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RUSSIAN OCCUPATION PRACTICES IN CRIMEA AND THE DONBAS

BA Thesis

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ANNOTATSIOON

Alates 2014. aastast on Venemaa poolt okupeeritud Ukraina territooriumeid kirjeldatud kas piirkondliku venemeelsuse või julgeolekust tingitud interventsioonina tulemusena. Need selgitused varjavad sageli neid mehhanisme, mille kaudu okupatsiooni tegelikult teostatakse. Käesolev lõputöö rakendab Pierre Bourdieu *praktikate teooriat*, analüüsides okupatsiooni *kui välja*-keskest protsessi. Krimmi poolsaart ja Donbassi piirkondi uurides väidan, et Venemaa okupatsioonipraktikad hõlmavad *kapitali* (sunnivõimu-, majandus-, poliitilise ja sümboolse-) strateegilist konverteerimist ja ümbersuunamist erinevate väljade vahel. Lisaks, seal kus autonoomsed institutsioonid juba eksisteerivad, nagu Krimmis, toimub okupatsioon juba legitiimsete võimustruktuuride omastamise kaudu. Seal aga, kus selline institutsionaalne kiht puudub, nagu Donbassis, peab Venemaa okupatsiooniks vajalikud institutsioonid ise looma, mille tulemuseks jäävad need struktuurid sõltuvaks välisest sunnist ja Moskva otsesest järelevalvest. Käesolev lõputöö visualiseerib neid protsesse, näidates kuidas konkreetsed toimijad liiguvad etteantud ajavahemikus väljade vahel. Esitatud raamistik uurib okupatsiooni kui võimu loomise praktikat ning selgitab, miks identsed Venemaa strateegiad annavad Ukraina erinevate territooriumite vahel lahknevaid tulemusi.

ABSTRACT

Russia's occupations of Ukrainian territories since 2014 have been characterized as either the result of regional pro-Russian sentiment or security-driven interventions. These explanations often obscure the mechanisms through which occupation is practiced. This thesis applies Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practices* to analyze occupation as a *field-specific* process. Examining the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas regions, I argue that Russian occupation practices involve the strategic conversion and redirection of capital (coercive, economic, political, and symbolic) between distinct fields. Furthermore, where pre-existing autonomous institutions exist, as in Crimea, occupation proceeds through the appropriation of the already-legitimate authority structures. Where no such institutional layer exists, as in Donbas, Russia must manufacture the institutions required for an occupation, resulting in structures that remain dependent on external coercion and Moscow's direct supervisory control. This thesis also visualizes these processes by showing how specific actors move between fields in a given timeframe. The given framework studies occupation as a practice of authority-making and explains why identical Russian strategies produce divergent outcomes across Ukrainian territories.

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the 26th of February 2022 an article was published on the Russian state-owned news agency RIA Novosti titled “*The beginning of Russia and the new world*”. This editorial by Petr Akopov was seemingly published by accident, as it was written from a perspective where Russia had already occupied Ukraine in 3 days. The article announces the restoration of Russian unity, which was ‘broken’ in 1991, by saying: “*Russia is restoring its historical fullness, gathering the Russian world, the Russian people together ...*” (Akopov 2022). Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine has made it a special case of being occupied on a larger scale (in both territory taken and resources spent) than any other post-soviet state. Based on this, it can be assumed that the occupation of Ukrainian territories represents the most sustained effort to translate the “*Russian world*” into a reality. The occupied territories of Ukraine also offer a uniquely valuable lens through which to examine how Russia employs occupation, annexation, and subjugation as instruments of ideology.

Direct Russian military involvement in Ukraine can be attributed to the actions of the Donbas based, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich. As president, he consolidated most of Ukrainian state power around himself and his inner circle. Through corruption he funneled more than \$70 billion to his and his family’s personal accounts, leaving the country on the verge of default. His business dealings and general conspiring with Russia undermined the promises of westward development and culminated in Ukraine’s withdrawal from negotiations to create a free economic zone with the EU. This was the final straw that, for the third time since independence, brought the people of Ukraine to the Kyiv Independence Square (or locally know as Maidan). Protestors set up camp, which throughout the next 3 months became a brutal battleground between the citizens and the state. In the end more than a 100 people would be killed. The events of the third Maidan saw international attention and brought Yanukovich’s government under heavy criticism. Following threats of sanctions, an uncooperative parliament and the failure of his crackdown operation, Yanukovich fled the country on February 21st, 2014 (Plokyh 2015. 140-142).

A few days before his departure Yanukovich had requested Russian military assistance in restoring order and to offer him protection. As a result, between February 22. and 23., a battalion of Russian Spetsnaz and special airborne units were airlifted to strategic locations across the strait separating mainland Ukraine from Crimea. A day later the 24th, Russian marines departed in APCs from the Sevastopol naval base, that Russia had been leasing from

Ukraine since the late 90s. They proceeded to storm the city and install a local Russian citizen as the new mayor. Over the next 14 days, Russia funneled more troops, machinery and supply to the peninsula and continued to occupy major settlements and strategic locations. Russia also organized self-defense militias and dressed their military in the uniforms of the local police and military to get better control over the population (Kofman, et al. 2017. 9-11). On the 16th of March, the Russian federation held a disingenuous referendum resulting in an alleged 97% of the peninsula supporting separation from Ukraine. This was widely condemned by the international community as illegitimate and conducted under conditions of military occupation. Two days later, Putin signed a treaty officially incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation (UN General Assembly 2014).

At the same time, counter-protests in response to the 3rd Maidan spread across the country, especially in the east and south. These protestors were largely pro-Russian and regarded the recent events in Kyiv as a coup by western forces. This was a narrative largely perpetuated by local Russian language media, which was popular in region (Plokhly 2015, 142-43). With the quick and deceitful fall of Crimea, local pro-Russian groups and organizations were encouraged to take similar separatist action in the Donbas. This resulted in proclamations of ‘people’s mayors’ and ‘people’s governors’ especially across the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Kofman, et. al 2017, p. 33). These regions had seen large public support for joining Russia in the late 90's (around 60-80%), but the local public was significantly less interest to do the same in 2014 (around 20-30%) (Kravets 2022). At first the actions of the separatists were peaceful, but by April of 2014 the conflict had grown violent. The separatists captured public buildings and offices and declared the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR/LPR). The following war in the Donbas saw the estimated death of 14 000 and the wounding of more than 37 000 civilians (International Crisis Group 2022; OHCHR 2022).

The political and military crisis born of the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent armed conflict in the Donbas, were detrimental to Ukrainian self-determination and territorial sovereignty, as shown by the escalation of the crisis into a full-scale invasion in 2022. Three days before the invasion, Russia officially recognized the independence of the DPR & LPR and on the 24th of February 2022, Vladimir Putin specifically references the Crimea and Donbas as underlying reasons for the “Special Military Operation” (SMO), saying: *“They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action.”*

The last 4 years of fighting have seen many phases and developments in tactics and strategy. What largely hasn't changed is the area that Russia has come to occupy. In terms of combined occupied territory (including the Crimean Peninsula, Donbas separatist Republics and post-2022 'new territories') Russia has captured around 20% of Ukraine and conquered the homes of 6.3 million people, 2.9 million of whom have fled, leaving an approximate 3.5 million Ukrainians stuck living under occupation (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2024). Some of these people have lived under these conditions for more than a decade and might be quite used to it, while others will now be forever traumatized by the consequences of war and occupation. What all these people do share, is that they all live, either directly or indirectly, under the same authoritarian state.

This thesis examines the mechanisms that have been used to establish and form these occupations, or in other words the *occupation practices* that Russia uses. However, it couldn't be assumed that these practices operate similarly across the different territories of occupied Ukraine. For example, it would be unreasonable to expect to see the same policies or narratives used in the occupations of Crimea, where annexation was relatively quick and bloodless, and in Mariupol, which was occupied only after being subjected to a ruthless siege that effectively razed the city to the ground. For this reason, to truly understand how Russia practices occupation in Ukraine, a comparison should be drawn between at least 2 regions to highlight some of these differences.

With all this in mind, two research questions will be proposed:

"What practices did Russia use to occupy the territories of Crimea and the Donbas"

And the following sub-question:

"How do the mentioned occupied territories differ regarding the use of region-specific practices?"

For these research questions, the thesis at hand will provide a framework by employing Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practices*. Bourdieu was a French sociologist and philosopher, whose theories mainly concerned with the manifestation of human autonomy and agency. In essence, practice theory argues that social life is produced through the interaction of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. Habitus refers to the deeply rooted dispositions, habits, and perceptions that an individual, or *actor*, acquires throughout their life. Habitus then unconsciously inclines their actions and interpretations in one way or another. Actors operate and interact within fields, or structured arenas of social competition. Fields are centered around, and delimited by, a specific capital that actors struggle for. This framework will be used to construct a *field-specific*

analysis of the two of the occupied territories, thus providing an overview of how key people and their actions directly affected the structure or condition of the surrounding occupation.

To explain why this specific approach has been chosen, two important issues are presented that stand out in the study of both Ukraine and active occupations in general. These issues, in turn, are built a theoretical overview of both general occupation study and the literature on occupied Ukraine since 2014.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

In strictly legal terms, an occupation occurs when a territory is “*actually placed under the authority of the hostile army*” and extends to the area where “*such authority has been established and can be exercised*” (Hague Convention IV 1907, Art. 42). Occupations have traditionally been viewed as a temporary condition, where an authority holds no legitimate sovereignty, but is nevertheless the de facto powerholder. Occupying forces have also been held responsible for the local population, the ousted government, and for the management of civil order (Benvenisti 2012, 1-2, 6). Historically, occupations have been regarded as the by-product of military action but more recently can also be seen as the result of armistice or peace (Benvenisti, 2012 p. 3). The international law of occupation mainly holds the goal of regulating: “*the inter-relationships between the occupying force, the ousted government, and the local inhabitants for the duration of the occupation*” (Benvenisti, 2012 p. 6). This regulation is based on some of the most notable legal documents on occupations from the 20th century, including:

(1) The 1907 Hague Regulation which establishes that an occupying power must ensure public safety and respect for local laws. Additionally, an occupation is seen a temporary situation and does not grant the occupier sovereignty over their occupied territory (OHCHR 2017, p. 3) It also established the assumption that an occupying power would have a duty to establish direct governance (not proxy), which was based not a legal right, but on the fact of occupation.

(2) The Fourth Geneva Convention, which provides three additional details that are common for occupations: the presence of foreign forces, inability of the legitimate government to exercise authority, and the occupying power's capacity to exercise effective control (ICRC, 1949, art. 64). The protocols also prohibit the forceful transfer and deportation of occupied people unless unavoidable due to threat to life. Occupying powers are also expected to provide food, medicine and public health services and allow for the continued operation of the local

legal frameworks (ICRC 2025).

(3) The 1977 additional protocol to the Geneva Convention adds to the framework under which “civil defense” forces (including emergency aid, rescue, firefighting, essential repairs, etc) should be allowed to work. This includes the prohibition of occupying force from restricting civil defense and use of their ‘material’ and buildings for their own use (Additional Protocol I, 1977).

Military conflicts, that have resulted in the capture of territory, have often tried to avoid the label of an occupation, most likely due to its complicated and antagonistic nature. Instead, there has been preference for direct annexations, puppet/satellite states or from refraining to form any substantial forms of governance at all (Benvenisti, 2012 pp. 11-12). This has also brought on criticism from academics and experts, who criticize the uncertainty of occupation definition, with even the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC 2012) having said: “*Recent occupations have highlighted how difficult it can be to determine when an occupation begins and ends as well as to identify with certainty the legal framework governing the use of force in occupied territory.*”

Similar actions of deflections could also be seen in Russia’s case. Russia often tries to project narratives and ideas that paint the picture where they are seen as ‘liberators’, who are helping ‘subjugated people’ by ‘denazifying’ a country, led by an ‘western puppet’. These manipulative narratives, along with the attempts of the occupied territories to organize semi-legitimate institutions could be regarded, in some way or another, as an attempt at fostering a better image to an otherwise hostile attack. Also, in Russia’s case (as for most occupations), the regard for the mentioned laws and protocols has been low. There have been deportation of Ukrainian civilians, indiscriminate arrests and seizures of property, sexual violence, the separation of children from families and their transfer to Russian, forced conscription and more (Schmitt 2022, OHCHR 2022).

In theory terms, realists would argue that occupations are the result of larger international conflicts that happened due to states concerns over security. David M. Edelstein's occupation theory sits squarely within this realist tradition, arguing that the “*threat environments*” surrounding occupations, are the main source that determine their outcome. Edelstein defines threat environments as a combination of both: “*external threats and internal threats that may challenge the security, survival, and integrity of an occupied territory*” (Edelstein 2008, 22). Based on this assumption, he states that since 1815, there have been twenty-six completed military occupations, but only seven have succeeded (Edelstein 2008, 2). This yields a success

rate of merely 27%, with 54% failures and 19% mixed outcomes (Edelstein 2008, 9). Critically, six of the seven successes cluster around the immediate post-World War II period, with the sole exception being the allied occupation of France after the Napoleonic Wars in 1815–18 (Edelstein 2008, 9). These two findings (the overall trend of failure and the clustering of success around a single period) frame the book's inquiry. Occupation according to him: *"cannot be explained by looking only at the choices made by the policymaker"* but rather based on the surrounding *"structural context of an occupation, including threats to the occupied territory"* (Edelstein 2008, 166). Furthermore, the 'success' of an occupation also requires a more in-depth analysis than just the measurement of liberal values, such as democratization, legitimacy or resource distribution, but by the structural distribution of external threats (Edelstein 2008, 13-14). Edelstein's 'success' is thus judged by whether the occupying power can create conditions that guarantee a safe threat environment, or more specifically they must leave behind *"a stable, indigenous government,"* and the post-occupation state must be *"guaranteed of its security and nonthreatening to others"* (Edelstein 2008, 7, 89). For this, the occupiers must convince the population to *"forestall its demands for sovereignty and, not necessarily welcome, but tolerate - the occupation"*. This is because if the population concludes it would rather govern itself *"it will resist the occupation and make the accomplishment of occupation goals more difficult"*. (Edelstein, 2008, p. 12). Edelstein offers a few grand strategies through which occupations might find such 'success'.

Before diving into details, the author establishes that when an oppressed population feels threatened by a third-party state, then it will welcome an occupying power who is *"both willing and able to protect it from that threat."* In Edelstein's view, this should affect the occupier positively, in allowing them to: *"rebuild political and economic institutions within the occupied country and create conditions conducive to a successful withdrawal"* (Edelstein, 2008, p. 23).

Furthermore, the book offers three general strategies that occupier has available them. Firstly, accommodation attempts to satisfy nationalist demands by incorporating local elites into occupied governance. Successful accommodation allies with local elites who share similar goals to the occupier and have the potential to control the occupied population (Edelstein, 2008, pp. 49-50). Secondly, inducement or the purchasing of obedience through material means, investments, pensions, direct pay, etc. This is often a necessary strategy to implement for an occupation to succeed, but as Edelstein mentions: *"Inducement alone cannot solve the political problem of nationalism that is at the heart of the difficulty of occupying another society"* (Edelstein, 2008, p. 52). Thirdly, coercion which includes the use of military and

security forces to intimidate or otherwise bully the occupied people into submission. This violence can take many forms but have the same goal of destroying any sort of opposition (Edelstein, 2008, pp. 53-54)

Edelstein's book draws several broad conclusions about the nature of occupations. Mainly he warns that states should hesitate to use military force, in order to intervene in foreign countries. Occupation, according to him, is "*among the most difficult tasks of statecraft*" and should be left as "*an option of last resort*" (Edelstein, 2008, p. 169). The author believes that neither more planning nor more resources can substitute for favorable occupation conditions and therefore, policymakers should assess the threat environment before undertaking occupation. However, the threat environment is arguably far easier to identify retrospectively than prospectively. Edelstein also argues that historically, when a commonly perceived external threat exists, occupation succeeds and when it does not, occupation fails. However, in the case of Ukraine, it could be argued that under this framework, the greatest external threat to the now occupied regions has always been Russia. Another limiting factor in Edelstein's framework is the absence of discussion on the culture and identity politics. Edelstein's analysis operates on historic precedent and state interest, thus providing an important framework on how occupations generally happen. What is missing is the internal aspect, or how occupying powers attempt to reshape the identity, thinking and the wider 'symbolic order' of an occupied society: languages, educational systems, cultural institutions, public monuments, street names, etc. All these policies, political mechanisms and other measures also contribute to a wider internal understanding of an occupation and its nature; thus, they should be considered equally as important in study as the external threats.

2.1. Literature review

The research on Russia's occupied Ukraine can be characterized by a differentiation in quantity and quality across territories.

Crimea, due of its rapid and legally discrete annexation in March 2014, attracted immediate and sustained academic attention. The seizure of the Peninsula was territorially bounded, institutionally 'legible', and had a pre-existing body of studies. For example, published in 2007, Sasse's *The Crimea Question* gives a fundamental overview of Crimean autonomy formation, the separatist movements in the early 1990s and the dynamics between Crimea and Kyiv.

The Donbas, by contrast, has remained comparatively neglected. For example, Guariglia et al. (2025), employing a difference-in-differences estimator on a sample of

approximately half a million journal articles collected from Scopus, demonstrate that researchers affiliated with institutions in the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk experienced a significant decline in both the quantity and quality of their academic output after 2014. Researchers based in annexed Crimea on the other hand actually increased their publication volume. The authors attribute this to increased funding channeled by Russian authorities toward Crimean institutions. The consequence of this for the broader field have been, that Crimea has come to function as the default empirical referent for studies of Russian occupation, while the Donbas (and, by extension, the post-2022 occupied territories) remain analytically underdeveloped.

Regarding more academically valid sources, the strongest cluster of peer-reviewed studies seems to be the concerned with identity formation and political attitudes.

A 2018 survey conducted across the divided Donbas in December 2016, covering the Kyiv-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the DNR/LNR, the internally displaced within Ukraine, and those who had fled to Russia (Sasse & Lackner 2018, 154). The survey set out to examine how armed conflict and forced displacement affect political identity formation and change. Specifically, it sought to test the widely assumed "*polarization hypothesis*," or the idea that war inevitably consolidates and simplifies identities along ethnic or linguistic lines. The study found that the conflict did not uniformly collapse identities into singular ethnic categories. Among the events of 2013–2016, 24.1% of respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas reported their identification as Ukrainian citizens to have strengthened, with 6.4% describing it as weakened and 69.5% as unchanged (Sasse & Lackner 2018, 145). By contrast only 8% of respondents in the DNR/LNR felt more like Ukrainian citizens, compared to 54% feeling less like Ukrainian citizens (Sasse & Lackner 2018, 146; 150). Thus, the experience of war does not only streamline identities, but can maintain or even reinforce mixed identities.

Similarly, a 2019 study aimed to examine how five years of war had reshaped political identity, geopolitical orientations, and conflict settlement preferences among residents of the government-controlled areas (GCA) of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts found that military intervention into Ukraine only strengthened the Ukrainian civic nation (Haran, et. al. 2019, 7, 16-18). On the question of conflict resolution, the authors found that there was hope for a diplomatic solution and readiness for some compromises, but reintegration of the occupied territories, without any federalization of Ukraine, was essential (Haran, et. al. 2019, p. 18).

A more recent article explores the history of the Donbas through the lens of post-colonialization, which has so-far been rare as the Soviet Union was rather seen as an occupying

force as opposed to a colonial one. The author however claim, that recent actions by Russia: “... reveal a striking parallel with the Western colonial powers” with Russia trying to implement a stronger authority over the culture and identity for the people in the territories belonging to the former Soviet Union and Russian Empire (Babenko 2025, 1247-48). Building on previous research, the article explains how expansionist and colonial ideas have shown up in both Russian scholars and academia, as well as in the political sphere. The author explains how the prevalence of Russian cultural dominance is directly rooted in historical promotion of the Russian language, the suppression of local political structures and promotion of Russian ones, along with the limitation of movement in the Ukrainian territory (Babenko 2025, pp. 1248-49)

Empirical research regarding the occupied territories has been more common but more unconsolidated. For example, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) has published a daily update of the latest developments in Russia’s offensive campaign. In April 2024, ISW also launched bi-weekly update into Russian occupation efforts. The circumstances brought forward by the ISW oversee a largely variety of fields relevant to the occupation.¹ Nevertheless these analyses are important in providing a consistent overview of the occupation in Ukraine (ISW 2026). A more detailed ISW study from 2024 also mentions: passportization, weaponization of census data, demographic alterations, sociocultural and linguistic manipulation as occupations strategies used in the Crimea and the Donbas. The report also asserts that the “*strategy of forced depopulation and repopulation*” *currently being used in occupied Ukraine*,” amounts to a “...wider deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign”. This in turn, is isolating these regions even further from the rest of Ukraine (Hird 2024, p. 16).

Similar overviews of policies and strategies is presented by Amnesty Internationals (2024) ” *Russia/Ukraine: 10 Years of Occupation in Crimea.*”. This research briefing comprises ten years of Amnesty International's documentation of conditions in Russian-occupied Crimea. The study is based on trips conducted to occupied territories when access was still possible, testimonies from key informants and human rights defenders, along with analysis of reports by the OHCHR, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights,

¹ The biweekly “Russian Occupation Update” consists of updates on 9 fields: Deportation and Forcible Transfer of Ukrainian Citizens, Including Children, Sociocultural Control, Militarization of Occupied Areas, Administrative and Bureaucratic Control, Occupation Administration Mismanagement and Internal Dynamics, Physical and Legal Repressions, Economic and Financial Control, Information Space Control and Infrastructure and Development Projects. Depending on findings/developments, most updates produce long discussions or important findings in some fields, while reporting “nothing significant in others. See more [ISW](#).

and other Ukrainian civil society organizations. The report is structured around six thematic domains that demonstrate Russia's attempts at changing the local identity of the occupied territories arguing that the occupying power has "*continuously and flagrantly violated IHL, and some of its actions may amount to war crimes*" (Amnesty International 2024, p. 4).

Some more detailed research into these subjects reveal how these policies work in detail. For example, forced passportization, or the process of imposing Russian citizenship on occupied people, forces Ukrainian citizens to collaborate with the Russians, as refusing to do so may result in: "*...property right loss, unemployment, deprivation of social benefits and medical care, or even deportation and imprisonment...*" (Bulyk, et. al 2025, pp. 133-134, 137). Passportization itself has been a part of a larger legal problem surrounding citizenship in occupied territories.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Ukraine adopted a *jus domicile* (established based on permanent residency to the territory) definition of citizenship and with the 1991 Citizenship Law, all people permanently residing in the country became Ukrainian citizens. Following this initial population, all future citizenship would be determined under *jus sanguinis* (established based on decent) (Ganohariti & Burkhardt 2025, 1). After the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas, Russia activated large scale naturalization programs in the region. For example, immediately after the annexation, Russia considered all children born under Russian-occupied Crimea as its citizens. The same was done in September in the other occupied territories (Ganohariti & Burkhardt 2025, 4). There is also difficulty determining if people were forced to become citizens or if they were automatically assigned Russian citizenship. From the start of 2025, Ukrainians living in occupied territories without a Russian passport are treated as foreigners, thus: "*... losing access to basic payments, social and administrative services, and risking deportation*" (Ganohariti & Burkhardt 2025, 8). Before January of 2026, Ukraine did not allow for dual citizenship which has meant that a lot of people living in occupied territories have had to choose between their nationality or their livelihood.

In addition to passportization, there has been criticism regarding Ukrainian legal vagueness around general acts of collaboration in the occupied areas. After the full-scale invasion the Ukrainian Rada criminalized a wide range of collaborative acts, leading directly to the initiation of 9,179 criminal proceeding as of June 2024. The uncertain definitions regarding collaborationism in the national legislative process: "*particularly in defining its subjects forms and levels of accountability*", have now been turned against Ukraine itself. Namely, Russian propaganda has used this for its advantage and begun spreading a sense of "*no return*" in the occupied peoples. This is done by distributing manipulative information

about no longer being able to return to Ukraine due to already living and coexisting/cooperating with occupying forces (Bulyk, et. al 2025, 137-138).

2.2. Research method

On this basis, two issues can be outlined that directly affect the study of occupied Ukraine and, in a sense, active occupations as a whole.

First, the subject under study is a currently ongoing event. Therefore, the information regarding it is also to a certain extent: limited, unavailable or unreliable. Research suffers from a severe access and data gathering problem, which is inherent to studying an active occupation during an ongoing war. The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues were among the first organizations to be denied access after 2014 (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 5). Since then, further restrictions have made entry for scholars even more difficult. Particularly, conducting surveys or interview local persons of interest is often impossible without mediation by either Russian occupation authorities or by Ukrainian intelligence services on the other side (with some exceptions²). Both groups have obvious interests in shaping what and how things are reported. For example, Daly (2025) interviewed two researchers for his article regarding Russian disinformation and distrust around the study of Russian supply chains. The researchers had previously analyzed different food, energy and critical-material supply disruptions after the start of the full-scale invasion. The interviewer noted that due to the substantial disinformation produced by Russian counterintelligence and the reluctance by the Ukrainian authorities to disclose vulnerabilities, researchers frequently *"don't know what data is true"*. In addition, Guariglia et al. (2025) have demonstrated that a significant amount of recent survey research regarding the invasion has been conducted through Russian-controlled academic institutions that promote Russian-language journals, with lower foreign accessibility and enforced supervision. In light of this, the empirical foundation for a study of an active occupation must largely be assembled from previous studies, indirect sources, survivors testimony, satellite imagery, open-source investigations, social media analysis, data from civil society organizations, and the limited quantitative material release by occupying authority, such as: census figures, passportization

² An interesting example of a more-or-less objective journalistic insight into the everyday lives of Russian invaders of is provided by the documentary ["Russians at War" \(2026\)](#). The film is shot mostly by hand-held camera and follows the director Anastasia Trofimova's travels to the front line in Ukraine. There, she documents honest views from soldiers regarding the war and Russian ideology at large. The story is also interesting in a Bourdieusian sense, as through the film the viewer can observe her progressively adapt to the surrounding military struggle or become an actor on a field.

statistics, legislative documents, official statement's, etc. The reliability of these sources is however contested and subsequently, before employing these sources, they should be thoroughly scrutinized.

Secondly, and most consequentially for the purposes of this thesis, the existing research has no consolidated theoretical framework. Occupation study so far has shown many different options for both theoretical and practical approaches. Traditional theories can provide a reasonable argument for why Russia decided to target Ukraine. However, both realism and constructivism, despite their opposing theoretical foundations, tend to share the tendency to assume that similar conditions will generate broadly similar outcomes. Hence why the use of these theories will often produce basic explanations for the occupation of Ukraine, such as 'power balancing' or 'an enraged pro-Russian minority'. At the same time though, the occupations in Crimea and in Donbas show notable differences in their content (territorial control, legitimacy, pre-existing conditions, administrative structures, policies, demographic engineering, etc.). Studies on these regions have so far been concerned with varying distinct cases affected by the environment of the occupation. Similarly common are surveys analyzing how occupied people sense their new environment and the effect it has had on them. What is missing is a framework that can provide the groundwork for analyzing any given distinct case or given environment..

To overcome these problems, this thesis will employ a framework based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practices. Pouliot's and Mérand's (2013, p. 25) application of Bourdieu's concept to IR offer an interesting research method for studying change in social spaces. They argue that:

"Bourdieu's obsession with empirical work, and resolute opposite on to armchair theorizing, justifies in our view putting him in conversation with "mainstream" approaches, with which he shared a number of common research questions, namely the sources of cohesion, conflict, power, and domination. For him, there is no contradiction between juggling with data, on the one hand, and criticizing society, on the other."

First, Bourdieu's theory of practices judges the assumption that people act based on conscious reasoning, explicit norms, or deliberate strategy. In his view, social action rather flows from practical sense, habit, and unreflective know-how. Bourdieu described human action as a combination of both long-lasting tendencies that formed through past experiences (or *habitus*) and of structured social spaces where people exist in the moment (or *fields*). This was theorized by Bourdieu in regard to the third "*Great Debate*", which in the late 1980s, criticized the understanding that states and their actions could be studied by methods similar to those

employed in the natural sciences, and that this study could somehow lead to “*universal truths*” (Pouliot’s and Mérand 2013, p. 26).

Habitus comprises of the fundamental guiding principles which does not directly produce but “*incline*” the actor one action, or another. This inclination shows how people think ‘in the context of the game’ based on their “*incorporated history*” and surroundings. Habitus is “*transposable*”, meaning the knowledge one gathers in one field can be directly used in another (for example a politician who has previously held work in local government would be expected to be more adept in a position of higher government) (Pouliot & Mérand 2013, 29).

Fields, on the other hand, require three components: (1) power relations, which similar to Marxism, assumes that positions are formed by each actor’s respective historic capital accumulation. (2) objects of struggle, or the stakes that actors hold and the goals they struggle for. These are the main substances that delimits fields. In the political field, the stake is the power over instruments to manipulate the social order (such as the monopoly of violence, ability to establish legislation, etc). In the economic field, the stake is material accumulation. In the academic field, the stake is intellectual prestige or influence. These are different struggles, and it is the specificity of the struggle that constitutes the field as a distinct arena. (3) Deriving directly from the previous point, established rules that are taken for granted within the field, or *doxa*. This includes the social norms and internal logic that making each field “*autonomous*. ” (Pouliot & Mérand 2013, p. 30).

Fields are centered around specific capital, that actors accumulate, invest, and trade. Not to be confused with Marxism, capital for Bourdieu is quite abstract and represents “*the set of actually usable resources and powers*” (Bourdieu 1984, 108). Capital is thus a social currency defined by what actors find usable in each given struggle. It is a resource that can be *deployed* to promote one’s positions in one’s field. The exchange of capital is a ‘game’ over field domination. This explains why economic capital is dominant over cultural capital. It’s not because money is inherently more ‘real’ than knowledge, but because the holders of economic capital have, throughout historic struggle, won the power to establish the exchange rate in their favor. Holders of economic capital have ‘changed the rules of the game’ by restructuring institutions in their favor (inheritance law, corporate structures, property rights, etc.) that directly allow exchange of capital for benefits. Cultural capital on the other hand, requires the mediation of the educational system and is therefore more precarious. (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012,. 36; Bourdieu 198, 116, 120).

Based on capital, the positions actors hold on a field are different and unequal. They come together to create a “*hierarchy of domination*.” This is a form of ‘social topography’, which shows how positions centered around a specific capital might change with the actors participating in it, thereby offering a unique visualization of change in a given social struggle.

What this practice theory thus provides is a means of moving beyond the level-of-analysis problem, since for Bourdieu the field (whether local, national, international, or functional) is always the appropriate level of analysis (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, p. 35).

In the case of this thesis, a distinct form of capital should be mentioned. This is the capacity to exercise legitimate authority or to issue commands that are obeyed, not because the recipient fears punishment but, because the authority behind the command is recognized as rightful. This is what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital. This capital does not sit alongside others like economic, cultural or social. Rather, it is a ‘condition’ that actors can reach, when the capital they hold is considered legitimate by those who are affected by it. (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 39). This condition is based on the doxa of the field, and the fact that actors agree on some formal rules or understandings in each struggle. Bourdieu defines this state as “*an unspoken submission to everyday life*” (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 38) The state, Bourdieu argues, is the holder “*par excellence*” of symbolic power, because it possesses the power of nomination (appointing officials), codifying (defining the policy of the country) and engaging in international relations (declaring war). Since these actions are considered legitimate or “*naturalized*” in the eyes of the public, the state could be considered the main holder of symbolic capital. (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 39).

Symbolic capital is produced slowly through the sustained process of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence. Though this, relations of domination are misrecognized as relations of legitimate order by those who are subject to them (Pouliot & Mérand 2012, 39). Symbolic violence is not a metaphor for physical violence but rather a distinct mechanism that operates through *habitus*. (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 39–40). Therefore, when the state issues a passport, certifies marriage, or adjudicates a legal dispute, it performs an act of symbolic violence by establishing its power to conduct a certain action. If the action is accepted as legitimate (not because the citizen has reflected on the idea of the state’s right to classify, but because due to long exposure to state institutions, they have internalized the state’s power in their habitus) it means that the capital the state holds is symbolic. In this way, “power over”

and “power to” are basically the same thing. For Bourdieu, symbolic power function as systems of domination (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 38-39).

In the context of IR, the authors argue that the space of global politics can be conceived as a “*field of forces*”. This is similar to state fields in the sense that it is a struggle, consisting of: “*a set of objective power relations imposed on all those who enter this field*” (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 36). Within the field of forces, the state occupies a privileged position as the holder of a form of “*meta-capital*”, deriving from the historical accumulation of coercive, political, and economic capital and from the state's capacity to organize multiple fields simultaneously. Thus, the state is not a regular field, but a “... *field of institutionalized power that articulates relations between other fields*” (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 36). The authors argue that Bourdieu’s framework allows to open the “*black box of the state*” to better understand what and who is really making decisions. (Pouliot & Mérand, 2012, 37).

Regarding the two established problems, I find that practice theory offers a framework which allows to better visualize how a social struggle, like an occupation, occurs. As the authors argue: *Bourdieu’s theory of practice differs considerably from most IR theories because it rejects the very notion of distinct modes of action. For Bourdieu, social action is always field specific*” (Pouliot & Mérand 2013, 32). This field specific analysis also doesn’t need to rely only on empirical data (like surveys), rather focusing on actors and their consequences: “*The researcher is not the one who determines which resources are most important and generate positions; these resources are sources of power precisely because they are recognized as such within the social field*” (Pouliot’s and Mérand 2013, 33). Applying this “*relational ontology*” can also explain why actors pursue certain goals or act differently depending on their surroundings and, on how different struggles structure these goals (Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 34).

Applying practice theory on the Russian occupation of Ukraine would firstly assume that each region is a mix of different fields with different internal logics, different pre-existing conditions, and different degrees of authority towards one another. These fields overlap, compete and dominate each other (see Map 1.).

The given illustrative map is simple, but it effectively visualizes Bourdieu’s theories in IR. In the given map, the Ukrainian state field would contain all the potential fields that make up the state. One of these abstract fields might take the form of a Kyiv political field. As Kauppi

(2003, 785) has shown in the case MEPs traveling to the EU Parliament: “*spending time in Brussels changes the political habitus of politicians.*” The state field itself is positioned inside the field of force. The Russian invasion, conflict zone and occupation fields all represent struggles that the Russian invasion has resulted in. The *conflict zone fields* would be centered around a coercive capital, whereas the *Russian invasion fields* might inhibit capitals of other nature (financial, political, etc.). Each of the occupied regions can be seen as combinations of many different fields (academic, cultural administrative symbolic financial, etc) that have been restructured and taken over by trading the mentioned coercive and supporting Russian capital.

Based on this framework, the overarching argument of this thesis would thus be that ‘occupation practices’ (or the process of occupying), include the trading of different forms of capital between different fields and restructuring the fields that invading actors most value, with the aim of promoting their positions as occupiers. From this, we can expect that the actions of the occupier are not uniform, but dependent on pre-existing field conditions of each targeted territory. This research method would follow Steinmetz’s (2008, p. 591) study on colonial states as social fields, which argues that inter-colonial policies are best viewed by: “*theorizing the colonial state as a semi-autonomous field with its own specific form of symbolic capital, its own specific stakes of competition.*” A social struggle in these fields is primarily about the preservation or disruption of the existing distribution of capital: or who holds it, how much of it, and on what basis it is allocated. These struggles can go beyond redistribution and redefine what counts as capital in the first place or, and thus, what the field is. Therefore, for the thesis at hand, this will mean establishing a field and studying its capital, composition and actors before and after the intervention of occupiers. This analytical priority also follows directly from Pouliot and Mérand's (2012, p. 33) observation that positions within a field can only be understood in relation to one another.

For the Crimean Peninsula, an administrative field is constructed to show how the preexisting condition of the Autonomous republic allows allowed for arguably the most stable Russian occupation. For Donbas, a more complex visualization is presented which demonstrates how Russia had to use significantly more resources on the region, to further its occupation.

3. THE CRIMEA

The Crimean Peninsula covers an area of approximately 27,000 km². The largest cities located there are Sevastopol, Simferopol, Yevpatoria, Kerch, and Yalta. Crimea had formally become

a part of Ukraine in 1954 when, celebrating the “*eternal friendship of the two East Slavic peoples*,” Khrushchev transferred the peninsula to Ukraine (Ploky 2015, 283–284). In contrast to the controversial claim that he simply ‘gave away’ Crimea, Sasse (2007 118–119) argues that the transfer took place just after Stalin’s death, during a period when Khrushchev’s grasp of the Union was still uncertain: “... *it seems unlikely that any decision, including the transfer of Crimea, was made regardless of the cutthroat power struggle within the political elite*” (Sasse 2007, 119). Among other attempts to consolidate his position, such as allowing Ukraine to have its own army and a seat at the UN, the transfer was a political move to secure the support of the Ukrainian Communist Party in the ongoing succession struggle.

The composition of the peninsula’s population underwent extensive transformations over the course of the twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, Crimean Tatars made up an estimated 34% of the peninsula’s population, while Ukrainians and Russians (no distinction was made in ethnicity until 1921) comprised 45.3% (Sasse 2007, 275). Based on the false allegation that they had aided German forces during the Second World War, Stalin targeted the Crimean Tatars as a whole, resulting in the deportation of the entire ethnicity in May 1944 (Sasse 2007, 6). Simultaneously, a Soviet resettlement campaign brought in families from across the Union. Between 1954 and 1960, an estimated 31,392 families were resettled to the peninsula, 5,345 of whom left between 1955 and 1958 due to poor conditions. The 1959 and 1970 census data showed that the increase in Russian and Ukrainian settlers was proportionally the same (Sasse 2007, 121). By 1979, Russians made up 68.4% of the population, Ukrainians 25.6%, and Crimean Tatars just 0.3%. By the 2001 census, the Russian and Ukrainian shares had stayed relatively same, with 58.5% and 24.4% respectively, while the Crimean Tatars, who had begun returning from exile during the late Soviet period, had risen to 12.1% (Sasse 2007, 275).

The diverse demographic composition of the Crimean Peninsula gave rise to questions of autonomy well before the fall of the USSR. In June 1991, while the Union still existed, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was established inside the Ukrainian SSR. This was a strategy by the local Communist elite to allow for a quick exit from Ukraine in the larger environment of the crumbling Union: “... *an ASSR status promised not only to contain the uncertainty over the region’s future within an independent Ukrainian state, but would also pre-empt the Crimean Tatars’ exclusivist ethnoterritorial demands*” (Sasse 2007, 133–134).

Fearing escalation, Kyiv responded quickly by affirming Crimea's ASSR status, but situating it within the Ukrainian SSR rather than the USSR (Sasse 2007, 138). When Ukraine declared independence in 1991, Crimea was administratively in a state of limbo. Local organizations emerged that supported restoring the peninsula's autonomous status or leaving Ukraine entirely (Sasse 2007, 140). As Sasse (2007, 143) observes: "*Thus, the claims for autonomy, sovereignty, independence, and closer links with Russia were rooted in a regional political identity that was not exclusively defined in ethnic terms.*" The territory was linked instead by a shared connection to the Soviet legacy and by the Russian language, which functioned as the majority language on the peninsula.

No agreement was reached on how to organize this regional difference within the new Ukrainian state. In the early 1990s, the local rhetoric of autonomy was "*hijacked*" by radical nationalists who, according to Sasse (2007, 144): "*tapped into ethnoterritorial, cultural, and historical memories.*" In Bourdieusian terms, this represented an attempt to convert the cultural and social capital of a regional identity into institutional authority, a strategy oriented toward 'field exit' from Ukraine, rather than position improvement within the existing state field. The separatist movement peaked in 1994 with the election of Yuriy Meshkov as President of Crimea, who won 72% of the vote in the presidential election. In the separate parliamentary elections, Meshkov's Russia Bloc won approximately 67% of the vote (Sasse 2007, 159, 163). This accumulation of capital across both the executive and legislative fields represented the peak of the separatist institutional power in the 90s. Meshkov's political term was however filled with strategic errors, which allowed Kyiv to slowly re-establish itself in the local institutions and root out separatist sentiments (Sasse 2007, 170). By the second half of the 1990s, the dominant strategy of the nationalists had shifted from field exit to position improvement. Separatism was replaced with public demands for a strong, autonomous region inside the Ukrainian state, which for the remaining radical nationalists represented the most efficient option to re-establish closer connections with Moscow (Sasse 2007, 185).

Following negotiations with the Ukrainian government, the Verkhovna Rada granted Crimea special autonomy status inside the Ukrainian state in December 1998, establishing the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Sasse, 2007, pp. 129–130). Sevastopol, separately, was granted special status equivalent to an oblast, akin to Kyiv's status, as the city hosted the strategically important Russian Black Sea Fleet base. Sevastopol also represented an important historic landmark in both Russian and Soviet historical consciousness. The city was besieged twice, once during the Crimean War and again during the Second World War, and this dual siege made the city a myth that became "*the cornerstone of all Russian claims to the Crimea*

and Sevastopol” (Sasse 2007, pp. 70–71) These post-Soviet and post-imperialist narratives regarding Sevastopol and Crimea as a whole remained prominent after Ukrainian independence. After granting Crimea special status, the Sevastopol Naval Base was leased to Russia for twenty years (Sasse 2007, 4).

After the 1998 elections of the Crimean Supreme Soviet, the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) won 35% of the vote and 33 out of 44 seats in the Crimean Rada. This made the communists the single most powerful political force on the peninsula, while the Russian nationalists were reduced to a small minority (Sasse 2007, 198, 201). Most of the elected officials were middle-aged, between 41 and 50 years old. The Rada consisted of forty-two Russians and thirty-five Ukrainians, along with a minority of other ethnicities (Sasse 2007, 203). After the establishment of the Autonomous Republic, Kyiv’s approach to language and culture policies in Crimea was notably restrained. There was no attempt at a rapid Ukrainianization campaign (Sasse 2007, 218). This approach avoided provoking a larger conflict but also prolonged the time and effort needed to root out separatist dispositions within the field.

The Crimean support for Ukrainian sovereignty in the 1991 referendum had reached a remarkable 54%, though this was far below the national average of 91% (Kravets, 2022). The difficulties of the 90s, combined with further destabilization resulting from the 2004 presidential elections, made Crimeans notably more skeptical towards the Ukrainian government. In a 2008 survey, when Russian was seizing territory from Georgia, 85% of ethnic Russians, 65% of ethnic Ukrainians, and 17% of the Crimean Tatars on the Peninsula reportedly wanted their region to secede from Ukraine. However, by 2011, these feeling had faded and only 38% of the respondents felt the same. After Euromaidan, Crimea again became a hotspot for separatism and pro-Russian sentiments, as the: “*absolute majority of Crimeans backed the Yanukovych government*” (Katchanovski 2015).

The question still remains of how Russia was able to appropriate the existing administrative structure of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in a way, it was able to annex the territory in a matter of a couple of months.

3.1. Reconstruction of the Crimean Administrative Field

To analyze how Russia took over the Crimean state apparatus, an administrative field of 2014 Crimea will be visualized. This is done according to three dimensions: volume of capital,

composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time, that is, social trajectory (Bourdieu 1984, 108).

The operative capital for the field at hand is institutional authority and the portion of this capital that is transfigured into symbolic capital. Symbolic capital occupies an especially important position within the administrative field. Unlike fields in which authority can partially function through direct command, an administrative field that operates exclusively on coercive or institutional capital is structurally unstable. It requires permanent surveillance, it generates resistance at every point of contact between the state and the population, and each new generation demands constant maintenance and propaganda to sustain compliance. An administrative field that has transfigured its institutional capital into symbolic capital, by contrast, is one in which the population has internalized the norms and classifications of state authority and accepts them as features of the natural order. This transfiguration is the condition under which an administrative mechanism ceases to be sustained by force and becomes an institution of governance sustained by recognition.

The first dimension of the field is the volume of capital an actor holds, defined as the sum of institutional resources they can deploy, or the capacity to issue binding directives, to allocate resources, to classify persons and situations, and to enforce compliance (Bourdieu, 1984, 108). This dimension produces the field's vertical hierarchy.

The second dimension dictates the “*different distributions of their total capital among the different kinds of capital*” and emphasizes the study of the “*structure of total asset*” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 109). In the French national social space analyzed in “Distinctions”, this opposition manifests between economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu observes that capital is distributed in inverse proportions among dominant actors. For example, a university professor and industrial employers hold comparable total capital but in opposite compositions, and this compositional difference determines their strategies and position-takings in each field (Bourdieu 1984, 109–110, 120). This dimension therefore defines the fundamental internal opposition that organizes the field. In the case of Crimea, the administrative field was divided between two institutional systems: the Ukrainian state apparatus and Russian institutional networks. Importantly, this is not an ideological distinction. Ideology, in Bourdieu's framework, is a position-taking that expresses a structural location rather than constituting one. As Pouliot and Mérand (2012, p. 33) specify, actors can state and defend their ideas and norms

"but only insofar as they 'fit' with the positions that they hold." In this case, an actor's political orientation towards Ukraine or Russia is the result of their capital composition.

At one side were actors whose capital was bureaucratically integrated into the Ukrainian state system. These individuals held Ukrainian civil service credentials, possessed procedural expertise in Ukrainian administrative law, maintained institutional relationships with Kyiv ministries, and advanced their careers through the Ukrainian constitutional order. Their capital was certified by the Ukrainian state and generated returns within the institutional framework that the Ukrainian state's meta-capital guaranteed.

At the other side were actors whose capital was oriented toward Russian institutional networks. These actors derived their administrative position from connections to Russian state structures, Russian military-institutional networks, or Russian-aligned political organizations. The Russian Black Sea Fleet's institutional apparatus in Sevastopol was the most visible and permanent concentration of Russian-origin institutional capital on the peninsula. Similarly, however, there were many among the local population who held considerable capital in other fields and who were simultaneously Russian aligned in the administrative field. This meant, that when the opportunity presented itself, these people were able to use their resources work their way up in the administrative field in Russia's favor

Trajectory is the third dimension. It captures *"change in these two properties over time (manifested by past and potential trajectory in social space)"* (Bourdieu 1984, 108). An actor's trajectory represents the combination of *"the lifelong evolution of the volume of his capital ... the volume of each sort of capital ... and therefore the composition of his capital,"* and extending back through *"the father's and mother's asset volume and structure and their respective weights in the different kinds of capital... and therefore the volume and structure of the capital of both sets of grandparents"* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 118). In the cases of this analysis, trajectory is shown more simply as the change in capital over a given period.

Based on these conditions, a Crimean administrative field, and the change it went through in the spring of 2014, can be visualized (see Graph 1). The given field can then be filled with relevant actors. By analyzing their capital composition and the change in their position and more fundamental understanding of Russian occupation in Crimea can be provided.

Before the 27th of February the serving regional PM in Crimea was Anatolii Mohyliov, who was appointed directly by Yanukovych in 2011, after the death of the former premier Vasyl

Dzharty (Interfax-Ukraine 2011). Mohyliov previously served as the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine and was known for his xenophobic statements against the Tatar population (Kyiv Post 2011). He was also a part of the small elite formed around Yanukovych's inner circle. This was specifically a Donbas based elite group, whereas many of the members of this group were from the local city of Makiivka. They have been described as: "... *loyal to [Yanukovych] or members of his family, have reputations for ruthlessness and are expected to do what the president wants.*" (Wilson 2014, p 3; Gorchinskaya 2011). Therefore, his position demonstrated that the peninsula's administrative apparatus was firmly subordinate to Kyiv's ruling party, not to any local separatist project. He held the top executive position in the autonomous republic, but this was almost entirely *borrowed* capital or delegated by the Ukrainian state apparatus. He had very little autonomous capital rooted in the Crimean field itself. Mohyliov also held no, or quite little, symbolic capital, as his legitimacy was contested by Crimean Tatars and the general civil society. After the ousting of Yanukovych on February 22, 2014, Mohyliov publicly recognized the legitimacy of Ukraine's new provisional government in Kyiv and had vowed to enforce Ukrainian law (Damon, et al. 2014). This could be considered an attempt at trying to keep his legitimacy within his primary institution. His public recognition of the post-Maidan government however sealed his incompatibility with the emerging Russian-controlled field. On the 27th of February, The Supreme Council of Crimea voted to dismiss Mohyliov and his cabinet, with 60 votes in favour and 0 against. He was physically excluded from the parliament session and replaced by Sergei Aksyonov within hours.

Secondly, the Chairman of the Supreme Council, Vladimir Konstantinov. He entered politics as a Supreme Council deputy in 1998, aligned with the Party of Regions in the 2000s, and was appointed Chairman of the Supreme Council in March 2010 (Crimea State Council, n.d.). In a now deleted post on the defunct Ukrainian parliament in Crimea, Konstantinov had initially criticized the idea of Crimea joining Russia and, and the pro-Russian separatist group Poplar Front, promising that: "*the absurd demands of these political midgets will receive the treatment they deserve in court*" (Bigg 2016). However, on 20 February 2014, during a visit to Moscow, he stated that the 1954 transfer of Crimea had been a mistake. By that time, his construction company Ukrrosbud had become a monopoly on the Peninsula, with his own fortune was estimated at \$315 million (Putin's List n.d.). Yet Konstantinov's capital structure also contained a vulnerability. Namely, by 2014, his company carried debts exceeding one billion hryvnias, and his other firm had collected money from citizens for housing construction that

was never completed (Hinnant 2014). Ukrainian MP Andriy Senchenko has also alleged that: *“the huge debts of Konstantinov companies, as well as dependence of Konstantinov’s business on the construction contracts in Russia, allowed the Russian special services to use him as their puppet”* (Putin’s List n.d.). Furthermore, unlike Mohyliov, his capital was accumulated within the Crimean field itself, not delegated from Kyiv, making his capital therefor also symbolic. This made him the perfect candidate for a new elite inside the occupied Crimea, an elite that would follow the Kremlin’s orders. During the February 27th Supreme Council session, while Mohyliov was physically barred from the parliament he nominally governed, Konstantinov was inside and chairing the session. On March 11, 2014, as Speaker of the Crimean parliament, Konstantinov oversaw the body's declaration of Crimean independence from Ukraine, followed by the March 16 referendum on joining Russia (Kremlin 2014). He then co-signed the treaty of accession on March 18. On March 25, he received a Russian passport, and on April 7, he joined Putin’s party United Russia (Putin’s List n.d.). After the 2014 Crimean elections, he was reappointed parliament speaker with 75 votes in favor and was re-elected again in 2019. His symbolic capital, however, became permanently fractured, as it’s legitimate within the Russian field but criminal in the Ukrainian field (wanted by the SBU, subject to EU, US, and Canadian sanctions). The Crimean political elites are *“foreign policy hawks and cheerleaders for a military victory at all costs”* because *“their fates are entirely dependent on the success or failure of the Russian army”*. They also reportedly have struggled to find allies within the Russian regime, since *“moderate technocrats see them as purveyors of an extreme form of aggressive Putinism, while ultra-patriots consider them unreliable because of their history of betrayal”* (Pertsev, 2023).

Thirdly, the new PM appointed after Mohyliov’s expulsion was Sergei Aksyonov, who was a local businessman and the leader of the Russian Unity party, which had won a mere 4% of the vote in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Aksyonov received Russian citizenship as a resident of Moldova on 10 January 2003, a full eleven years before the annexation, while still formally a Ukrainian citizen. According to media reports, in the 1990s an organized crime group called Salem, whose members have been charged with about 50 murders, was active in Crimea. One of the more senior and gang leaders included: *“one brigadier, or mid-ranking overseer, known as ‘Goblin’ ... who took their money and their connections and went (semi)legitimate, in business and politics. Indeed, usually they were involved in both, leveraging their continued, although less overt, criminal alliances to further their political and economic ends”* (Galeotti 2014). This ‘Goblin’ was nonother than Sergei himself. He had personally been involved in a

series of contract killings and extortions in the 90s. The local journalists reported that Aksyonov first appeared on the political scene with the backing of Konstantino (Hinnant 2014). Moreover, his political party Russian Unity was largely financed by Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash, who held considerable assets in Crimea and a close friend of Yanukovich (Pertsev, 2023). In late January 2014, as the Euromaidan protests intensified, Aksyonov began forming what he termed a “*self-defence force*” on the peninsula. Its first battalion of 700 men came from his party’s youth group and by 21. of February, he claimed command over several thousand ‘troops.’. These forces drew heavily on the peninsula’s criminal networks: “*many were the foot soldiers of the peninsula’s crime gangs, including Bashmaki and the descendants of Salem, who had temporarily put their rivalries aside to pull Crimea out of Ukraine*” (Galeotti 2014). Aksyonov’s coercive-social capital, collected through decades in the criminal underworld, thus became directly usable as a military instrument when Moscow required local armed capacity to complement its own ‘little green men.’

On the morning of February 27th, armed men seized the Crimean parliament. Aksyonov entered the building, gathered a quorum, and was voted into office as Prime Minister following a vote of no confidence in the new Ukrainian government. Kremlin-sympathetic analyst Sergei Markov subsequently explained the selection logic: “*Moscow always bet on Yanukovych. But after the coup in Kyiv... Moscow decided it needed to back the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. Then they looked for who could be its leader. They chose Aksyonov*” (Vasovic & Zinets 2014). On 4 March, Putin recognised Aksyonov as the legitimate leader of Crimea, apparently without having previously met him (Shuster, 2014). On the 9th of October, the Crimean State Council unanimously elected Aksyonov as Head of the Republic from a list of nominees prepared by the Russian president (Freedom House, 2015). Aksyonov was chosen precisely because of the qualities that had weakened him in the Ukrainian-structured field. His criminal past and paramilitary capacity meant he possessed coercive capital hostile to formal political actors. His separatist political identity meant he had no stake in the first field’s preservation. His marginal electoral position (4%) meant he was maximally dependent on Moscow for the legitimation of his new authority and therefore maximally controllable.

Finally, Alexander Zaldostanov, who is the leader of the Night Wolves motorcycle club and known by the nickname “The Surgeon.” He introduces a structurally distinct actor type into the analysis, namely the external agent who produces symbolic capital. He entered the Crimean field from the Russian national field to perform a specific function in the occupation’s legitimation apparatus. In 2009, Zaldostanov met with then-Prime Minister Putin at a

motorcycle rally in Sevastopol. Putin rode with the Night Wolves at Sevastopol in 2010 and Novorossiysk in 2011, where he publicly thanked Zaldostanov for his “*service to Russia*.” In 2013, Putin awarded him the Order of Honour for his contributions to “*youth patriotic education*” and the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. Zaldostanov was also selected as the official torchbearer for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics (Marlo, 2018). Prior to the annexation however, Zaldostanov held no capital within the Crimean administrative field. Zaldostanov did however play a role in the Peninsulas coup itself. Before arriving in Simferopol on February 28th himself, members of the Sevastopol Night Wolves club were already supporting the Russian military, possibly as early as the 20th. Activities during this period included collecting intelligence, distributing propaganda, organizing protests and self-defense units, and coordinating with Russian Special Operations Forces. When the vanguard of the Russian military arrived in the early hours of 27 February, the Night Wolves escalated their involvement by coordinating roadblocks and intimidating local officials. By early March, Night Wolves members were conducting joint operations with Russian Spetsnaz units. This including a raid on a Ukrainian naval facility (Lauder 2018). The Night Wolves were one of only two non-governmental organizations that carried automatic weapons and participated in joint operations with Russian Spetsnaz during March 2014 (Marlo 2018). United States Treasury sanctions documents specifically accused Zaldostanov of participating in the confiscation of Ukrainian weapons during the storming of the Ukrainian Naval Forces headquarters in Crimea.

In June 2014, the city of Bakhchysarai awarded the Night Wolves a contract for municipal security services and youth patriotic education. By late 2015, the Night Wolves had also formed a rapid response team with local police and were patrolling areas of Sevastopol (Lauder 2018). Their August 2014 bike show in Sevastopol, that depicted Ukraine as a country controlled by “fascists” and celebrated the annexation, was attended by an estimated 100,000 people and broadcast on Russian state television. The most grandiose spectacle took place in Sevastopol in August 2015: entitled “The Forge of Victory,” and broadcast live on Russian television, it featured dozens of actors and thousands of bikers re-enacting the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, portraying pro-Russian militias as freedom fighters and the Kyiv government as a Western-controlled junta (Lauder, 2018).

As a reward for this symbolic production, the Russian government leased 267 hectares of Crimean real estate to the organization at 0.1% of the normal valuation rate (Shamanska 2015). The Night Wolves received an additional 12 million rubles from the Russian government to construct a “*Patriot*” youth center in Sevastopol. Zaldostanov organization and

actions were again publicly formalized at the highest level when Putin visited the Night Wolves' annual Shadow of Babylon bike show in Crimea accompanied by Head of Crimea Sergei Aksyonov and Acting Governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhayev (President of Russia, 2019).

Zaldostanov's position within the Crimean administrative field is therefore unique because he occupies the role not of a holder of symbolic capital but of a producer of it. All four preceding actors hold, lack or convert symbolic capital in their own ways. Zaldostanov however directly manufactures it on behalf of the occupying power. The bike shows, the patriotic education programs, the youth camps, and the re-enactment spectacles are instruments of what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984, 190–191). In this way, the occupation is meant to be perceived as something natural, legitimate, and historically inevitable.

The four trajectories analyzed above (Mohyliov's structural expulsion, Konstantinov's conversion, Aksyonov's catapult, and Zaldostanov's entry as a symbolic production) all share a sudden, rapid change in their capital composition and size. The February 2014 annexation transformed the rules of the game or the criteria by which the administrative field allocated positions and recognized authority.

Mohyliov's case demonstrates that capital which was never symbolically transfigured cannot survive the withdrawal of its enforcement mechanism. On the other hand, Konstantinov's case demonstrates that locally accumulated symbolic capital retains convertibility precisely because it is rooted in enduring social relationships.

Aksyonov's case demonstrates that a field revolution can elevate actors whose capital was previously anti-symbolic when an external power restructures recognition itself. And Zaldostanov's case demonstrates that the reconstituted field requires a dedicated apparatus for the continuous manufacture of symbolic capital.

All these trajectories depend however on the fact, that Crimea had a pre-existing administrative field (filled with institutions and positions) that could effectively be appropriated and taken over. The Donbas did not have this.

4. THE DONBAS

The territories that would become the Donbas were once inhabited by various ethnic traders and nomads. The territory also became an important place for thousands of Ukrainian peasants who escaped from the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. Between the 16.-18th century the region became even more of a multicultural hotspot as the Cossack state of Sich was established, making the region an intersection between traveling Christians, Muslims and Jews. Under the Treaty of Pereiaslav, this Cossack state was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1654. The ruling tsar Cathrine II claimed the new regions as “Novorossiya” or “New Russia”. During this period more Ukrainians continued to arrive in the region due to the large swathes of unoccupied land available to them. However, the Ukrainian population was marginalized, as they were barred from organizing any significant political or cultural institutions. By the 19th and 20th century, the Russian language had become the de facto language of the region: “*None of the other languages used in Donbas could compete with it, as Russian has become the language of educational institutions, science, the press, and the ‘mainstream culture’*” (Babenko 2025, 1250). The early soviet policy *korenizatsiya* (nativization), intended on promoting local people to positions of power, helped the Donbas to develop its own Ukrainian elites, as the region had been largely politically unactive during the events of Russian Revolution and during the early Ukrainian independence movements. This elite was however short-lived as the Bolsheviks quickly turned away from multiculturalism towards a more aggressive Russian cultural hegemony. The local Ukrainian culture was further wrecked by the Holodomor and Russian deportations (Plokhly 2015, 168-169). In the 1960s and 70s multiple key Ukrainian figures emerged from the Donbas, who protested to suppression of the Ukrainian language. However, as the cities in the local region grew, luring in more people from different backgrounds, this nationalist sentiment fell on deaf ears. Instead, the region developed its own identity which valued ‘being native’ to the local area, which was superior to both Ukrainian and Soviet cultural influences. The collapse of heavy industry in the 1980s, created a: “*unfavourable socio-cultural landscape in Modern Donbas.*” (Babenko 2025, 1251-52).

The independence of Ukraine offered a brief sense of hope for improvement, as demonstrated by the 1991 referendum where 83.9% of voters in Donetsk oblast and 83.9% in Luhansk oblast supported independence (KIIS 2014). However, as with Crimea, this post-independence unity would not last long. The situation regarding the local industrial and economical capabilities was further hampered by the collapse of Soviet-era industrial supply chains, the contraction of

the coal and metallurgical sectors, along with the failure of successive Kyiv governments to manage the region's specific economic dependencies. This produced a population whose experience of independence was defined primarily by impoverishment and the sense that the region's contributions to the national economy were unappreciated (Plokyh 2015, 324-326). The local oligarch who became important in the early 90s, stayed influential in the Donbas up until 2014. This was a system in which a small number of industrialists held monopolies in metallurgy, energy, media, football and other sectors (Plokyh 2015, 312-315). This resulted in enormous economic and political capital gain for the local elite, while the broader population saw diminishing returns from the region's industrial output. By the time Yanukovych was removed from power in February 2014, the Donbas had spent more than two decades oscillating between disappointed expectations of independence, oligarchic capture of its economic resources, and a hostile sense towards Kyiv and western Ukraine in general.

The period following Euromaidan has been referred to as the "*Russian Spring*," which included "*Russian world*" ideas, to actively oppose the new Ukrainian interim government (Matveeva 2022, 421). These early protests of February and March 2014, concentrated in the administrative capitals of Donetsk and Luhansk, were led by minor political figures with no prior governing experience. Most prominently, Denis Pushylin in Donetsk and Valeriy Bolotov in Luhansk, who were both small-scale entrepreneurs with no real prior political experience. No prominent political figures or experienced government officials defected to the separatist cause at the outset, and even sympathetic municipal authorities had no incentive to share power with unknown activists (Kudelia 2025, 26).

On April 14th, 2014, armed unit led by Igor Girkin, a former FSB colonel and Russian citizen, seized the Sloviansk police station and SBU office. Girkin himself subsequently confirmed in an interview that his group consisted of Russian Armed Forces volunteers and saying: "*I'm the one who pulled the trigger of this war*" (Girkin, cited in Kramarenko, 2024). Police forces either remained passive and demoralized in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution and either fled or actively sided with the militants. The new Ukrainian governments low coercive capacity also permitted theses of separatist militia groups to move across towns (Kudelia, 2025, p. 28-29). In parallel, Russian citizen Alexander Boroday, who was associated with the FSB, organized pro-separatist rallies in Donetsk under the slogan "Donbas is Russia" before being appointed as the first "prime minister" of the self-declared DPR (Truth Hounds, 2023). The initial territorial footprint of the separatist entities was thus established not through

indigenous political mobilization but through the insertion of Russian state actors into Ukrainian administrative space.

The leaked email archive of Vladislav Surkov, a senior Kremlin official widely regarded as the principal coordinator of Moscow's political management of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, also demonstrate the extent of Russian backing the creation of the self-declared republics (DFRLab 2016). Three particular leaks are revealing for the purposes of the present analysis.

Firstly, a manufactured draft letter authored by the "*public representatives of the Donbass*" and addressed to the Ukrainian government. The letter called for a cessation of the Anti-Terrorist Operation and described the humanitarian consequences of the conflict in terms designed to convey the appearance of an organic, locally generated political appeal. The email's subject line however read "*corrections in the text,*" indicating that the document had been drafted or revised within Kremlin-adjacent circles before endorsing it. This same letter was subsequently published, with minor alteration, in the Russian news magazine *Russkiy Reporter* and was later broadcasted through state-affiliated media outlets including *Russia Today* (DFRLab, 2016).

Secondly, on 16 June 2014, Pushilin sent a spreadsheet directly to Surkov containing detailed expense estimates for the establishment of a Ministry of Information, a press center, and a state newspaper in Donetsk and itemized costs for staffing, equipment, and printing runs. The fact that these budgetary documents were transmitted to a Kremlin official rather than processed through any internal DPR authority suggests that the fiscal stability of the separatist institutions was dependent upon Moscow's approval and, by implication, its funding (DFRLab, 2016).

Lastly, on 13 May 2014, Surkov received a document originating from the Marshall Group, an organization founded by a Russian ultra-nationalist financier that is sanctioned by both the European Union and the United States for his role in supporting pro-Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine. The document containing a list of candidates for ministerial and leadership positions within the DPR. The list included proposed appointments for the Speaker of the People's Soviet (Pushilin), the Ministry of Defence (Igor Girkin), and other key posts, with certain individuals marked as having been "*checked by us*" and "*especially recommended.*" Among those recommended was Aleksandr Zakharchenko, listed as a candidate for the position of Prime Minister, a role to which he was subsequently appointed. Three days after the document reached Surkov, on 16 May 2014, the full composition of the

DPR government was publicly announced (DFRLab, 2016). While the correspondence does not constitute conclusive proof that Surkov and the Marshall group unilaterally determined the government's composition, the fact that these same candidates were announced in 2014 strongly indicates that Moscow exercised a guiding or approving role in the formation of the separatist administration.

4.1.1. The creation of the DPR & LPR administrative fields

Unlike Crimea, the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts held no special administrative status inside the Ukrainian state. The Autonomous Republic of Crimea maintained its own constitution, parliament, and council of ministers that could be effectively taken over. The Donbas had no such comparable autonomous institutions. Donetsk and Luhansk were ordinary oblasts within Ukraine's unitary state structure, administered by centrally appointed governors and integrated into national ministries without any distinctive regional institutional layer.

This means that, the context of this thesis, when occupying the Donbas, Russia invertedly created new fields of occupation, which held their own capital, actors and their trajectories. To visualize the creation of these fields, a slightly more complex idea of practice theory can be imagined (See Graph 2). In this given social struggle to establish an occupation of Eastern Ukraine, the actors who would become the holders of administrative capital in the new self-proclaimed Republics can be divided into two preexisting fields. This division is similar to Kudelia's surveys, in which the establishment of the occupation can be seen as result of both local and Russian agitators.

The Donbas field of power is an exemplified field where holders of different capital (economic, political, coercive, social) compete for regional dominance. This is the region where most of the local political leaders of the DPR and LPR actors were drawn from.

The Russian state security field includes the resources and actors diverted by Russian state apparatus to support the occupation. This is narrower than "*Russian state field*" because the Kremlin actors who operated in the Donbas were overwhelmingly drawn from the security services rather than from Russia's civilian administrative or economic apparatus. Girkin was FSB and the coordination ran through Surkov's office, who managed both security and political questions.

The structural dimensions of each given field have not been established for the sake of simplicity.

Tracing the trajectories of four actors from their original field to a separatist one shows who became, and more importantly why, the new figureheads of the self-proclaimed republics.

Firstly, Igor Girkin the only one of the four whose social trajectory originates entirely outside the Donbas field of power. He was born in Moscow in 1970 and served in the FSB, reaching the rank of colonel before his retirement in 2013. His military biography included combat experience in Transnistria, Bosnia, and Chechnya (Kramarenko 2024). In Bourdieusian terms, Girkin occupied a position of moderate coercive capital within the Russian security field but negligible symbolic status: a retired officer with combat skills and FSB connections, but no political standing, no administrative experience, and no relationship whatsoever to the Donbas or its population. His insertion into the Donbas field on 12 April 2014, when his armed unit seized the Sloviansk police station and SBU office, was not a movement within any existing field but a violent irruption from the outside. As Kudelia (2025: 25) demonstrates, once Girkin took Sloviansk, local activists who had organized the initial protests were entirely subordinated to a command structure composed of Russian citizens. Russia most likely chose Girkin not for any capacity to generate legitimacy within the Donbas, but for his coercive skills and his willingness to serve as the operational instrument that could transform protest into armed insurgency.

Denis Pushilin's trajectory presents the inverse pattern. He first worked as a sales manager at a trading firm between 2002 and 2006, then from 2011 to 2013 became a key promoter of Russian Ponzi scheme, which defrauded anywhere from 100\$ million to 5\$ billion from investors. The scheme was founded by Sergei Mavrodi, a figure Pushilin once publicly described as "*the most honest man in the world*" (Balmworth & de Carbonnel; Hegarty 2016). His single attempt to enter the Ukrainian political field, as a candidate in the December 2013 parliamentary by-election in Obukhiv district, yielded 0.08% of the vote (Central Election Commission of Ukraine 2013). In Bourdieusian terms, Pushilin's capital volume was negligible across every dimension. His entry into the separatist movement came on 5 April 2014, and within six weeks he was chairman of the DPR's Supreme Council. His quick ascension in the new government was most likely from him *band wagoning* with the separatist movement, for financial gain or similar. For example, a document revealed in the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta showed that in 2014 Pushilin received substantial flows of money from Russian intelligence service. The same report noted that leaked messages revealed Pushilin simultaneously profiteering from an American multi-level marketing scheme (Kanygin 2015). This again reinforces the picture

of an actor whose orientation was fundamentally entrepreneurial and opportunistic rather than simply ideological. His loyalty to Kremlin has also been seen by the replacement of important government positions in the DPR. For example, in 2015, he removed Andrei Purgin as the parliamentary speaker and took the position over personally. Purgin had founded a separatist organization for the Donetsk separatists already in 2005 (Euromaidan Press 2017). His ousting reflected Moscow's determination to tighten its grip on the region. Similarly, in February 2020, Pushilin appointed Vladimir Pashkov, a Russian citizen and former deputy governor of Russia's Irkutsk Oblast and with no connection to the Donbas, as chairman of the DPR government (Kossov 2020). Thus, most likely, Pushilin's function within the manufactured field was not to represent the population of the Donbas but to execute Moscow's directives and get paid for it.

Valeriy Bolotov occupied a more ambiguous position between the two origin fields. His participation in the late-Soviet conflicts in Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Nagorno-Karabakh (1989–1990), provided him with a coercive capital rooted in the Soviet military field. After leaving the military, Bolotov obtained qualifications in economics and engineering and worked as a manager and director at a meat factory. Before the 2014, he served as a representative for a senior Party of Regions figure, supervising illegal mining operations in the Luhansk region (Euromaidan Press, 2017). Thus, his pre-existing connection to the Donbas field of power ran not through formal politics but through the 'shadow economy.' He was positioned within the networks of the Donbas oligarchy, but at its lowest level. On April 6th, 2014, Bolotov led the seizure of the SBU headquarters in Luhansk, and a few weeks later a 'people's assembly' elected him as 'People's Governor' of Luhansk Oblast. He was subsequently elected head of the LPR on 18 May at the first session of the self-proclaimed republic's parliament. His tenure was however brief and unstable. He first survived an assassination attempt on the 13th of May, was briefly captured by Ukrainian forces on 4 days later and finally being freed by armed separatists. He soon resigned on the 14th of August 2014, citing the consequences of his injuries (RT 2014; Kudelia 2025, 108). In an extensive interview with the Russian outlet Rosbalt on 8 December 2016, his last public statement before his death, Bolotov stated unambiguously that he had made only a "*public verbal statement that I'm leaving temporarily,*" and that Plotnitsky, whom he had personally appointed as Minister of Defence, exploited his absence during medical treatment in Russia to consolidate power without authorization. In the interview Bolotov's also hints Moscow's role in the suicide of LPR 'prime minister' Gennadiy Tsytkalov (Rosbalt, 2016; Euromaidan Press 2017). This suggests that similarly to the DPR, the internal governance structures of the LPR were supervised by Kremlin-appointed handlers.

Aleksandr Zakharchenko's trajectory most clearly illustrates the conversion of paramilitary capital into administrative authority through external support. Born in 1976 in Donetsk to a mining family, Zakharchenko graduated from the Donetsk University of Industrial Automation in 1995 and worked as a mine electrician before establishing small enterprises in the coal industry and food production (Kanygin 2015). His entry into the politics came in December 2013, when he became head of the Donetsk branch of '*Oplot*,' a civic and martial arts organization founded in Kharkiv in 2010 by a former police officer with a record of political violence, including being the lead suspect in the 2006 attempted assassination of the future mayor of Kharkiv (Kanygin 2015). Oplot functioned simultaneously as a mixed martial arts promotion, a private security enterprise, and a paramilitary mobilization vehicle; its fighters served as enforcers for pro-Russian political interests in Kharkiv during the Euromaidan period, and after the failure of the "Kharkiv People's Republic" project, the organization expanded into Donetsk (Balmforth 2016).

On the 16th of April 2014, Zakharchenko led twenty-armed Oplot members in the seizure of the Donetsk City Council building. By May he was appointed "military commandant" of Donetsk, commanding approximately one thousand fighters, which was one of the largest separatist formations. On 7 August 2014, he replaced Alexander Borodai as prime minister. Borodai, himself a Russian citizen from Moscow, publicly stated that the succession was orchestrated as a Russian government effort "to try to show the West that the uprising was a *"grassroots phenomenon,"* and claimed to have personally recommended Zakharchenko for the position (Dickinson 2021). The Surkov email archive confirms that Zakharchenko appeared on the 13 May candidate list from Malofeev's organization as a recommended appointment (DFR Lab, 2016). January 2015, Zakharchenko himself told a British journalist that a year earlier he had been leading *"a normal life, going to banyas and cafes with his friends"* (Miller 2018).

All the actors in the given analysis held relatively low capital in their preexisting fields. This shows that Moscow could not recruit the dominant actors of the Donbas field of power to lead its manufactured administrative field. Rather it had to recruit from the margins and choose actors whose capital was insignificant in the preexisting political order. Their elevation was made possible not by the internal logics of any field they inhabited, but by the external disruption of those logics through Russian intervention, and the simultaneous collapse of the Ukrainian state's coercive monopoly in the region. Both Girkin and Zakharchenko were

appointed to their positions directly through Russian mediation, and Pushilin and Bolotov both received considerable support from the Russian state security apparatus.

As established beforehand, most of the actors in the local region were opportunists with backgrounds in coercive or 'shadowy' fields. Individuals like Pushilin can be considered 'lucky' as their struggle has allowed them to stay at the top of the local field for past decade. Bolotov's case however demonstrates how violent the power struggle can be, and how quickly one can lose the authority they have. A Donetsk political analyst, Volodymyr Kipen, captured the dynamic in April 2014: *"the separatist figureheads were 'well-known' marginal forces ... that are now being used as functional figures to voice and represent the positions of the organizers of this separatist spectacle"* (Kipen, as cited in The Moscow Times 2014).

Furthermore, the more chaotic nature of Donbas occupation field (assassination, Russian intervention, and opportunistic nature of the actors) all demonstrate that Russia failed in creating a stable occupation as in Crimea.

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional approaches to the crisis of 2014 might view the events across Ukraine as a uniform separatist movement, characterized primarily by pro-Russian ideologies and motivated by regional grievances over Euromaidan. While this perspective is not necessarily wrong, it obscures the crucial mechanisms through which Russia translated ideological sentiment into concrete occupation practices. A Bourdieusian analysis of Crimea and the Donbas reveals that the occupation was not uniform but rather adaptive. This structure was determined by pre-existing institutional fields, constrained by the availability of convertible capital, and affected by the choices of local actors.

The practices employed by Russian and pro-Russian actors in both territories were overwhelmingly grounded in coercive and economic capital. In Crimea, where an autonomous administrative apparatus already existed with accumulated symbolic capital, Russia could appropriate existing positions and redirect their authority toward Russian state interests. The rapid transformation of figures like Konstantinov from locally embedded oligarch to Moscow-backed administrator occurred not through ideological conversion, but through the restructuring of the recognition criteria that generated legitimacy within the field. Symbolic capital, once distributed through Ukrainian state channels, could be redirected entirely once the enforcement mechanism shifted from Kyiv to Moscow. Crimea's occupation thus proceeded

with minimal resource expenditure and relatively little resistance precisely because the institutional infrastructure remained intact and merely required restructuring.

The Donbas presented an entirely different structural context. Without an autonomous administrative organization or pre-existing institutions to appropriate, Russia was forced to manufacture an administrative field from the existing power distributions. This required substantially greater resource commitments. The importation of Russian security personnel (Girkin, Boroday), the elevation of marginal entrepreneurs and opportunists (Pushilin, Zakharchenko), and the continuous provision of financial and military capital to sustain institutions that possessed no real indigenous roots. The Donbas occupation was thus more chaotic, more dependent on external coercive force, and more unstable, as evidenced by leadership purges, defections, and the surrounding war.

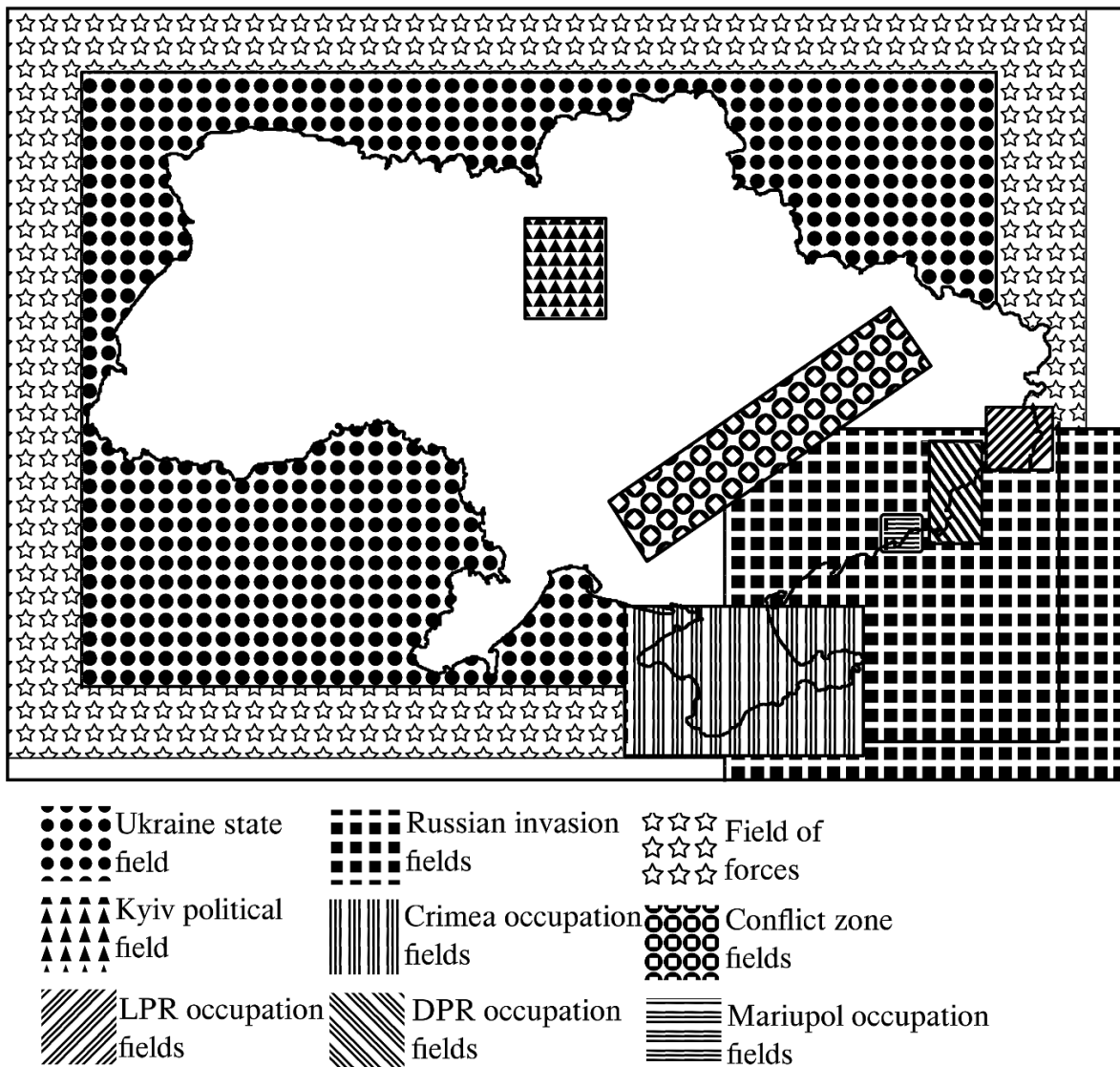
These differences demonstrate that occupation practices are not universal templates applied across space, but rather field-specific struggles that emerge from the interaction between an invading force, and the pre-existing distribution of capital within targeted territories. Russia's ability to 'naturalize' its authority, to transform domination into legitimacy, depends on the degree to which it can convert locally accumulated symbolic capital. Where such capital exists and can be captured (Crimea), occupation becomes institutionally stable and ideologically self-sustaining. Where it must be manufactured from scratch (Donbas), occupation remains structurally dependent on coercive enforcement and continuous subsidy.

The analytical payoff of this approach lies in its capacity to move beyond both identity-based explanations and security-dilemma arguments toward a more relational understanding of how power is actually exercised in occupation contexts. Rather than asking 'why did Russia occupy these territories?' or 'what do pro-Russian populations want?', it asks: 'how did these occupations become accepted as natural?' In times where Russian propaganda likes to paint the narrative of 'grassroot freedom fighters', it is important to understand exactly how Russia used the preexisting environments of Crimea and the Donbas, along with the actors in them, to create an image for its occupation an image.

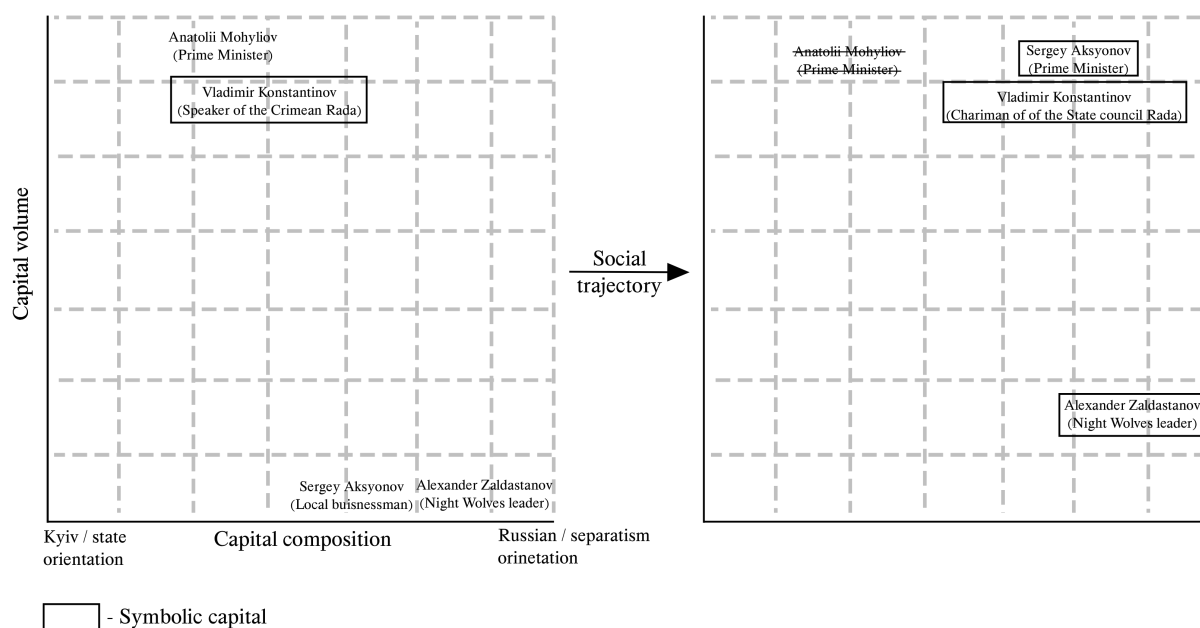
The occupations of Ukrainian territory remain ongoing, and the long-term stability of Russian administrative fields, or their ability to generate legitimacy rather than remaining dependent on external coercion, will determine the sustainability of Russia's occupation project.

ATTACHMENTS

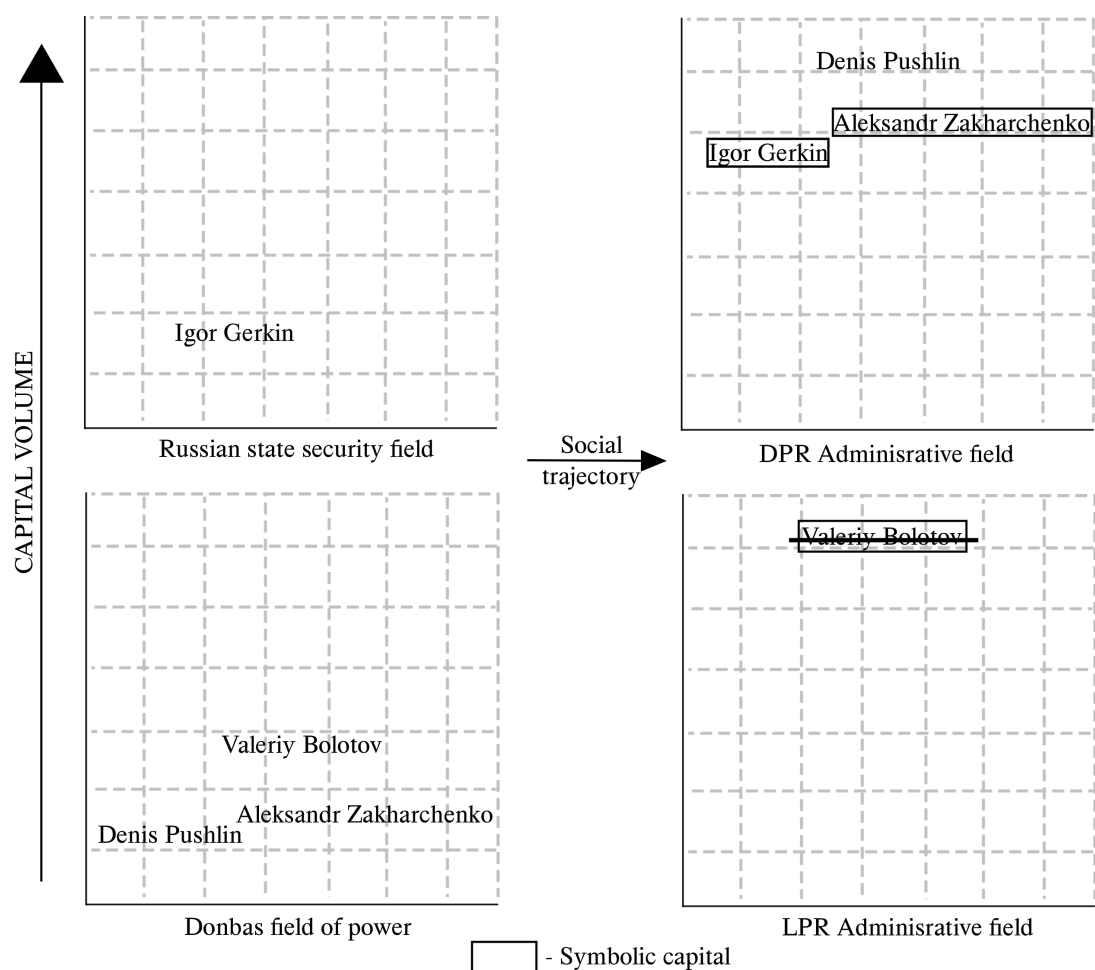
Map 1. – Theoretical fields surrounding Ukraine, circa 2026.



Graph 1. – The Crimean administrative field, before 27.02 and after 18.03, 2014.



Graph 2. -Establishment of the DPR & LPR administrative fields, circa 2014.



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