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Ukraine, Russia and new wars

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relevance of the Russo-Ukrainian War to the new wars analysis. The Russo-Ukrainian War is formally a conventional war fought by states for the political control of territory (i.e., an 'old war'), but it is also a conflagration that emerges out of the organized violence and instabilities of the post-Cold War world, and involves, in the form of Russia, a consummate 'new war' actor. What makes the Russo-Ukrainian War distinct from many other 'new war' settings is, however, the lack of its 'mutual enterprise' character. This is because Ukraine has, since 2014, sustained legitimate political institutions, albeit in a complex and still evolving form. Building on previous work on 'civicness', this article analyses the war as a contest between competing logics of authority. We argue that the 'just war' character of the Ukrainian resistance has been forged through an internationally constituted logic of civicness.

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Introduction

New wars (Kaldor, 2012, 2013) emerge from what we describe in this article as a fusion of the logics of identitarian sectarianism and rentier predation (or patronal politics) (Kaldor & De Waal, 2020) – an analysis that, in turn, highlights legitimate public authority as an alternative to these logics and processes (Theros & Kaldor, 2018). Recognizing this is important, we argue, for developing an analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian War that identifies substantively what is at stake, and the underpinning logic of Ukraine's resistance to the invasion, thereby avoiding the fallacy of seeing it simply as a state-based geopolitical contest.

The Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2014 had many of the features of a typical new war setting. The fragments were formed by the de facto states of the so-called 'people's republics' in Donbas and their associated ultra-nationalist and criminal networks. They were, in turn, backed by their patron, Russia, connecting 'the local' to 'the international'. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 opened a new high intensity phase of the war, one that dramatically increased the ferocity of the violence inflicted on Ukraine. In contrast to the localised stage of the conflict, it represents a more explicit threat to global security. Whereas in 2014 Russia confined its formal annexation of Ukraine to Crimea, by September 2022 it had broadened its territorial ambitions. The occupying authorities orchestrated sham referendums and passed legislation in the Russian Duma to claim the regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia in their entirety. This was also accompanied by a totalitarian language of so-called 'de-Nazification' that implied

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a broader threat to the country's democracy and identity. This focus on identity and territory combined with the high-intensity character of the war meant that after February 2022 the conflict took on the appearance of an 'old' war. However, our argument in this article is that the political goals of Russia should be seen as continuous before and after the pivot point of the full-scale invasion, and typical of the kinds of predatory behaviour associated with new wars.

What makes the Russo-Ukrainian War distinct from other new war contexts, however, is that it does not constitute a 'mutual enterprise' (Kaldor, 2012, pp. 218–220): a term that refers to how formally opposed actors may have a mutual interest in sustaining violence. Instead, we argue that it should be read as a contest between competing logics of authority: a sectarian and predatory logic in contrast to a civic and democratic one. Exploring the case from this perspective, allows us to look beyond the war's territorial borders, both formal and contested, and place Ukraine's struggle to construct a legitimate, democratic political authority in a longer historical context. It involved, for example, the citizen action of both the Maidan (2013–2014) and Orange (2004–2005) revolutions. These uprisings and their aftermaths occlude simplistic characterization, representing cases of popular confrontation towards patronal elites (Hale, 2015) and also stories of adaptation to, and co-option by, such oligarchic factions (Dalton, 2023). Since Ukraine's independence, inter-oligarchic competition has been mediated through formally representative institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Way, 2005a, 2005b). This system of competitive, formally democratic oligarchy, combined with popular pressure 'from below', was a factor in Ukraine being able to contain its 'new war' conflict to the Donbas when there was the greatest risk of a wider violent breakdown in 2014 (Arel & Driscoll, 2023). The complexity of this story illustrates how civic and kleptocratic logics can sometimes be entangled. Our intention is not to present these distinctions as neat, 'black and white' categories, whether in Ukraine, or other conflict affected settings marked by similar forms and logics. This is relevant to the on-going discussion in defence and security circles about the role of Ukraine's civic resistance in the war. It might be argued that the latter was so effective, not because of the legitimacy of state institutions but in spite of them. There was civic scepticism about the role of patronal institutions and so citizens felt the need to take independent action to resist the invasion. Ultimately, this contributed, albeit in a complex and non-linear way, to the still on-going process of state institution-building.

We use the concept of civiness to probe these questions in this article. Civiness is a logic of authority based on trust-based societal relations, which can include civil society organizations like NGOs but may also involve informal individual and collective actions (Al-Kaisy, 2019; Ibreck & Seeka, 2022; Majid, 2022; Theros & Kaldor, 2018; Theros & Turkmani, 2022; Vlassenroot et al., 2022). Our understanding of civiness in Ukraine builds on previous academic research that has highlighted how mistrust towards the state (Gorbach, 2024, 2022; Yurchenko, 2018) is often juxtaposed with high levels of citizen-to-citizen interpersonal trust – e.g. in popular protest or everyday community practices (Artiukh & Fedirko, 2025; Channell-Justice, 2022; Cooper et al., 2026; Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby, 2023; Darkovich et al., 2025; Onuch & Hale, 2022). However, this experience also demonstrates how Ukrainian civiness is entangled with state coercive power and operates, to some degree, in on-going contention and interaction with other logics. Two other logics of authority are also discussed in the article. Rentier predation refers to the buying or selling of support, a form of the commodification of politics (De Waal, 2015). We use this term interchangeably in the article with patronal/neopatrimonial politics (Bondarenko, 2026; Hale, 2015; Huss, 2023) utilized in studies of Ukraine and Russia. Our third logic of authority, identitarian sectarianism, refers to the use of exclusionary, identity-based distinctions for political ends (Kaldor & De Waal, 2020). Our argument is that the Russo-Ukrainian War can be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of the interplay and contention between these different logics of authority.

We argue that in the Ukrainian case the logic of civicism has emerged as a highly internationalised phenomenon. By containing elements that are continuous and distinct from the new wars analysis, the Russo-Ukrainian War therefore disrupts the heuristic distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ wars in a productive and potentially significant way.

Global fragmentations and global orders

At the most basic level, all human social relations are fragmented (Rosenberg, 2016). International Relations scholarship has long probed the question of how order is brought to this fragmented whole by some level of shared, mutual recognition of rules and norms (Koschut & Mende, 2026, p. 2; see also Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2020; Reus-Smit, 2018). When academics, policy-makers and journalists today discuss a rising level of fragmentation in the international order, what they tend to be referring to is contention over the rules, norms and ideas that shape the expectations we have about the global system. As power has become more diffusely spread across the global order (Cooper, 2024a) with the rise of a multiplicity of geopolitically ambitious states (Peter, 2021), there has been greater discord around rules and norms, including contests between liberal and authoritarian conceptions of international order (Peter, 2024; Richmond, 2025). What makes this discord more complex is the lack of clarity and shifting positions between different actors and networks. There is no straightforward (geo)political distinction between different camps.

During the Cold War, the prevailing sense of ‘order’ was defined by the conflict between the communist East and capitalist West. Both sides built huge military arsenals and came terribly close to war on several occasions. However, they also developed systems that managed their relationship to one another, despite their ideological differences. The perception of war risk structured the political economies established by both sides, their interest groups and systems of reproduction (Kaldor, 1990). Within and across these blocs – communist, capitalist or the non-aligned states – there were many examples of what we could call fragmentation, from geopolitical splits to different experiments or methods of political economy and different systems of political rights. Importantly, though, the Cold War did bring a sense of order to the state of fragmentation; it established rules and mechanisms to manage the conflict between the rival blocs. When we speak about a twenty-first century defined by growing fragmentation, then, it refers to this loss of agreement on the ‘ordering principles’, and a far greater experience of differentiation and flux. This change is connected with frequent, intense crises, and the rise of a range of states that expect to have a say on global issues. It can be seen as constituting, then, a diffusion of power across the system that diminishes the ability of a select few powers to dictate to the rest and a subsequent blurring of the kind of demarcations between ‘blocs’ that were characteristic of the Cold War era.

The competing logics of authority we discuss in this article are different imaginaries mobilized in this state of global fragmentation. While Vladimir Putin’s exclusionary logic subjectively sees itself as an exercise in re-establishing a system of ‘great power politics’ (Cooper, 2024a), in practice it thrives off of encouraging a different set of rules, norms and ordering principles, based on violence, predation, transactionalism and rent-seeking. This is a world that lacks the kind of centralized systems of order that big states once policed. Although Putin’s vision is often discussed as an attempt to re-establish a Soviet-like empire, in truth it lacks the coherence and centralization of such a system. The contrasting logic of civicism can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to bring a sense of order to global fragmentation through a concept of mutual obligation and rights. Civicism could even be seen as providing an underpinning in social relations, through the myriad of actions individuals and groups undertake across borders to cooperate without being coerced, for the

concept of international law ‘as a language through which states conduct their relations with other states and indeed civil society ... [that] creates expectations [of their] behaviour’ (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017, p. 24). Indeed, while the idea that international law is in severe crisis is commonplace, our contention is that something else may be occurring. In this more fragmented global order, we have witnessed a loss of the quasi-monopoly that wealthy and powerful states claimed over the use of international legal instruments – e.g. in the South Africa genocide case at the ICJ – and these institutions have, in turn, become entangled in the fraught contest between logics of authority. This suggests the problem is not that international law has failed but that the structural causes of violence have proliferated.

The new wars analysis and political economies of extraction

The term ‘new’ in relation to war refers to a conceptual rather than empirical/historical difference in relation to the wars of our imagination, which can be called ‘old’ (Kaldor, 2013). This difference has to do with what the Prussian general, Carl von Clausewitz, delineated as the inner essence of war: the notion of war as a deep-rooted contest between organized groups, usually states. Clausewitz’s theory was that deep-rooted contests tend to the extreme as each side tries to win. The politicians want to achieve their objectives, the generals need to disarm their opponent, and fear and hatred spreads among the people. For Clausewitz war was a continuation of policy that used ‘violence’ to ‘compel our opponent to fulfil our will’ (Clausewitz, 2007, p. 13; see also Kaldor, 2012, pp. 15–31).

With advances in all types of military technology, ‘winning’ in the way that Clausewitz understood it has become very difficult. Pursuing war to an extreme can mean the annihilation of all sides. Yet, organized violence has other utilities (Keen, 2012, 2006). Violence can create a context for the spread of ideologies. It can also represent a way of extracting economic resources. In such cases, the essence of war is no longer a deep-rooted political contest, as such, but is more like a mutual enterprise or a joint venture where the various warring parties need each other to legitimate their use or threat of violence. In environments where a number of different actors are interacting through violence, their practices may tell a different story to their justifications (Keen, 2012, pp. 7–8, 10).

The new wars paradigm explores these un-stated intentions present in political economies of predation. New wars tend to share a set of characteristics that can be understood as the outcome of economic and political developments at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Above all, they should be seen as a method of allocating resources. On one level, they may be seen as an extreme, militarized form of neoliberalism,¹ but in situations where markets are not stable or functional, they become entangled with political competition and armed actors compete for resources through the use of violence. Indeed, new wars have often emerged in the context of rapid economic liberalization undertaken by authoritarian states. The erosion of state capacity and public services amid depressed economic conditions creates an incentive structure favourable to predatory violence and criminality as well as identitarian ideologies. Political authority (Theros & Kaldor, 2018) in such contexts, whether we are talking about the state or the fragmented forms of political authority that are constructed through violence, tends to be dominated by two contiguous but different and sometimes contradictory logics: that of predation and what may be called identitarian sectarianism (Kaldor & De Waal, 2020).

A predatory logic of authority concerns what Alex de Waal discusses as an exercise in governing through the distribution of money and other forms of rent to supporters (De Waal, 2019, 2015).

Politicians compete in order to gain access to money rather than to implement a programme; it is systemic in the sense that these actors need money to compete which they can only obtain through gaining power. Even if they do have these motives, their ambitions are continually subverted by the logic of the marketplace. This is an outcome of neoliberal globalization in two respects; first, because the global financial system means that the gains of predatory activity can be hidden very easily; and, second, because they are an extreme form of the kind of rentier extraction that has come to dominate contemporary capitalism (on the latter see Christophers, 2020; Stiglitz, 2019). Rent, defined as unearned income that arises from the control (that may be formal or informal) of scarce assets or assets made artificially scarce (see Mazzucato et al., 2023; Sayer, 2015; Standing, 2016), is central to the political economies associated with situations of intractable violence. Conflict becomes about the control of rents. Funds are used to maintain the means of violence and secure supporters' loyalty, generating an incentive structure that is path-dependent, and thus a barrier to reform efforts. This also drives a tendency for states to rely on rents rather than tax revenue (Kaldor et al., 2007), or to treat tax itself as a form of rent extraction for elites (Benson, 2024). The actors engaged in this system may be referred to as 'political entrepreneurs' (De Waal, 2015), 'violent entrepreneurs' (Reno, 2002; Volkov, 2002), 'specialists in violence' (Bates, 2008) and 'military entrepreneurs' (Vlassenroot & Perrot, 2012). These formulations all refer to a situation in which coercive power is partially privatized and actors and networks engage in violence, brokerage and negotiation over the spoils of predation, creating incentives that render states fragile and perpetuate conflict.

This logic of predation tends to be associated, in turn, with identitarian sectarianism. The rise of exclusive, sometimes transnational, identitarian politics provides a framing that sustains the conflicts characteristic of new wars, particularly insofar as the interests of the insider group vis-à-vis 'others' are cast as zero sum. As the insider group is imagined to be existentially threatened by these others, it legitimizes authoritarianism and violence to 'protect' the community (Cooper, 2023a). Whether based on ethnicity or religion, the construction of these identities draws on historical experience but is not an outcome of that experience. Contrary to the idea of 'ancient rivalries' such identitarian frameworks require continual reinvention. History provides a pool of different narratives that can be tailored to relevant circumstances. Indeed, this reimagining is as much the outcome of violence as the cause. Such labels acquire an existential significance when they become a justification for violence and a reason for 'protection'. New wars are the site of such processes.

The logics of rentier predation and identitarian sectarianism are inherently prone to, and entangled with, violence. Whether used or threatened, violence acts as a form of bargaining in a new war setting. What follows is an intractable social process, in which the various actors compete and co-operate, coalesce and fracture, and both encourage and disrupt peace initiatives. It can be described as a mutual enterprise since they need each other to sustain and reproduce this social condition of violence. All-out-battles for 'victory' are rare, in part because the gains from violence can be achieved through more carefully directed means with less risk to the violent actor. Looting, checkpoints, systemic rape, forced displacement, or the destruction of cultural and historic sites, are not, in this sense, a side effect of the type of violence seen in new war contexts but the point of such violence.

Conceptualizing these elements as different logics highlights how they observe certain rules of reproduction; in this respect, they could be seen as different *forms of order*. They are structured according to particular rules and norms in the same way that successful mafia-like organizations (Tilly, 1985) will also have structures of hierarchical authority that are non-coercive and based

on some form of voluntary compliance in tandem with violence. When we refer to such logics, we are describing in an ideal typical fashion a bundle of practices with shared characteristics. They may be separated for the purpose of analysis even though their concrete forms can often observe entanglement and apparent contradiction. The question of analysis and empirical investigation is not whether a given logic is present in conflict, but which is dominant, i.e. whether the combination of an identitarian sectarianism and the political market predominates or whether civicism, as a set of trust-based relations articulating a conception of the broader public good, is able to constrain these other logics.

Russia as a consummate new war actor

The Russian state has over time become dominated by the logics of predation and identitarian sectarianism (in the form of an imperialized ethnonationalism). Many parallels can be discerned in this regard between the break-up of Yugoslavia and that of the Soviet Union. In both places, the last years of communism were strongly associated with crime and corruption. Since private economic initiatives were largely prohibited by law (though more stringently in Russia than in Yugoslavia), it was often difficult to distinguish them from organized criminal activity. This meant that when market reform was pursued it had the effect of legalizing activities that were already taking place in the shadow economy. The attempted reform of these systems revealed the polycentric nature of the ruling bureaucracies, as even institutions like the KGB, which were generally considered hostile to reform, had within their ranks many actors and networks that participated in, and sought to extract influence and rents, from these policies (Miles, 2021, pp. 832–833). Out of the links between corrupt officials and the shadow economy formed the ‘criminal–political nexus [which] became an integral part of the state–society complex of the USSR’ (Yurchenko, 2018, p. 31; regarding Ukraine’s transition see chapters 2 and 3) in the Brezhnev years. This nexus operated at the very top of the system, the *Nomenklatura*, the clan-like Soviet ruling class, whose status allowed them to mix outright theft from the economy with a range of legal privileges (Handelman, 1997, pp. 94–97). This elite used their influence to extract rents from initial market reforms, especially as discrete spheres emerged in which monetary wealth could be legally accrued, seeding their transition from extracting rents via control of the planning system to claiming property rights in the 1990s (Kryshtanovskaya & White, 1998).

Ethnonationalist narratives were also nurtured by a complex administrative system of ‘titular nationalities’ (Bennich-Björkman & Grybkauskas, 2021; Goff, 2021). This constitutional system made Soviet nationality policy unstable and continually renegotiated, reflecting the tension between the formally post-national state and the many appearances and logics of nationality woven into its structure. In a planning system where competition takes the form of conflict over resources rather than for markets (Kornai, 1992) and where socialist narratives were losing their substance and appeal, nationalism became salient, such that it carried over into the crises and disruptions of the post-communist transition. Ethnonationalist ideas rapidly became the basis for new movements and networks formed out of criminal gangs transitioning to legal ‘security’ businesses, lower order elements of the bureaucracy, notably former sports professionals, who had lost jobs and privileges, and new far right intellectuals (Volkov, 2002). The use of violence to capture rents was critical to these networks. As political disintegration was preceded by collapses in production, falling incomes, austerity and hyperinflation beggar-thy-neighbour dynamics ensued that were favourable to nationalist ideology. Fascist ideology, with its racialized valorization of ‘might’ and masculinity, formed an organic accompaniment in thought to these predatory practices. Thus, it

was coercive competition for resources and rents – itself an outgrowth of dynamics of elite power in the late Soviet Union – and not competition for markets in a capitalist sense, as such, that drove the rise and consolidation of Russian ultra-nationalism.

In post-Soviet Russia not only did austerity mean that the state lacked the capacity to protect against corruption, but networks born out of the old security system entered the marketplace of violence. Firms offered their clients ‘the roof’, a term that referred to the enforcement services necessary to protect property and extract rents through using legal and illegal practices (Volkov, 2002, pp. 139–140). So, while some of the first new wars took place in this period, in Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, these were not geographically localized exceptions to an otherwise ‘peaceful’ transition. Indeed, aspects of Thomas de Waal’s description of Chechnya in 2005, three years after Russia’s ‘victory’, could refer to the post-Soviet transition *per se*. The territory, he wrote, was run by bandits that ‘live off a black market economy made up of Russian subsidies, misappropriated reconstruction money, illegal oil trading and bribes’, and in this system of ‘private gain and public insecurity, abduction is a prime means of control’ (De Waal, 2005, np). In other words, the predatory form of violence typical of new war settings was pervasive.

While the phase of outright conflict was brought to an end by talks, usually sponsored by the international community, especially the OSCE, the new wars of the 1990s came to be known as ‘frozen’ conflicts, though perhaps ‘festering’ is a better term (Berg & Mölder, 2012; Caspersen, 2011; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025; Gueudet, 2023; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008). The Russo-Ukrainian War should be analyzed within this broader landscape and history of violence. Some of the practitioners of violence that ran criminal networks at that time, such as Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov, former FSB, active in the Donbas), Yevgeny Prigozhin (founder of the Wagner Group) and Ramzan Kadyrov (Chechen warlord, allied to Putin), would of course feature prominently in the war itself.

Putin modified but did not change these logics. Violent entrepreneurship continued in a more controlled and systemized form. Putin’s initial surge in popularity was formed through the Russo-Chechen War (Koesel et al., 2020, pp. 217–218). He brought order to the market in violence, establishing a centralized ‘roof’ across the system of violent entrepreneurship. He struck a deal with the oligarchs wherein they supported his control of the Kremlin in exchange for preserving their extractive privileges. Those who failed to accept these terms were cast out. The oligarchs were integrated into a network for rent capture and distribution (Gaddy & Ickes, 2010, pp. 298–299; for accounts of the Russian oligarchy see Browder, 2022; Glenny, 2017; Mezrich, 2015). Patronage was distributed in exchange for not challenging Putin. Underpinning this system were rents from rising oil and gas prices, which between 2011 and 2014 (a period of high oil prices) rose to 50% of state revenues and did not fall below 28% in the ten years prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Yermakov, 2024, p. 8). Putin thus integrated identitarian sectarianism and predation to consolidate his power. The impacts on Russian society appear to have been a complex mix of cynicism and apathy. Russian human rights activists often describe a society ‘traumatised’ by this transition from the era of violent entrepreneurship to authoritarian consolidation in the 2000s. To what extent the Putin regime actually convinced the majority of Russians of their cornerstone propaganda claims, that ‘they live in a time of threats and geopolitical humiliation’, has been debated (Morris, 2025, p. 9; see also Lewis, 2022). Jeremy Morris cautions against reading too much into opinion polling showing robust support for Russia’s wars given the societal pressure to conform with ‘correct’, state narratives (Morris, 2025, p. 10), a shaping of personal preferences by ruling regimes which has long been observed in autocracies (Pan & Xu, 2025).

Russia developed and practiced the methodology of ‘non-linear war’ in the Putin era, which became associated with Chief of Staff, Valery Gerasimov (Gerasimov, 2014; see also Pomerantsev, 2015; Wilson, 2014; and for a questioning of its novelty, see Galeotti, 2016). This systemized new war techniques into a strategic approach that mixed ‘political technology’ (i.e. disinformation), special forces, and the use of mercenaries and paramilitaries (Kaldor, 2016). These multimodal techniques are discussed in the hybrid war literature as deliberately creating a grey zone between war and peace, allowing, for example, the subversion of peacetime maritime law (Kormych & Malyarenko, 2023). It came to characterize Russia’s operation in Donbas as well as those in Syria (al-Rish, 2023; Artiukh et al., 2023) and various African states (Eledinov & Lechner, 2024; Gabidullin & Lechner, 2024; Lamarche & Lechner, 2024). In Syria, Russia was able to reverse the losses the Assad regime had suffered using airstrikes and mercenary groups. Notably, this did not bring about a victory in the ‘old war’ sense, i.e. political control in Syria’s internationally recognized borders, but did, until December 2024, protect what Assad had called *Sourya al-Mufida*, or ‘useful Syria’, as a fragmented territorial enclave out of which the regime would maintain and run its criminal networks (Haddad, 2019).

The Russo-Ukrainian War emerged out of this globalized landscape of predatory violence and authoritarianism. Whereas the 2011–2013 protest movement in Russia was defeated by the violent repression of the regime, Ukraine maintained its constitutional order after the Revolution of Dignity 2013–2014. The revolution had been prompted by Viktor Yanukovych’s decision, in the face of Russian pressure, to abruptly cancel the association agreement with the European Union. Ukraine’s political transition was evidently not ‘pristine’, containing complex articulations and tensions between different nationalisms, both inclusive/civic (Onuch & Hale, 2022) and those less so (Gorbach, 2020a), or ambiguous, hybrid fusions (Zhuravlev & Ishchenko, 2020), along with continuing oligarchic regime dynamics (Dalton, 2023). But for all this complexity, Ukraine was able to sustain functioning democratic institutions and a popular, civic logic of political authority as an alternative to the predation and identitarian sectarianism of the Putin regime. Recognizing this is critical to analyzing the present, at the time of writing, still ongoing, war. For it was not an instance of ‘geopolitics 101’ (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 82), i.e. a dispute over territory and the balance of power, but a contest over political authority that the Revolution of Dignity ultimately represented. The threat to the substance of ‘the Putin system’ was critical. Analyzed in this way, the Maidan protests formed part of the same global democratic wave that included Russia’s own 2011–2013 protests (Berti & Onuch, 2015). Indeed, viewing the protests in Russia and Ukraine as interrelated goes some way to recognizing why the Revolution of Dignity represented such a threat to the core, survival-based interests of the Putin regime.

Importantly, February 2022 constituted a pivot point of transformation for Russia’s fragmented power constellation, one that drove a dynamic of state centralization. After the Russian state encountered far greater resistance to its invasion than it had anticipated or prepared for, the war has forced it to transform its system of distribution of oil rents under the twin pressure of (a) the resource demands of fighting a high-intensity conventional war (quite distinct from Putin’s earlier military adventures) in the context of (b) unprecedentedly severe western sanctions. This compelled a shift to ‘military Keynesianism’ (Cooper, 2025; Ishchenko et al., 2023; Vlasjuk et al., 2025) that changed the distributional logics of the Putin system, favouring industrial working classes and those able to extract rents from the expansion in the military-industrial complex, and disadvantaging those elements of the Russian oligarchy that were either directly sanctioned or indirectly impacted by its effects. While this transformed the distributional logic of the authoritarian political market in Russia, it also accentuates the system’s dependency on oil rents and violent militarism, factors that may create incentives favourable to the war’s intractability.

The complexity of civiness in post-Maidan Ukraine

The analysis presented in the foregoing situates Russia as a fragmented power constellation, one centred on Putin and the Kremlin but spreading outwards in a global network defined by the logics of identitarian sectarianism and rentier predation. In this section, we take the same approach of ‘looking behind’ the Ukrainian state and its formal territorial claim to consider the logics present in how these are socially constructed. To explore this dynamic, we apply the concept of civiness as a logic of authority. We use this as a lens to explore the pattern of public authority formation in post-Maidan Ukraine, and the ambiguities of the assertion of a logic of civiness as a political position and its entanglements with other logics.

What was notable about the civiness that can be observed in the Revolution of Dignity and after is its relationship to the subsequent evolution of state formation. The revolution’s success stands out vis-à-vis the global context of revolutionary democratic mobilizations and subsequent conflicts. Ukraine was unusual in that the pockets of civiness which could be observed in these movements, i.e. their strong presence of trust-based social bonds based on mutual obligation, were to flow over into a pattern, however complex, of democratic state formation thereafter. If both the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Revolution of Dignity are analyzed as intertwined contests over logics of authority, then this violent conflagration started with the Yanukovich regime’s deadly repression of protestors in January 2014.

Civiness informs the types of question we ask about the societal relations that underpin how power is exercised and interpreted. At one level, the civiness that emerged in the Revolution of Dignity in the context of state repression was a ‘solidarity of the shaken’ (Krapfl & Kühn von Burgsdorff, 2023, p. 327; see also Shore, 2018). This system of mutual aid was consciously ‘articulated against uncivic politics, in particular the combination of endemic corruption ... and economic and social injustice’ (Kaldor & Radice, 2022, p. 138). This took aim at the ‘Donetsk clan’, the network of oligarchs and politicians that had seen themselves as a ‘natural’ ruling class of Ukraine (Kuzio, 2015) and drew their support from a paternalistically organized coalition of industrialists, managers and workers (Gorbach, 2020b) in Eastern Ukraine. But as this may suggest, the way in which subjects coalesce around such a position is complex and civiness does not itself constitute a normative concept. Its social reproduction as a logic of authority may appear to be inclusive from one vantage point but may actually be exclusionary from the perspective of those that do not benefit from such trust based relations (Vlassenroot et al., 2022). While one strand of opinion among the protestors favoured a more ethnic Ukrainian position, associated for example with a focus on the Ukrainian language as the priority, some have argued it was also in the Revolution of Dignity that a truly political, democratic idea of the nation was forged involving the many communities that live in Ukraine (Snyder et al., 2022). What was important about the civiness represented by the Revolution of Dignity was its commitment to the liberal reform of Ukraine’s institutions, but as it confronted the paternalism that had characterized the corruption of Ukraine’s old regime this rather inevitably generated new contradictions.

Importantly, the oligarchic system of the Donetsk clan won support from Eastern workers non-violently through paternalistic bonds that were arguably both trust-based and patronal, informal ties constructed over many generations (Gorbach, 2024, 2020b). These identity-based bonds that drew on nostalgia for the Soviet Union and an idea of fraternity with Russia were intertwined with a political marketplace logic (De Waal, 2019, 2015) that saw votes exchanged for patronage rents (Kuzio, 2015, p. 177). This entanglement of commodified identitarian politics was connected, in turn, to an ideological mix of ‘left-wing paternalism ... and big business’ orientations (Kuzio,

2015, p. 177). This hybridization was not a simple reproduction of the Putin system in Ukraine. It was not continuous with the great Russian ethnic chauvinism of Novorossiya ('New Russia') which made territorial claims on southern and eastern Ukraine. Russia had encouraged such ideas since the 1990s by funding local media and organizations (Yurchenko, 2018, p. 172). This included the 2008 formation of the 'Russian Unity' party in Crimea. But these groups and networks were distinct from, and often antagonistic towards, the Party of Regions (on Crimean domestic politics from 2009 to 2015; see Matsuzato, 2016). So, although, in general, the Yanukovich network can be seen as part of a fragmented constellation of Russian power, it also reflected its diversity, and the nature and agency of this 'nodal point' placed limits on what Putin could achieve from the first invasion.

The Russian invasion of 2014 applied in this sense the framework of non-linear war, discussed in the foregoing. Its use of 'technologies for influencing state structures and the population with the help of information networks' (Gerasimov, 2014, np) followed this strategy but faced the problem that the audience for great Russian ethnic nationalism was rather small in Ukraine. While Russia's successes in the first stage of the war reflected its longer-term investment in Ukraine's information space, it also contrasted to the much wider influence that the Donetsk clan and the Party of Regions had enjoyed. Where eastern elites came out early against defection to Moscow in the throes of the 2014 crisis, this played an important role in averting the path to conflict (Nitsova, 2021) and reflected how these milieus had more to lose than gain from the violent disruptions that Putin offered (Arel & Driscoll, 2023). Citizen groups supporting a conception of a political Ukraine – and opposing the great Russian nationalism articulated by seditionist forces – also began their own popular mobilizations in eastern and south eastern Ukraine, outnumbering pro-Russian forces in key cities like Kherson (Melnyk, 2019, pp. 31–32). At the same time, Putin's limited but real successes in 2014 removed from the Ukrainian electorate those voters that were most inclined to supporting sedition against Kyiv, paradoxically stabilizing a western-oriented majority with Russia-sympathetic parties henceforth much more marginal after 2014 (Melnyk, 2019, pp. 31–32).

The localized nature of the conflict prior to the full-scale invasion of 2022 would also shape the complex way that civiness would be negotiated and recoded in post-Maidan Ukraine. While Ukraine successfully modernized its security sector after 2014 (Detzner & Beliakova, 2023) and increased military spending to 3.3% of GDP in 2015 (from 2.2% of GDP in 2014), a level around which it would oscillate until the full-scale invasion, it did not undertake the kind of militarization of its economy which it would pursue in 2022. This treatment of the war as a local and not existential conflict is consistent with the decision of the majority of eastern elites not to pursue sedition. For the risks to their interests were greater than any gains they might be able to make from a violent war-economy. Ukraine's state formation between 2014 and 2022 did not then have the character, which is sometimes associated with 'old wars', of empowering the state over the market and centralizing resources in order to direct them to military ends (Tilly, 1990, 1975). But, in fact, as Volodymyr Artiukh and Taras Fedirko suggest, Russia's non-linear war produced a non-linear pattern of Ukrainian state formation full of incoherence and tensions (Artiukh & Fedirko, 2025, p. 60). Citizens' suspicion of the state as a patronal regime (Hale, 2015), and a site of corruption and pro-Russian influence peddling, shaped this dynamic. It was the shift to the full-scale invasion, in tandem with the international response, that drove a more orthodox pattern of state centralization which was underpinned in turn by popular civic mobilization.

The image of Maidan (for a critique see Gorbach, 2020a) as a conjuncture in which 'Ukrainian citizens began acting as an autonomous, self-governing community, independent of the powers that were' (Krapfl & Kühn von Burgsdorff, 2023, pp. 327–328) left a legacy of do-it-yourself

civic activism which existed in a complex relationship with public authority (Channell-Justice, 2022; Kaldor, 2015). Whether the state was *included* in Maidan's notions of trust and mutual obligation, was a question answered with ambiguity; the state could be cast as both a concrete manifestation of the revolution's success and a reminder of the limited change it had brought. There was a sense among civic activists that they could not rely on the political class to carry out reform (Kaldor, 2015). If they were to succeed in putting Ukraine on a democratic path, it was up to them to press for reform and indeed to reform society themselves. Consequently, after Maidan, human rights groups, advocacy networks, a feminist movement, and humanitarian NGOs flourished. This energetic civic space contrasted with the relative stability of the oligarchic system in Ukraine after 2014.

With the old 'clan' politics persisting under President Petro Poroshenko (Polityuk & Williams, 2016), Yuriy Matsiyevsky argued that Maidan had produced 'a revolutionary process' without a 'revolutionary outcome' in which 'the leadership changed, but the regime remains' (Matsiyevsky, 2018, p. 350). In this context, the localized conflict risked becoming an opportunity for predatory rent extraction, presenting a barrier to peace efforts. For example, in the Spring of 2019, President Poroshenko was embroiled in a defence corruption scandal that appeared to suggest that his supporters were extracting rents from their relatively hawkish line on the Donbas war by selling smuggled Russian parts necessary for Soviet-era military equipment at inflated prices (Haring, 2019). The possibility that the localized war in the East could become a site of elite profiteering was therefore subject to some level of public debate. Even though Poroshenko was heavily defeated by Volodymyr Zelensky on a populist anti-corruption and pro-peace platform (Cherepanyn, 2019), the system by which Ukraine's clans converted wealth into political power and vice versa (Dalton, 2023) would not be threatened by the market liberalization policies of his government.

When civicness took the form of a political position it also brought with it contention and ambiguity over the exclusions this entailed, i.e. who were the forces against which this democratization would be pursued; whose interests would be challenged? Denys Gorbach observed, in 2020, what he called a 'demophobic' tendency among Ukraine's post-Maidan intellectuals whose criticism of the old patronage system had grown into a neoliberal, moral populism, one which associated all forms of social security with patronage (Gorbach, 2020a, np). Trade unions would be depicted in some elite discourses as a component of the oligarchic nexus to be tackled with the deregulation of employment rights (Ivanova, 2024).

Civicness was often, then, cast in neoliberal terms, as a political position that associated democratization with free market thinking. Indeed, Ukraine in this period pursued a highly neoliberal vision according to which the tradition of paternalism associated with the old regime would be displaced by marketization and individual competition. While Ukraine did achieve progress in anti-corruption, security sector reform, greater gender equality, and a significant devolution of power to local government (at the 'hromada' level) often as a consequence of civic pressure, the drive to rapidly align with WTO and EU rules tended to asymmetrically favour its external trade partners, exposing its conflict-affected economy and struggling domestic producers to heightened foreign competition (Milakovsky & Vlasjuk, 2024). Far from centralizing resources to grow state capacity and prosecute the war in the east, Ukraine's post-Maidan governments sought state retrenchment from markets, reflecting their own ideological preferences as much as the requirements of its IMF bailouts.

With this policy toolkit Ukraine oversaw further deindustrialization and failed to make up for the loss of both Russia's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and its falling demand for Ukrainian exports. Austerity, the abolition of the progressive income tax scale and the creation of ultra-low

tax rates for ‘entrepreneurs’ (defined so broadly that any citizen could declare themselves as such) with no requirements for record keeping, would all undermine the state’s capacity to act as a public authority and tackle the oligarchic system. Libertarian economic policies, which had found a hearing in part due to a criticism of the state as a component of an oligarchic nexus associated with the old regime, would, ironically, then, create new opportunities for corruption and informality. This also overlooked how the absence of a ‘stable socio-economic environment’, i.e. the general precariousness and fragility of the broad population, had underpinned *both* the Maidan protests and the anti-Maidan reaction in parts of the East (Yurchenko, 2018, p. 175). While the full-scale invasion would eventually prompt a turn towards wartime state centralization policies, combining tax rises with the modernization of administration and collection, and industrial policy, Kyiv had initially responded with proposals for huge tax cuts (Cooper, 2024b).

Viewed in these terms, Ukraine’s pattern of state formation after the Revolution of Dignity contained many of the ‘red flags’ associated with new war contexts; indeed, it can be read as constituting a series of complex entanglements between the logics of civiness, identitarian sectarianism and rentier predation. The vital point, however, is that civiness as a sense of mutual obligation remained the dominant organizing logic, albeit in the complex form we have discussed. Above all, this meant that Ukraine’s various contending parties and social groups sought to resolve their disputes non-violently. Civiness as a societal web of formal and informal ties and behaviours, producing voluntary compliance with authority, has therefore intersected with the pattern of Ukrainian state formation, creating a kind of ‘power of legitimacy’, that enabled this imaginary to become a material force in the war. Due to the extraordinary shift in the political economy of the war that the full-scale Russian invasion produced, and the impressive performance of the Ukrainian armed forces in the crucial first months of the war (against most expectations of a rapid Russian victory), February 2022 may have marked a transformative pivot point in the ability of the state to act as a legitimate authority. An important example is the innovation eco-system that developed around drone warfare, in which the old Soviet style military procurement system was bypassed in favour of a new set of relations between frontline soldiers, technological start-ups and civil society who made the connections and raised the funding (Fedirko, 2025). The last section considers this possibility, reflecting on how this construct of the ‘just war’ was shaped by Ukraine’s relationship to ‘the international’ realm.

The international construction of Ukraine’s ‘just war’

Civiness in the form of dense networks of activity to support Ukraine’s resilience has been its ‘secret weapon’ in the war (Melchior, 2022). In September 2023, 85% of Ukrainians reported engaging in some form of ‘civic resistance’ activity with 40% having undertaken volunteering since the full-scale invasion (Onuch et al., 2023). The fact that this is highly informal, operating through personal connections and ad hoc networks and groups (Zarembo & Martin, 2024, p. 204), illustrates the utility of analyzing these relations as civiness. These often-intangible ties and bonds that shape a sense of duty and obligation to others appear to have been critical to protecting life and maintaining social order. Networks have mobilized resources to support the war effort, blurring the distinction between humanitarian and military aid. They are often based on loose ties with resources transferred from neighbouring states to frontline battalions and civilian communities with very high levels of interpersonal trust enabling horizontal delivery (Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby, 2023).

Examples of Ukrainian civiness in the course of the all-out-war include the volunteer networks that kept alive vulnerable citizens cut off from their family during the Battle of Kyiv; citizens

donating funds directly to the war effort via crowdsourced platforms and the networks of volunteers, such as those organized by the NGO, Help to Leave, that have evacuated citizens from Russian occupied Ukraine and campaigned against their stigmatization. This activity also forges global information spaces that have created pressure on western allies to maintain the flow of aid. So, in a direct sense, through the mobilization of resources and role of these networks in public advocacy, civicism is a 'material force' in the war. These social relations are also neither entirely global nor domestic but constituted by a kind of dialectic of the national and international; they are both societal and intersocietal relations contributing to opinion formation and shaping state decision making.

The Ukrainian state has interacted with this civic mobilization in a productive and complex way. With state capacity limited, activists have played a key role in helping local municipalities deliver services (Savisko et al., 2024, 2023). This indicates a shift in attitudes towards state authority, and local activists' appreciation of the post-Maidan decentralization reforms and its role in war resilience (Rabinovych et al., 2023). There may also be a 'David effect' that arises from the success of the Ukrainian side in resisting the 'Goliath' of the Russian invasion in the sense that the state's military successes have shaped citizens' attitudes and behaviours. This can be observed, for example, in the phenomenon of 'patriotic Ukrainians ... rushing to pay their taxes' (The Economist, 2023), as tax revenue fell by half the rate of GDP in 2022 (Cooper, 2023b) despite the huge wave of outward emigration. This appears to indicate a transformation in how citizens view the state as a public authority, away from seeing it as a force for elite rent capture towards the creation of a social contract in which taxes are exchanged for public goods. It could be interpreted, perhaps, as a takeover of the state by the civicism already present in society; as the shared sense of existential threat and the 'public good' of a free and independent Ukraine reconstitute public authority. If so, it is, however, a process of 'becoming, rather than being', i.e. an unfinished transition in which different logics continue to be entangled with one another; some have argued for example that decentralization efforts have consolidated local patronal elites, reinforcing patronal/neopatrimonial logics of power (Bondarenko, 2026). Democratization entails no, as Oksana Huss argues, 'big bang' moment of change (Huss, 2023). We argue that analysis should focus on the interpenetration and co-existence of such different logics, i.e. the civic and uncivic; the public good and the political market; the rule-based and informal; and so on. This challenges the tendency to draw sharply categorical distinctions between a liberal democratic west and a neopatrimonial east (Madlovics & Magyar, 2023) – a position arguably especially important to uphold given the great surge of patronal politics in western societies. In short, the issue is one of predominance and trajectory, i.e. which logic has momentum.

This, in turn, poses questions of theory and how Ukraine can be situated within the wider new wars analysis. As we have outlined, Russia can be seen as a consummate new war actor, whose mechanisms of external intervention are multidimensional and non-linear and, thus, not *wholly* defined by the push to annex Ukrainian territory. At first sight, Ukraine, in contrast, appears to assert a classical claim of Weberian territorial sovereignty in counter-position to the logics of the Russian system. Even in these narrow terms, however, Ukraine draws from a source of authority that is global, i.e. international law, and specifically the principles of territorial integrity and sovereign equality. This also reflects something broader about the type of political authority that Ukraine has constructed which is not wholly domestic but formed through a logic of civicism constituted through a deep interrelationship with 'the international'. Indeed, Ukraine's successful defence to date has made extensive use of transboundary ties and connections (mirroring, though in a democratic form, the international nature of the Putin system). In other words, it is fighting for its

national liberation to a certain degree with *international* means. The international condition imparts a fragmentary character to the competing civic and predatory logics, blurring the distinction between domestic and international, the local and the global. While Ukraine's external relations can be analyzed as a series of dependencies shaping its process of non-linear state formation (Artiukh & Fedirko, 2025), they may also illuminate how resisting the Russian power constellation requires an internationally embedded response.

The Ukrainian case may suggest a need to think of 'the international' as a field that is productive of the social relations that we call civiness alongside less palatable global logics such as financial flows, mineral revenues or transnational identitarian networks. Both the logics of predation and the logics of sectarianism are embedded in global interconnections. Rather than understanding 'the international' as a set of relations among nations, it is helpful to reconstruct what we mean in terms of competing logics. Starting from the basis of these (inter)societal relations brings a different perspective to the paradigm of Weberian statehood that defined the state as 'the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory' (Weber, 2004, p. 33). For Weber, 'territory' was the decisive element, the 'essential defining feature' of statehood (Weber, 2004, p. 33). This defined power as proceeding from the top down ('people rule over other people', as he put it) with *acquiescence* to this by the ruled critical to how he understood legitimacy (Weber, 2004, p. 34). While Weber did hold 'belief' to be important in the willingness of subjects to acquiesce to their rulers (see Weigand, 2022, p. 34), he viewed power as a vertical relation binding the state and people together in a territorial community. Something different to this, we argue, is occurring in how the Ukrainians relate to the Ukrainian state; it is not a form of acquiescence to power but indicative of social relations that are productive of its legitimacy. Likewise, in the geopolitical framing of the conflict as a territorial and identity-based contest, or in struggles over how rents are captured and distributed, the relations involved are not simply vertically arranged but social and intersocietal. In other words, if we understand the war in terms of competing logics of authority, then this is a horizontal competition within the framework of the 'international'.

Civiness as the bonds of obligation that construct rules and logics 'from below' brings a different perspective to this question of authority. It does so in part because it has arisen as a concept in studies of contexts marked by 'limited statehood' (Santini et al., 2020) where the insufficiencies of the Weberian paradigm are all too obvious. This means, however, that its coordinates are helpfully un-state centric, providing a different lens of analysis to the idea of a statehood as formed through territorially circumscribed vertical relations. In contexts marked by the absence of national authorities that can substantively exercise a monopoly on the use of force a multiplicity of overlapping logics and sites of authority operate (Turkmani, 2024). As Florian Weigand puts it, the 'political order' that emerges in such situations is a 'dynamic arena', for though 'the level of monopolization of force is low and the number of authorities is high', these 'various authorities coexist, interact, compete, and coordinate' (Weigand, 2022, p. 21). While in Ukraine the state's ability to monopolize the use of force remains very high, it is nonetheless helpful to think about the way in which its sovereign claim on territory has been forged in such a dynamic arena of interlocking parts. This arena is also, notably, not wholly constituted by Ukraine's domestic societal relations.

The question of legitimate force and statehood brings a different perspective to how civiness has been observed in other conflict environments, in which it is sometimes associated with non-violent peace advocacy in national (Haddad, 2019) or local agreements (Bell & Wise, 2022). In the Ukrainian case, its entanglement with state formation and the war effort involves instead a prioritization of legitimate power, of 'justice before peace', so to speak. The war has entailed a very high level of

cooperation between civic networks, NGOs, the military, civil service, business and the political sphere (with many activists moving in and out of official politics), blurring the distinctions between state, market and civic space. Activists often report, for example, working with local government on the implementation of decisions and projects, not merely being consulted on their development (Savisko et al., 2023, p. 49). These relations and ties can be fraught and contentious, a reality evident, for example, in the dispute between Kyiv and local hromradas over the reallocation of surplus tax revenues in areas with large numbers of soldiers (Gaidai, 2023). However, they remain governed by implicit rules of the game that entail a willingness of parties to comply with a public authority and institutions they see as legitimate. The democratic character of Ukraine's public authority arises from this continual negotiation and re-negotiation.

This civicness does not necessarily map onto the territorial demarcations of the nation-state; it may involve networks that traverse these borders or may be local (or both). These transboundary connections contribute to the production of legitimacy. They mean, in turn, that we should question concepts of 'proper authority' which focus exclusively on the territorial state (Lang & O'Driscoll, 2013, np). For the contention and discord that produces outcomes that claim legitimacy will always involve a fragmented constellation of authority structures at local and international levels. When individuals and groups exercise contention over authority they are negotiating both the substance of the public good and the relationship of this concept to political institutions. Ukrainians have drawn on international law to assert their right to resist while voluntarily providing their time and resources to support their resilience and security. The effect of this is to construct a logic of authority on the basis of voluntary compliance to cohere a 'public good' defined as Ukraine's *just war*.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Russo-Ukrainian War should be read as a conflict between competing logics of authority: a sectarian and predatory logic in contrast to a civic and democratic one. Rather than vertical forms of state-based centralization, the war is a contest between two constellations of power centred on the territorial entities of Russia and Ukraine but involving a wider polycentric array of actors and networks, operating across national borders. It has produced decidedly non-linear patterns of state formation and fragmentation. On the Russian side, this has perpetuated a seemingly entrenched logic of warmaking as the state's drive to extract resources to fund the conflict, and its limited territorial gains, have not, at the time of writing, prompted the regime to accept international demands for a ceasefire. For Ukraine, the willingness to pursue peace talks, and their negotiators' openness to freezing the line of control in the 2025 talks (Kaldor & Cooper, 2025), illustrates that the war does not have the 'mutual enterprise' character associated with the wider new wars analysis.

The internationalized way in which Ukraine has constructed its legitimate political authority does not resemble the 'old wars' idea of a classical political contest over territory. *New Wars* (Kaldor, 2012), however, did in fact present legitimate authority as an alternative to intractable violence and in a certain sense the Ukrainian side has constructed this, albeit in a complex manner with still uncertain future prospects. Ukraine has constructed a form of political legitimacy for its campaign of *national* liberation out of a logic of civicness which involves a *global* source of authority (i.e. the international legal order) and mobilizations of actors and networks that are *transnational*. This means that if Ukraine were to be successful, then it may prove helpful to constructing a new democratic imaginary that can bring some sense of 'order' – as agreement on rules, behaviours and actions – to the international system, providing a means for states to navigate democratically the new global fragmentation.

Note

1. It entails what David Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003), but often lacks the ideological forms of justification associated with neoliberalism regarding individual competition through ‘free’ markets.

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