

Denis Kazanskyi and Maryna Vorotyntseva, **Yak Ukraina vtrachala Donbas**. Kyiv: Knyzhkove vydavnytstvo Chorna hora, 2020. 336 pages. ISBN 978-617-95046-0-0

Seven years of a devastating armed conflict, an international blockade, and criminal warfare have left Ukraine's Donbas region in a state of disarray. Denis Kazanskyi and Maryna Vorotyntseva, as well as several other Ukrainian journalists call the region a "ghetto." Half of the population of the Donbas has left it for Russia, Ukraine-controlled territory, or destinations further west. The rest have lost any hope for the future, whether Donbas stays in the Ukrainian state or is incorporated into Russia. International news channels long ago shifted their focus to different topics. However, Donbas is still a key issue in Ukrainian politics and society. The authors' aim is to return to the basics and give the Ukrainian public insight into the causes of the war. As the book's title, *How Ukraine Lost Donbas*, suggests, the authors are looking for answers to the questions of when, why, and how the Kyiv central government lost the sympathy and trust of the Ukrainian citizens of Donbas and ultimately, its control over the territory.

Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva have much to say about the topic. Both are originally from Donbas and long worked as journalists and political commentators in the region. In spring 2014 they both covered events in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in person, but eventually left for Kyiv. Kazanskyi was also politically active: in the local elections of 2012, he aspired to become the mayor of Yenakiieve, a city in the Donetsk region. Currently, he is contributing to the Ukrainian weekly magazine *Ukrainskyi Tyzhden* as a political commentator and blogger. In 2020 he was appointed as a Ukrainian representative to the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk, the international negotiating format that seeks a peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in Donbas. For her part, Maryna Vorotyntseva is now working as a PR consultant for politicians and is an expert on election campaigns. Their backgrounds strongly influence the style of the book, which is more of a journalistic piece than an academic work. The personal accounts, stories, and experiences of the authors and their acquaintances are the key features of the book and its main strength. In addition, the authors rely in large part on excerpts from central and local government documents, national and local media reports, and transcripts of speeches. To include separatists' views on the war events, they also cite passages from a 2016 pamphlet, *Fakel Novorossii*, written by former separatist leader Pavel Gubarev.

Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva's book attempts to cover the political, social and economic events in Donbas since Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, with a focus on the relations between Donbas and Kyiv and, to a lesser extent, between Donbas and Russia. The main objective of the book is to help readers understand why the events of 2014 happened and what triggered them. The book is organized chronologically, and each chapter is devoted to one event or issue that informed relations between Donbas and Kyiv (or Moscow). At first the authors explain how Ukraine's government, under the presidency of Leonid Kuchma in the late 1990s, helped to create a narrow ruling elite that seized control of the politics and economy of Donbas. These oligarchic structures were given the opportunity to rule Donbas on their own with little or no supervision from Kyiv. The

authors show that until 2004 the level of pro-Russian sentiment in Donbas was very low. There were only a few insignificant underground groups and political parties with only a few dozen members that held strongly pro-Russian views. They were not considered to be a real political force.

However, the flawed presidential elections of 2004 and the subsequent Orange Revolution unsettled the Donbas oligarchs, who feared that Kyiv would engage more forcefully in “their” territory. They sponsored a media campaign that stoked hatred for western Ukraine and the new government’s pro-Western orientation in general in Ukrainian society. The oligarchs’ media outlets portrayed western Ukrainians as “fascists” who considered the people of Donbas as “second class citizens.” In the opinion of the authors, this was the moment when the mental barrier between the mostly Russian-speaking south-eastern regions of Ukraine and the rest of the country arose.

The rule of President Viktor Yushchenko proved to be less dramatic for the Donbas oligarchs than they had feared. The 2010 presidential elections and the victory of Viktor Yanukovich put any separatist tendencies to rest, only to be revived by the Euromaidan revolution of 2013/2014. Politicians, especially those from Yanukovich’s Party of Regions and the Communists, warned that Ukraine was being taken over by western Ukrainian “fascists” under whom Donbas’s Russian-speaking population would be subjected to “cultural genocide.” The authors show how in late 2013 and early 2014 local politicians and oligarchs in Donbas allowed marginal separatist groups to gain strength. They financially supported anti-Maidan demonstrations and provided their organizers and supporters space in the mass media they controlled. Those groups, the authors argue, were used by the Donbas oligarchy as a tool for discouraging Kyiv from taking any measures against their economic interests inside Donbas and in Russia. This proved to be a very risky game, and the Donbas oligarchs ultimately overestimated the strength of their hand. President Yanukovich’s escape to Russia and Russia’s annexation of Crimea allowed local separatists to gain momentum. Whereas until 2014 the separatists were generally considered to be low-class, picturesque hooligans, the developments gave them the ability to raise their voices in the media and arms in the streets. They managed to persuade the majority of the local population in Donbas that the only way to prevent suffering at the hands of Kyiv was to be annexed by Russia.

The book puts major blame for the war on the shoulders of the Donbas oligarchs. They created the divide between East and West in the mind of the local population and failed to foresee what their effort to hold onto their power would lead to. The most prominent tycoon from Donetsk, Rinat Akhmetov, miscalculated badly and he is rightly to blame for not intervening on the side of Kyiv in the spring of 2014. The book gives a short report on his role (pp. 270–279). However, offering deeper insight into the people surrounding Akhmetov would be useful to fully explain his role in the entire affair.

It would be easy to put all the blame for events only on the Donbas oligarchs. However, the authors argue that Kyiv also played a role by failing to take action throughout February and March 2014 in order to keep the region under its control. The leaders of the separatist groups should have been prosecuted and jailed. Local police forces, the secret

service, and the army should have been reinforced with members completely loyal to the state. The separatists should never have been allowed to besiege municipal councils and local police stations. Since the book focuses solely on Donbas, it lacks any statements by the heads of the Ukrainian secret service and police about why they let their branches in Donetsk and Luhansk stay neutral and did not act with more urgency against the pro-Russian uprising. When separatists successfully stormed administration buildings in Donbas in late March and the beginning of April in 2014, the situation was dire, and it took only a small group of Russian intelligence and military operatives to trigger a full-scale war.

A group of masked militants led by Igor Girkin, a former officer of Russian FSB, seized the city of Sloviansk in mid-April 2014. Prior to that, Russia's influence in Donbas was mostly indirect. However, the ideas of "Novorossiya," "the Eurasian world," and "Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood" had circulated in Donbas since the 1990s. They were also held by several Russian politicians and the leaders of the Don Cossacks and other paramilitary units, who periodically visited Ukraine and spread anti-Ukrainian ideas. Additionally, the authors claim that Russia had many politicians of the Party of Regions and the Communists on its payroll to protect Russian interests, which might explain those politicians' behavior in the spring of 2014. Perhaps the biggest indirect influence on Donbas, however, was the annexation of Crimea, because it created an atmosphere of pro-Russian euphoria among the local separatists. They immediately began to think that if Donbas would only show its willingness to join Russia, then the anonymous "little green men" would appear in Donetsk and Luhansk. To answer the main question of the book – who is to blame – all mentioned are to blame for the ongoing war. It is only a matter for every reader's imagination which one is the biggest villain.

In general, the book is fast-paced and its arguments follow each other nicely, creating a bigger picture. Given the authors' journalistic background, the book is easy for the general public to read. One of the authors' biggest advantages is their first-hand knowledge of the region and the differences between Luhansk and Donetsk. This makes the whole book very insightful and gives the narration an additional layer of credibility. For example, Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva stress that the oligarchs differ in their origins and skills. The Donetsk elite is made up of underground and grey zone personalities, while the Luhansk oligarchs are former Soviet Communist party *apparatchiki*. This has led to the Donetsk elite being more powerful on the Ukrainian national level than the Luhansk elite (pp. 29–32). To the huge credit of the authors, their book devotes a good number of pages to the situation inside of the Party of Regions, the role of President Kuchma, and the meteoric rise of Viktor Yanukovich and his Donetsk clan in the 1990s and 2000s.

One can only appreciate the direct quotes from the people the authors interviewed for the book. Well-chosen passages from public speeches, documents, and other materials nicely complement the arguments of authors. Since this is a journalistic account, not an academic work, the book lacks a formal citation style. It also lacks a bibliography of publications, news articles, and documents used in its preparation, which would help the reader to expand their understanding of the authors' arguments. Sadly, the book does not make that much use of the press releases and comments of Party of Regions politicians,

or of comments and opinions of the separatists, which would help the reader understand the reasoning behind their actions. This is especially true for the chapters “The Crisis of Severodonetsk” (pp. 95–102) and “The Mystery of the Luhansk SBU” (pp. 255–270).

One more thing that I perceived rather negatively was that the authors did not consult “ordinary people” of Donbas for their views. The book repeats the fact that Donbas is a land of miners and blue-collar workers. However, it never gives them the opportunity to have their opinion heard like it does the “elites.” The authors could have talked to thousands of emigres who have their own ideas about the triggers of the war and what they experienced during the “Russian Spring” of 2014. In fact, the book sometimes disparages entire groups of people just because of their class or profession, calling them “lower-class people lacking their own will” (p. 170).

To conclude, I would recommend Kazanskyi and Vorotyntseva’s book not only to people engaged in researching or studying Eastern Europe but also to anyone interested in how things can go desperately wrong in a place that has no history of internal war or ethnic conflict but is the subject of fierce propaganda, oligarchic rule, and the clashing geopolitical interests of foreign powers. It should be a warning to any leader who hopes to stay in power by creating barriers between citizens based solely on the region in which they live. Hopefully, the book will soon have an English translation.

*Vít Volný*

doi: 10.14712/23363231.2022.11