). For example, the appearance of a border between Russia and Ukraine disrupted the supply of timber necessary for building mining galleries. This led to drastic reduction of coal output, which in turn reduced the capacity of the metallurgical industry (Siegelbaum, Crowley 2007: 18).

Because of the geographical concentration of heavy industry in eastern Ukraine, the consequences of the economic crisis were felt more strongly there, providing a material basis for demands of deepening ties with Russia. While the economic situation was dire also in the west of the country, a lower level of dependency on the Russian economy and a stronger support for nationalism resulted in the heightened focus of central authorities on state-building efforts – meaning both stateness and national identity.

Constructing political cleavages

As the basis of the „historical compromise” ceased to exist, the alliance between intelligentsia and workers broke. According to Vlad Mykhnenko (2005: 107), the growing distance between nationalists and miners can also be attributed to operating under different cultural frames. This, in turn, led to „fail[ure] to establish a common mobilizing structure to reinforce their pro-democracy and pro-market challenges. No joint opposition institution emerged”. Moreover, the economic uncertainty was coupled with growing fears of ethno-centric, anti-Russian policies of new Ukrainian authorities, forming two pillars of what Wittkowsky (1998: 583 and 584) calls „double disappointment” – a conjunction of ethno-linguistic differences and the conditionality of support for Ukrainian independence, which leads to the escalation of the political conflict between „two Ukraines”.

Yet, as the example of the language issue shows, it is important not to overlook the conscious and self-interested attempts at constructing the main political cleavage of the post-Soviet Ukraine, which sees the political differences between Ukrainian regions as an inevitable result of dormant ethno-cultural divisions. While it is true that the western and the eastern Ukraine differ in many aspects, the prolonged significance of the regional cleavage in the post-Soviet Ukraine was to a large extent a consequence of its conscious construction. As Yuliya Abibok argues, the 1990s in Donbas was a time of „a discursive transformation of self-perception and self-presentation, or identity, of the population of the region” (Abibok, Hrytsak 2021: 13). The subsequent distrust towards Kyivian authorities was not grounded in a longing for a recognition of one's own intrinsic Russianness, but in a sense of a threat to a regional identity, manifesting itself every time the region was displeased with the center – regardless if it is Moscow or Kyiv. The borderlands identity of Donbas was thus mostly devoid of ethnic overtones, but rather rooted in class solidarity and nostalgia for the region's fading industrial power (Abibok, Hrytsak 2021: 14).

For emerging Donbas regional elites, which consisted mostly of former *nomenklatura* members, managers of state-owned enterprises and members of organized crime groups (Yurchenko 2018: 9; Kononov 2021: 23) the language issue provided means for channeling the discontent of economic crisis into a mobilizing framework that furthered their economic and political agenda. At the same time it was deeply rooted in an intuitively understandable cultural code. By presenting „Rukh” as a dangerous nationalistic grouping that wants to cut both economic and cultural ties with Russia, the so called „red directors” were able to frame the political conflict in a way that positioned them in the role of defenders of Donbas, with the potential to reach voters outside of the region.

While employment of such tactics may be seen as an attempt to create programmatic linkages with voters, the new regional elites had simultaneously exploited their position to establish clientelistic linkages with disgruntled laborers, whose militancy and commitment has already been demonstrated. After the collapse of the USSR, the importance of social benefits offered by the workplace increased. In times of ubiquitous scarcity, rising unemployment and hyperinflation, the post-Soviet enterprise served primarily social rather than economic functions, prioritizing ability to provide access to scarce goods and services (Humphrey 2002; Siegelbaum, Crowley 2007: 23). This situation had two major consequences for the political economy of Donbas. Firstly, it favored old trade unions that, thanks to their rootedness in informal exchange networks, could secure access to scarce goods and services through barter with other enterprises. Secondly, it encouraged patronage relationships between workers and officials, further undermining the independent trade union movement. Both factors strengthened the clientelistic ties between voters and „red directors”, furthering their influence.

Capturing strikes’ mobilization infrastructure – economic into political capital

In Summer 1993 the eruption of social discontent was only a matter of time. As the economic conditions worsened, the anger of Donbas miners only grew stronger. The independence has not fulfilled the hopes of the miners. As Yuri Makarov, co-chair of the city strike committee put it: „the center has just moved from Moscow to Kyiv. We didn’t want that. [...] We wanted power to be given to the localities, enterprises, cities; we wanted the living standard of the population to improve, but not so that Kyiv could concentrate the reins of government in its fist” (Siegelbaum, Walkowitz 1995: 143). In such conditions, an overnight, four-fold increase in price of sausages was all it took for the largest strikes in the history of Ukraine to begin (Borisov, Clarke 1994: 10).

Although at the beginning of the strike miners focused on both economic and political demands, ultimately the strike committee put forward three political demands: regional independence for the Donbas, national referendum on (no) confidence in the parliament and the president. Contrary to previous strikes, during which the grievances

were oftentimes directed towards regional elites, this time it was the central government in Kyiv that was deemed responsible for the problems of Donbas mines. The common, anti-Kyiv platform brought together miners and the „red directors”, who supported the strikes and cooperated with them in order to achieve their goals (Crowley 1995: 64). This proved to be a turning point in the history of the Donbas strike movement. Thus the economic movement became a regionalist one. Such turn of events was especially beneficial for the new regional elites, who were able to gain concessions from Kyiv. By capturing the strike’s mobilizing potential, they were able to strengthen their political influence, while also bringing about the privatization reforms. The representatives of the strike committee weren’t principally opposed to the idea of privatizing the mines. To some extent, it resonated with their demands for freeing the workplace from political influences. At the same time, many were concerned with the possibility of their takeover by former nomenklatura members. Such opinion was voiced by Mikhail Krilov, the leader of the 1993 strike:

Speaking frankly, I support privatization. But which privatization? Our enterprises are likely to be bought by the mafia, as we call the former party officials. You need a great deal of money to create commercial structure or joint venture. Where did they get this money? It’s from the former party purse. Now they are speaking about privatization of the mines. I am against that. Can you imagine the sum? Where can the workers get money for its privatization? (Siegelbaum, Walkowitz 1995: 147).

The political upheaval of 1993–94 provided them with a plethora of opportunities to expand their influence on regional and national decision-making centres. During 1994 regional elections, many were able to secure seats in the regional administration (Wittkowsky 1998: 585). To ease the tensions, the director of the Zasy’adko mine where the strikes began, Yukhym Zvyahilsky, was appointed as an interim acting prime minister (Yurchenko 2018: 58). On top of that, president Kravchuk agreed to hold a referendum and early parliamentary elections, promising an economic plan to ensure „economic independence” for the Donbas (Mykhnenko 2005: 102). The plan responded to three sets of demands, which served as a basis for creating a special social and economic program for the region (Jung 1994: 20):

- 1) Formation of an autonomous network of „regional associations of businesses”, which would also function as providers of economic and social safety net, as well as environmental protection,
- 2) Strengthening the prerogatives of regional governments of four oblasts (Donetske, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovske and Kharkiv) in the administrative and economic sphere,
- 3) Creation of a special economic zone that would consist of eleven Ukrainian and Russian oblasts, translating into improved investment conditions, tax-free trade and a facilitation of financial flows within the zone.

Although ultimately the plan has not been translated into specific legislation up until the granting of the status of economic independence to Donetsk Oblast' in 1999 (Mykhnenko 2005: 105), the protests have shaken the Ukraine's political system and led to early parliamentary and presidential elections, held under the new electoral law enacted in November 1993. Despite protests from representatives of the democratic bloc, it didn't introduce significant changes to the laws inherited from the Soviet era, maintaining its majoritarian character:

A unicameral legislature of 450 deputies is elected from single-member constituencies in what, with competitive elections, is a double-ballot system. For a candidate to be elected, two criteria must be met: turnout in the constituency concerned must be over 50%, and the candidate must obtain more than 50% of the vote. If, as a result of the first ballot, no candidate is elected, a runoff is held between the two top-ranking candidates. If no candidate is elected in the runoff, the entire electoral process is begun anew with a new slate of candidates (Birch 1995: 94).

The registration of political candidates was possible through three paths: a declaration signed by at least ten voters in constituency, a nomination on a meeting of a workplace collective or a party conference, with 27%, 62% and 11% candidates registered through respective path (Birch 1995: 94). The regulations were particularly strict for party-affiliated candidates, with independent candidates facing lowest requirements. Their aim was to obstruct the registration of candidates associated with Rukh. What's more, for the vote to count as eligible, the voter had to cross out all the candidates except for the one that he supported (Bojcun 1995: 232). The emerging electoral system was thus characterized by increased opacity and personalization, favoring candidates with ties to administration and economy, that were able to exploit their position.

The importance of parliamentary presence was further exacerbated by the new Constitution in 1994, which delegated powers from the regional to the central level, thus weakening the regional administration (Wittkowsky 1998: 587). Surprisingly to many commentators, the Labor Party, established by „red directors”, was not able to attract substantial support in Donbas. The parliamentary elections resulted in a spectacular win of a re-formed communist party, established by local communist party secretary Petr Symonenko. Of the 62 seats in the Donbas region, the communists claimed 36 seats (58%), with many of the remaining seats taken by party-affiliated candidates. Donbas turned out to be a crucial stronghold for the party, as 40% of its parliamentarians came from the region (Bojcun 1995: 239). On national-level, 168 independent candidates were elected to Verkhovna Rada. Among them, 28% occupied managerial positions in state enterprises, 12% were employed by central political institutions (ministries, state committees, security organs), 10% worked in the presidential administration, while 8% came from regional politics (Bojcun 1995: 245). Although some striking miners took part in the elections,

none of them was able to secure a seat in the parliament (Crowley 1995: 66). Such results could be linked to the lack of clear programmatic differences between the candidates, as virtually all parties and candidates in 1994 Donbas called for deeper economic and political ties with Russia and CIS, regional autonomy, self-government and a legal status of Russian language (Mykhnenko 2005: 102). The polarization of the society along regional lines, hindered formulation of strictly economic, trade-unionistic demands.

Apart from parliamentary elections, in 1994 the presidential elections also took place. Largely thanks to the support from Donbas miners, the incumbent president Kravchuk was defeated by Leonid Kuchma. As the economic crisis prevailed, Kuchma introduced market reforms, which stabilized the macroeconomic situation in the country and kickstarted the privatization of state enterprises (Mykhnenko 2005: 103), providing broad opportunities for their take-over by those in power. The decision, coupled with the new Constitution in 1994, which delegated powers from the regional to the central level (Wittkowsky 1998: 587), further exacerbated the importance of parliamentary presence for regional elites. Thanks to linking their interests to the existence of the Ukrainian state, the threat of separatism in the region was neutralized.

The consequences of the 1994 elections and subsequent economic reforms have been especially acute in the mining industry, with the privatization and liquidation of many enterprises – the natural space for trade union activity. The enfranchisement of „red directors” is accompanied by the gradual closure of more mines in the Donbas region. In the face of restructuring and mass redundancies, the strike movement becomes fragmented and marginalized (Mykhnenko 2005: 104). Subsequent protests become increasingly localized, focusing on the growing debt of unpaid wages of specific mines and their workers, rather than on the situation of the sector as a whole. Although the intensity of the strikes is often very high, the protesters never again achieve the same political significance as was the case in the period between 1989–1993. Moreover, in 1998 the Ukrainian parliament passed the ‘Law on Dispute Settlement’, which restricted the right to strike in twenty three sectors – including mining (Traub-Merz, Volynets 2014: 250).

■ CONCLUSIONS

While in 1991 miners and intelligentsia were united in their common struggle against Soviet leadership for Ukrainian independence, contributing significantly to its reclamation, only 2 years later the miners found themselves protesting the Kyiv government and its policies of „compulsory Ukrainization”. At the same time their mass movement ceased to exert any autonomous influence on the political system of Ukraine. The disparate historical background of regions forming two poles of Ukrainian national project – Galicia and Donbas – served as a basis for formation

of opposing political cultures, which pitted their inhabitants against each other (Kononov 2021: 23). At the same time, they merely provided the cultural repertoire for politicians. The 1994 elections have convinced them of the effectiveness of strategies that employ polarizing, regionalistic political programs, which led to the consolidation of the regional cleavage as the key political cleavage in Ukraine (Kravchuk, Chudowsky 2005: 145). By establishing both programmatic and clientelistic linkages, the regional elites were able to garner the popular support of Donbas citizens and use it to take full advantage of the opportunities associated with the privatization of state-owned enterprises.

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TRACING THE DONBAS MINER MOVEMENT'S ROLE IN UKRAINE'S TRANSITION BETWEEN 1989 AND 1994

The article explores the impact of the miner strike movement in Donbas on the post-communist transition in Ukraine from 1989 to 1994. By focusing on the Donbas strike movement, its relationship with the nationalist intelligentsia, and a later co-optation of its mobilizing potential by regional elites, it provides an analysis of the agency of bottom-up social forces operating within a particular cultural framework during the transition period. The striking miners played a significant role in the reclamation of Ukrainian independence in 1991. Building on this momentum, Donbas politicians were able to politicize the already existing socio-cultural diversity of Ukrainian society and to define the fundamental political cleavage in Ukraine in self-serving, regionalist terms.

Słowa kluczowe: transformacja postkomunistyczna; podziały partyjne; tożsamości regionalne; Ukraina; Donbas; strajki górników

Keywords: post-communist transition; party cleavages; regional identity; Ukraine; Donbas; miner strike