



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: The Massacre That Changed Ukraine and the World

The chapter describes importance of the Maidan massacre of the police and the Maidan protesters in Kyiv in Ukraine on February 18–20, 2014, and its role in the overthrow of the Ukrainian government and ultimately in the start of the war in Donbas, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and conflicts of Russia with Ukraine and the West that Russia escalated dramatically by launching the illegal war with Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The question is whether the Yanukovich government, the Maidan opposition, in particular, the far-right, or any “third force,” such as Russia, was involved in the mass killing of protesters and the police. Methodology and data combine content analysis of thousands of videos, photos, and audio recordings of the massacre in Ukrainian, Russian, English, and Polish with analysis of several hundred testimonies of witnesses and wounded Maidan activists and results of forensic ballistic and medical examinations by Ukrainian government experts. The analysis of the primary data includes about 1,000 hours of video recordings of the Maidan massacre trial, nearly 1,000,000-word trial verdict, and over 2,500 other court decisions. This chapter describes the theoretical framework of rational choice and the Weberian theory of rational action and develops the moral hazard theory of the state repression backfire.

## 1.1 THE MAIDAN MASSACRE AND ITS IMPACT

The mass killing of 74 Maidan protesters and 17 police and Internal Troops members in Ukraine during the mass “Euromaidan” protests on February 18–20, 2014, and wounding of respectively over 300 activists and about 200 police and Internal Troops members is a crucial case of political violence. This mass killing of the protesters and the police led to the overthrow of the democratically elected and pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovych and gave the start of a civil war in Donbas, Russia’s military intervention in Crimea and Donbas, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and an interstate conflict between the West and Russia and between Ukraine and Russia. Russia drastically escalated these conflicts by launching its illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Russia-Ukraine war also escalated into a proxy war between the West and Russia (see Black & Johns, 2015; Katchanovski, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b, Forthcoming; Kudelia, 2016; Hahn, 2018; Sakwa, 2015).

This book uses the theory of rational choice, a Weberian theory of instrumental rationality, and state repression backfire theories and analyses a variety of evidence to determine whether the Yanukovych government, the Maidan opposition, or any “third force” was involved in the mass killing of protesters and the police. The research question is which party or parties of the conflict massacred Maidan protesters and the police.

The Maidan massacre was immediately attributed to government snipers and the Berkut police by the Maidan opposition, Western leaders, and the media in Ukraine and the West. The far-right commander of the same special Maidan company of snipers called from the Maidan stage on the evening of February 21, 2014, to reject a signed agreement, which was mediated by foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Poland and a representative of the Russian president. He issued a public ultimatum for President Viktor Yanukovych to resign by 10:00am the next day, justified it by blaming Yanukovych and his forces for the massacre, stated that his Maidan company was responsible for the turning point of the Euro-maidan, and threatened an armed assault if Yanukovych would not resign (Yakshho, 2014). The commander of the Maidan Self-Defense said that this ultimatum was a decision by “institutional bodies of the Maidan” and that it was adopted by a military council set up by the Maidan Self-Defense and the Right Sector on February 21, 2014 (Kalnysh, 2015).

The Maidan massacre undermined the legitimacy of Yanukovych as president of Ukraine and the legitimacy of the incumbent government, police, and security forces and their monopoly on the use of force. The massacre prompted a part of the Party of Regions deputies to leave their faction and support the Maidan opposition and the parliament vote on February 20 to withdraw government forces from downtown Kyiv and subsequent votes to dismiss then President Yanukovych and his government, even though this was unconstitutional. Many deputies were forced to vote or their cards were used to vote for them. For instance, the commander of the far-right-linked group of the Maidan snipers admitted that his group forced certain members of the parliament to participate in the votes to dismiss Yanukovych and his government and to elect the Maidan leaders in their place (Katchanovski, Forthcoming; Kovalenko, 2014).

An agreement signed on February 21, 2014, by Yanukovych, the Maidan opposition leaders, and representatives of France, Germany, and Poland stipulated withdrawal of the government forces from downtown Kyiv, disarmament of the Maidan activists, early presidential elections, and the investigation of the Maidan massacre with involvement of the Council of Europe. But this agreement was violated by the Maidan opposition, which seized control over the presidential administration, the Cabinet of Ministers, the parliament, and other government buildings following the withdrawal of the government forces.

Then US Vice President Joe Biden revealed in his memoirs that during the Maidan massacre he called Yanukovych and told him that “it was over; time for him to call off his gunmen and walk away” and “he shouldn’t expect his Russian friends to rescue him from this disaster,” that “Yanukovych had lost the confidence of the Ukrainian people,” and that “he was going to be judged harshly by history if he kept killing them.” Biden wrote that “the disgraced president fled Ukraine the next day — owing to the courage and determination of the demonstrators — and control of the government ended up temporarily in the hands of a young patriot named Arseniy Yatsenyuk” (Biden 2017).

US President Barack Obama stated that “we had brokered a deal to transition power in Ukraine” after the massacre and before Yanukovych fled, but the US president or other American government officials did not release any specific information about the nature of this involvement (PRES, 2015).

Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders as well as the Russian media called the overthrow of Yanukovych as a fascist or Nazi coup. They justified support of separatism and annexation of Crimea by protection of ethnic Russians from the Ukrainian ‘fascists’ or ‘Nazis’ and by the Russian national security interests to prevent it from losing control of the main Black Sea naval base and its falling under control of NATO.

Not only Russian President Vladimir Putin but also then US President Barak Obama stated that the Russian annexation of Crimea was a reaction to the violent overthrow of the Yanukovych government with the US involvement. Obama said that “Mr. Putin made this decision around Crimea and Ukraine, not because of some grand strategy, but essentially because he was caught off balance by the protests in the Maidan, and Yanukovych then fleeing after we’d brokered a deal to transition power in Ukraine” (PRES, 2015). After initially denying the Russian military intervention, Putin admitted in his 2015 documentary interview that he proposed his plan to “return” Crimea and authorized the covert Russian military intervention on February 23, 2014, following the overthrow of Yanukovych (see Katchanovski, Forthcoming).

The violent overthrow of the pro-Russian Yanukovych government gave a significant boost to separatism in Crimea. The Russian government used this overthrow to reverse its previous policy and start backing both pro-Russian separatists and the annexation of Crimea. Yanukovych fled from Eastern Ukraine to Russia and then to Crimea on February 22, 2014, and the Russian military there on instructions from the Russian government helped him to escape again to Russia (Katchanovski, 2015, Forthcoming).

Previous studies show that conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and the West started with the violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government in Ukraine by means of the Maidan massacre and assassination attempts against then President Viktor Yanukovych (see Bandeira, 2019; Black & Johns, 2015; Katchanovski, 2016a, 2016b, 2020, 2023a, 2023b, Forthcoming; Hahn, 2018; Mandel, 2016; Lane, 2016; Sakwa, 2015). The violent overthrow of the Yanukovych government escalated into the civil war in Donbas with pro-Russian separatists and an international conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the West and Russia. Russia escalated the conflict by conducting military interventions in Crimea and Donbas and annexing in the violation of the international law Crimea, which was populated primarily by ethnic Russians, and by launching the illegal invasion and the war in Ukraine (see

Katchanovski, 2015, 2016a, 2022a, Forthcoming; Kudelia, 2016; Hahn, 2018; Sakwa, 2015).

The violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government was a tipping point in the conflicts in Ukraine and between the West and Russia over Ukraine. President Putin used this overthrow and its backing by the governments of the US and EU countries to radically change his policy towards Ukraine. The Russian government started to pursue annexation of Crimea with the help of direct military intervention since the end of February 2014 and then annexed Crimea in March 2014 in a violation of international law (see Katchanovski, 2015).

The Maidan massacre that resulted in the overthrow of the Yanukovych government also spiraled into the separatist rebellion in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. The overthrow of the government led to a power vacuum in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, which were until then strongholds of Yanukovych and his Party of Regions.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was illegal and extreme escalation of conflicts of Russia with Ukraine and the West and the civil war in Donbas that followed the Western-backed violent and illegal overthrow with involvement of the oligarchic and far-right elements of the Maidan opposition of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine by means of the Maidan massacre and assassination attempts against Viktor Yanukovych. The Russia-Ukraine war also escalated into the proxy war between the West and Russia in Ukraine (see Katchanovski, 2022a, Forthcoming).

Ursula von der Leyen, the EU Commission President, stated in 2023 that “Today, war is back in Europe. But for many Ukrainians, this conflict began already ten years ago. It began when peaceful protesters, just waving the European flags in Maidan Square, were shot dead by snipers” (Keynote, 2023). Putin, for instance, in his Tucker Carlson interview in 2024, made similar statements linking the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the Maidan massacre (Carlson, 2024).

The identification and prosecution of those who perpetrated and organized the Maidan massacre could have helped to prevent or resolve peacefully the subsequent conflicts that it triggered, including the violent overthrow of the Yanukovych government, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, and the Russia-Ukraine war (see Katchanovski, 2015, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a).

## 1.2 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This book combines different social science research methods and analysis of vast amount of various type of data. It uses content analysis of all publicly available videos, photos, and audio recordings of the Maidan massacre on February 18–20 in English, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and other languages with an analysis of several hundred testimonies concerning this massacre based on qualitative interview methodology. The manifest and latent content analysis covers over 2,000 videos and recordings of live Internet and TV broadcasts of the massacre in nearly 50 countries, news reports, and social media posts by over 120 journalists covering the massacre from Kyiv, more than 6,000 photos, and close to 30 gigabytes of publicly available radio intercepts of snipers and commanders of the Security Service of Ukraine and Internal Troops.

The analysis is also based on nearly 1,000 hours of official video recordings of the Maidan massacre trial and the Yanukovych treason trial, the nearly 1,000,000-word text of the Maidan massacre trial verdict in the official online Ukrainian court decisions database. The data includes information concerning GPU investigations of this massacre of the protesters and the police in over 2,500 court decisions. These court decisions are publicly available in the official online Ukrainian court decisions database. The names of people being investigated are omitted in these decisions. Media interviews of prosecutors, Maidan victims' lawyers and Berkut lawyers, and various media reports about the Maidan massacre trials and investigations are also examined.

This study analyzed interviews and statements by several hundred witnesses in media and social media. Most of these testimonies are by eyewitnesses, mostly Maidan protesters, and Western and Ukrainian journalists. Testimonies of indirect witnesses concerning Maidan snipers are primarily Maidan protesters, politicians, and pro-Maidan journalists. Such “statements against interest” relayed by indirect witnesses are accepted in criminal law and trials in the US, Canada, and other Western countries (see Martin, 1994). Since it would be in rational self-interest for Berkut officers and the Yanukovych government officials, who are charged with the Maidan massacre, to deny their responsibility whether they are guilty or not, the analysis does not rely on their testimonies.

The analysis also employs field research and photos by the author at the site of the Maidan massacre in downtown Kyiv in July 2014, and numerous visits before the massacre to the Maidan and most surrounding

buildings, such as Hotel Ukraina, the Main Post Office, Zhovtnevyi Palace, Dnipro Hotel, and Kozatsky Hotel. A multimethod methodology combining content analysis of videos, audio recordings, and photos of the massacre with analysis of qualitative interviews with witnesses makes the case study and its findings much more reliable than typical scholarly studies. Specific testimonies concerning specific events, in particular, killings and wounding of specific protesters and locations of the shooters, were corroborated by other evidence, such as other testimonies, video and audio recordings of these events, and results of forensic medical and ballistic examinations by government experts of the same specific events. The same concerns other types of evidence such as videos. In addition, the evidence is evaluated using other standard criteria in scholarly methodology, such as validity, specifically, face validity and replication.

This study also introduced a digital event reconstruction methodology for scholarly research on political violence. Digital event reconstruction methodology, in particular, of mass killings and other cases of political violence, is used in international criminal justice and by non-academic researchers such as Bellingcat (see Zarmsky, 2021). It is revealing that Bellingcat did not present an analysis of this massacre despite stating in February 2015 that they were working on such investigation (Bellingcat 2015). The failure by Bellingcat to examine the Maidan massacre was another dog that did not bark.

Seven online video appendixes include brief relevant compilations of segments of videos of the February 20 massacre and the Maidan massacre trial (see Video 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g). They are available on the author's YouTube channel. Numerous videos of the massacre were synchronized based on the matching visual and audio content of videos, in particular, speeches from the Maidan stage, and on time-stamped video recordings, such as recordings of live TV broadcasts, Internet streaming, and security cameras. These video appendixes also contain maps that show the locations of the government forces and buildings with snipers, locations, and times of killing and wounding of specific Maidan protesters and policemen. The locations and positions of the snipers are determined based on their videos, photos, and testimonies of wounded protesters and witnesses.

The timing and video synchronization in these video compilations, including the times and locations of killings and wounding of the specific Maidan protesters, have some minor exceptions consistent with the time-stamped compilations of videos of the massacre by the SITU architectural

company and Talionis group, which are based on their computer synchronizations. The Talionis video compilation of the Maidan massacre was presented as evidence by the prosecution and Maidan lawyers during the trial (see Vysota, 2017a, 2017b). This compilation was produced by an anonymous group with funding from the Prosecutor's General Office (Katchanovski, 2019). However, both SITU and Talionis omitted the initial part of the massacre on February 20, in particular, the killing and wounding of the police, and many videos regarding Maidan snipers that were included in the present study.

The multimethod research and analysis of all publicly available data sources enhance reliability and validity of the analysis and data. Only findings that are corroborated by at the very least two independent sources, excluding those with vested interest, are used. Typically, findings rely on much greater number of such independent sources.

### 1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study relies on the rational choice theoretical framework and the Weberian theory of rational action and state repression backfire theories. The rational choice theory views people as acting in a calculated and self-interested manner, and this theory was applied for various specific political events (see, for example, Bates et al., 1998). However, rational choice assumes that people have perfect information to make such decisions and that all of their actions are rational. In contrast, the Weberian theory of social action regards instrumentally rational type of action as one ideal type of action alongside value-rational, traditional, and affectual types of action, and that such actions can be interpreted and understood by scholars. The instrumentally rational type of action involves “the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends” (Weber, 1978, 24–25).

While rational choice treats all actions as rational and calculated, Weber recognized other types of actions, such as affective or emotional (Weber, 1978, 25). Irrational actions, particularly emotions and mistakes, can also occur during violent conflicts and revolutionary events (see Beissinger, 2022). For example, an examination of the Maidan massacre by a pro-Maidan journalist emphasized feelings of hate between protesters and the police (Koshkina, 2015).

The Ukrainian and Western media and governments-promoted narrative of the Maidan massacre appears irrational from both rational choice

and Weberian instrumentally rational action perspectives. Yanukovych and his associates lost all of their power and much of their wealth, and fled from Ukraine as a result of this mass killing, since this massacre of protesters undermined his and his government's legitimacy, even among the many deputies of his Party of Regions who joined the opposition and voted to remove him from the presidency. The same problem concerns the irrational retreat of the police from their position at Maidan and the mass killing of the protesters by the police, since Berkut and the internal troop units had nonlethal weapons to stop unarmed protesters and it was more rational to use live ammunition or snipers to deliver warning shots or target armed protesters and the Maidan leaders, rather than to kill advancing protesters. Similarly, the repeated attempts by protesters to advance on the very small and relatively unimportant part of Instytutska Street also seem irrational and hard to explain from these theoretical perspectives, because a large number of people going under constant fire would amount to a collective mass suicidal action. While some of the government leaders, policemen, and protesters might have been driven by value-rational actions, such as being motivated by ideology; affectual actions, based on emotions; or miscalculations in their instrumentally rational actions, it would be anomalous for all different actors to do this at the same time.

The dominant narrative promoted by the Ukrainian and Western governments and, with some exceptions, the Ukrainian and Western media concerning the Maidan massacre is consistent with state repression backfire theories. State repression backfire means that attempts to use violence to suppress protests instead produce a backlash against the state in response to such violence. This means defeating vastly superior state forces by peaceful protesters in an asymmetric conflict (see, for example, Anisin, 2014, 2019; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Hess & Martin, 2006; Martin, 2007; Sharp, 1973).

The backfire requires that state repression be perceived as completely unjustifiable, excessive, or disproportional, and that information about state repression be communicated to the public and other actors, such as foreign governments (see Martin, 2007). Examples of such state repression backfires include the Bloody Sunday massacre of anti-government protesters by the police, which spurred the Russian Revolution in 1905, and the Jallianwala Bagh (Amritsar) massacre of pro-independence protesters by the British Indian Army, which spurred the

pro-independence movement in India led by Mahatma Gandhi (see Anisin, 2014, 2019).

State repression backfire theories suggest that the Maidan massacre of unarmed anti-government protesters in Ukraine was an extreme form of state repression by the Yanukovych government and its forces and was aimed at suppressing anti-government mass protests on the Maidan. However, the state repression of peaceful Maidan protesters by means of their unprovoked massacre supposedly backfired after it was highly publicized by media and social media in Ukraine and the West. The mass killing of the protesters ostensibly produced a massive public outrage and a backlash against the incumbent government, delegitimizing its use of force and leading to Yanukovych and his government leaders, who were blamed for the massacre of protesters, fleeing from Ukraine to avoid prosecution or other retaliation to order this mass killing.

State repression backfire also implies that the incumbent government has rational incentives to cover up state violence and those responsible for such violence to prevent or minimize the backfire. If the Yanukovych government, its police and security forces, or any pro-Yanukovych “third force” did perpetrate this mass killing one would expect cover-up by them and speedy and effective investigations and the prosecutions by Maidan governments. It was in the rational self-interest of the Maidan governments, whose legitimacy was ultimately based on this massacre, to conduct effective and speedy investigations and prosecutions of this one of the most documented cases of mass killings in the history of the world.

However, previous studies have failed to consider that there is a moral hazard in such mechanisms of state repression backfire. The mechanisms of the repression backfire can be exploited by opposition or pro-opposition actors in their own self-interest based on rational calculations of expected costs and benefits. The provocation of government violence against protesters or the covert staging of such violence and attributing it to state repression can be rational from the perspective of theories of rational choice or Weberian instrumentally rational actions for actors driven by self-interest and not concerned with ethical considerations.

The moral hazard contains an incentive for the opposition to produce a transformative event that could not only create significant media coverage and public outcry against the incumbent government inside and outside of the country, but also dramatically increase popular mobilization and domestic and international support, eventually resulting in concessions or regime transition. Provoked or staged violence by pro-opposition actors

has the power to backfire to a government by undermining its legitimacy and its use of security, police, and military forces, thus defeating them in an asymmetric conflict. This greatly increases the chances that government police, security, and military forces and high-ranking commanders, officials, and politicians will defect from the incumbent government. Such provocation of state violence or staging of false-flag violence means a very high-stake and high-risk game. The incentive to minimize risk in case of failure and detection of exposure implies that the use of provocation and staged false-flag violence would be exceptional and rare, and would be done covertly and with subsequent cover-up.

The moral hazard of the state repression backfire in the case of the Maidan massacre would mean that certain elements of the oligarchic and far-right Maidan opposition provoked the mass killing of the protesters, for instance by killing and wounding the police, or covertly staged the mass killing of the protesters themselves in order to blame the violence on the incumbent government leaders and their security or police forces and seize power in Ukraine as a result of this transformative event. This would also mean very strong incentives for the Maidan governments to cover such provocation or staged violence and stone wall investigations of mass killing on the Maidan.

There is evidence of such precedent of provoked and staged violence in Romania during the anti-communist “revolution” in 1989, which became a transformative event in Romanian history. The former Romanian president, prime minister, and a number of other leaders of the “revolution” were charged by Romanian prosecutors in 2018 and 2019 with crimes against humanity for using deliberate disinformation and diversion right after they seized power in 1989 to provoke false-flag mass killings that resulted in 863 deaths. The prosecution charges state that they used such orchestrated killings and other violence to legitimize their power and execute the Romanian communist government and party leader Ceausescu for these mass killings in a mock trial that they helped to stage. These and other leaders of the new Romanian government and military commanders reportedly provoked and staged the killings of supporters of the new government by other supporters of the new government, including in the military, by literally using false flags, deliberate diversions, and misinformation that Ceausescu snipers from the security services and his other loyalists, called “terrorists,” were killing supporters of the new government (Romanian, 2018).

A similar state repression backfire can involve executions, assassinations, poisoning, arrests, beatings, or torture by opposition leaders, activists, and protesters. However, such repression also involves moral hazard. For instance, videos and testimonies of various Maidan activists and eyewitnesses show that violent dispersal of Maidan protesters on November 30, 2013, was deliberately provoked by Maidan opposition leaders, the far-right Right Sector, and the head of the Yanukovych administration. His TV channel filmed and publicized it along with other Ukrainian and foreign TV and other media as unprovoked police violence against students on the Yanukovych order. Orchestrated police violence was used to trigger mass Maidan protests against Yanukovych and his government (see Katchanovski, 2020).

The moral hazard theory of state repression backfire, rational choice, and Weberian rationality-based analysis can be applied not only to the analysis of the Maidan massacre in Ukraine. Such a theoretical framework can also be used to conduct theory-based and evidence-based scholarly analyses of possible cases of false-flag violence in Ukraine and other countries. There is a similar moral hazard in interstate violence and conflict backfires. Similarly, there is a moral hazard in humanitarian intervention that involves perverse incentives for political actors to engage in risky and fraudulent actions against their own state to elicit violent state repression and humanitarian intervention by foreign states in response (Kuperman, 2008).

Cases of false-flag violence included violent attacks staged by Nazi Germany and disguised as Polish attacks in the German territory, for instance, in Gleiwitz. They were used by Nazi Germany as a pretext to invade Poland and start World War II and for propaganda purposes to justify this invasion (see, for instance, Davies, 2006, 152). A false-flag shelling with reported casualties by Soviet border guards near the village of Mainila was used by the Soviet Union as a *casus belli* for a war with Finland in 1939. This shelling was staged by Soviet forces on orders of Soviet leadership and was falsely blamed on shelling by Finland to create a pretext for the war (Spencer, 2018).

There is a documented history of such false-flag operations in politics and conflicts in Ukraine and other countries, specifically during

World War II, the Cold War, and since the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army units often used disguises of Soviet partisans or Soviet military and security forces to carry their killings of Polish and Ukrainian civilians in order to hide the UPA responsibility and impute these killings on their adversaries. The Soviet secret police created many fake UPA units to locate and neutralize actual UPA units and their sympathizers among the local population in Western Ukraine after the Soviet Union regained its control of this region at the end of World War II (see Statiev, 2010).

The Soviet KGB created fake underground organizations in Ukraine as a part of its tactic against different factions of the OUN and the US and British intelligence services that used the OUN during the Cold War. Various academic studies and documents of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) show that the US government was involved during the Cold War in 1953 in organizing false-flag violent attacks in Iran as a part of the US-led overthrow of a democratically elected government and turning this country into a US client state run by an authoritarian government (see Abrahamian, 2013; Gasiorowski, 1991). Some researchers and journalists argue that clandestine networks, which were organized during the Cold War by the governments in West European countries to form underground resistance during their potential occupation by the Soviet Union and which included many far-right elements, were involved in various false-flag attacks (Ganser, 2005).

The dioxin poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko helped to mobilize popular support for the “Orange Revolution” and win him the 2004 presidential elections, whose results were initially falsified in favor of Yanukovych. While the opposition and the media initially presented this as an assassination attempt by the Yanukovych side or the Russian government, the case has not been solved. After becoming president, Yushchenko indicated that politicians or oligarchs with whom he was previously allied might have been involved (Katchanovski, 2008).

Some scholars and journalists presented the Moscow apartment bombings in 1999 as a false-flag operation carried out by the Russian domestic security agency in order to create a pretext for the second Russian war in then de facto independent Chechnya and increase popular support

<sup>1</sup> In various cases, especially relatively recent, it is difficult to come to definite conclusions if certain events constituted false flag operations or not, because of lack of publicly available data to answer research questions or test various research hypotheses.

for Vladimir Putin before the presidential elections (see, for example, Dunlop, 2012). While such hypothesis cannot be excluded, the second war in Chechnya then already started with invasion or radical Islamist militias in Chechnya of the Dagestan region of Russia and the Islamic terrorists carried out several similar large-scale attacks during the first and second Chechen wars in Budenovsk, Makhachkala, Moscow, and Beslan and later claimed responsibility for the Moscow apartment bombings (see Sakwa, 2005).

Similarly, while Western governments and international organizations concluded that a chemical attack near Damascus in Syria in 2013 was most likely perpetrated by the Syrian government, there were claims that this was a false-flag attack by Islamic rebels in order to draw a direct US military intervention in the Syrian civil war. Some journalists argued based on various evidence that the massacres of opposition protesters in Venezuela and in Vilnius in Soviet Lithuania were falsely attributed to the government forces but were perpetrated by snipers from the opposition forces in order to frame the governments and to overthrow them (see Jones, 2009; Sapozhnikova, 2018).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, various government and opposition parties and leaders in Ukraine often used political technologies against their political opponents, including false-flag political parties, newspapers, and advertisements, specifically during election campaigns (see Wilson, 2005). Ukrainian politics has been a high-stakes game because the power it gives allows rent seeking for politicians and oligarchs via the enrichment of themselves and their personal and political networks via corruption, insider dealings and advantages over political and business rivals. Power also grants *de facto* immunity from prosecution.

There are numerous “conspiracy theories” of false-flag operations which are generally promoted by political activists and amateur researchers. For example, they dismiss the overwhelming evidence that 9/11 attacks in the US were organized and carried out by Islamic terrorists and claim without sufficient evidence that these attacks were a false-flag operation.

Similarly, the Ukrainian government and media claimed that separatists in Donbas have routinely used false-flag attacks by shelling cities and towns under their control. Similar allegations about false-flag attacks by Ukrainian forces were often advanced by separatist and Russian media concerning shelling of cities and other areas controlled by the central government. However, studies and OSCE mission reports indicate that

such claims generally either lacked evidence or relied on fake evidence (see Katchanovski, 2016a).

Various separatist and Russian politicians and media claimed that a downing of a Malaysian MH17 passenger plane in Donbas in 2014 was a false-flag attack. However, publicly available evidence, which was reported in the media, the social media, and a trial in the Netherlands, indicates that the plane was shot down with a missile by separatists from a Russian-supplied Buk because it was mistaken for a Ukrainian military plane. Such evidence includes photos and videos of a Buk with anti-aircraft missiles near the time and estimated place of its missile launch and the location of the Buk and launch spot in the separatist-controlled areas, SBU intercepts of phone calls of separatist commanders concerning the Buk and the shot-down plane (see Katchanovski, 2016a; Forthcoming).

There were also numerous claims of false-flag attacks during the Russia-Ukraine war. However, contrary to claims by the Russian Defense Ministry and Donbas separatists, there is no confirmed evidence of false-flag bombings of the Mariupol maternity hospital and the Mariupol theater by the Azov Regiment or other Ukrainian forces. The same concerns claims by the Ukrainian government that the shelling of Donetsk and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant were false flags by the Russian forces. There is no corroborated evidence of systematic false-flag shelling or bombing of civilians by the Russian, separatist, and Ukrainian forces. Similarly, contrary to the Russian government claims of staged killings in Bucha, analysis of UN and Amnesty International reports, forensic expert reports, videos, satellite images, eyewitness reports, media investigative reports, and other sources shows that at least dozen civilians and territorial defense members were summarily executed or shot indiscriminately by individual Russian soldiers or Russian units during the Russian occupation of Bucha and suggests that at least many of several dozen other shot civilians and territorial defense members in Bucha were also victims of such Russian war crimes, while most of about 400 victims were killed by shelling (see Katchanovski, 2022a; Forthcoming).

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