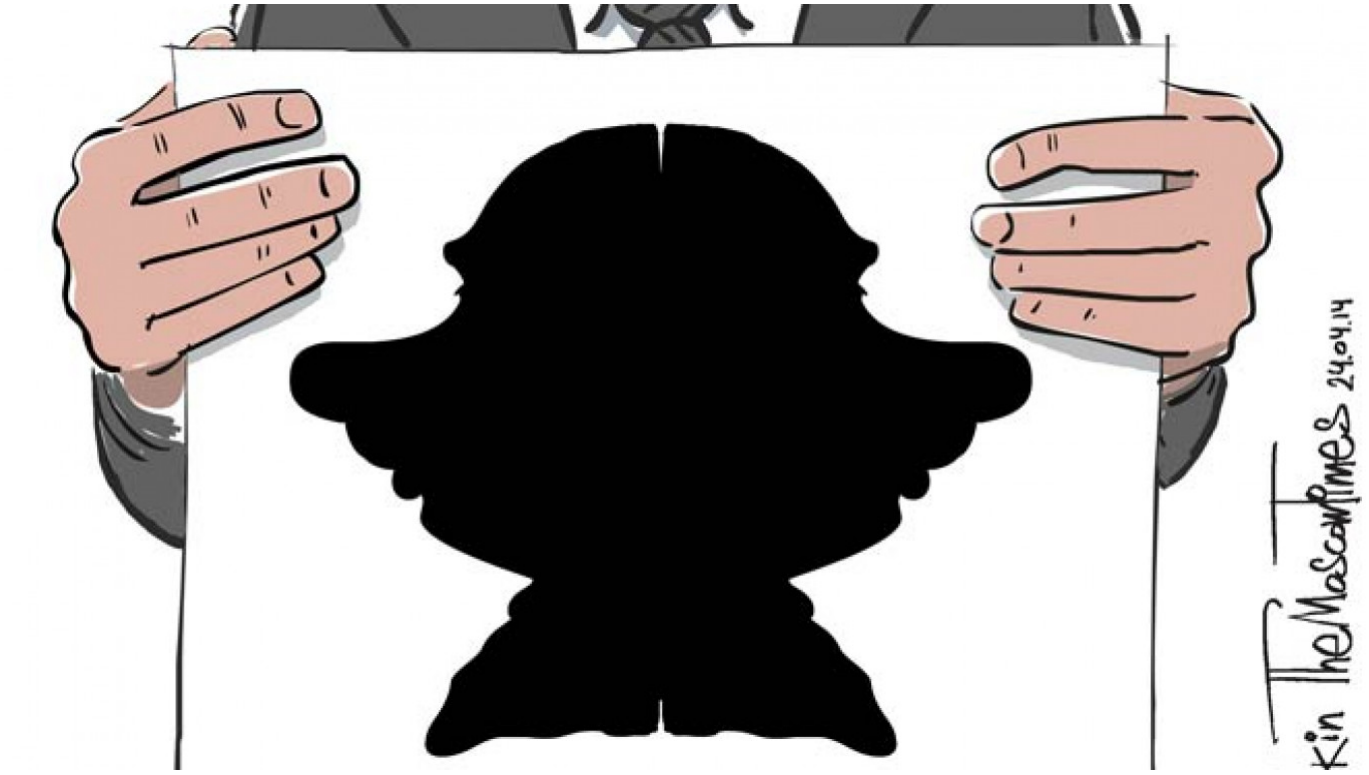
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Moscow's War in Ukraine Relies on Local Assets

By Mark Galeotti

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In many ways, the hunt for clear, undeniable proof of direct Russian involvement in the eastern Ukrainian rebellion — above all, the presence of its special forces and intelligence officers — has become a political Rorschach test. Those determined to deny any Russian role can airily dismiss all claims. Those eager to prove a link see evidence all around them. But both miss the point. It is safe to assume that Russian operatives are there, but to assume that they are the gunmen is to misunderstand the nature of the Russian campaign and the new kind of war being fought.

There are many "war tourists"
fighting in Ukraine, looking
for excitement and money.

NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Philip Breedlove, for example, sees

in eastern Ukraine "a professional military force, acting under direction and leadership, not a spontaneous militia." For all that, though, all the evidence so far has been open to question and interpretation and does not support the version that the militants in eastern Ukraine are from Russia.

Take, for example, the infamous "Russian lieutenant colonel" appointing the Horlivka police's new commander. He turned out to be a local hoodlum. In addition, the identification of a bearded gunman in Kramatorsk and Slovyansk as Khamzat Gairbekov, from Russia's Chechen-raised Vostok battalion, is debatable except for the fact that they both have luxuriant beards.

The AK-74 rifles that pro-Russian militants are carrying are standard to Russian and Ukrainian forces alike, and they were probably looted from Ukrainian police and Army arsenals. At the same time, however, some militants are armed with AK-100 series rifles, which are not issued in Ukraine and not commercially available in Russia, as well as specialized weapons such as sniper rifles equipped with silencers. This does suggest that Moscow is acting in its time-honored role as the arsenal of anarchy.

But Russian guns do not need Russian gunmen. Let's assume that the bearded militant is, indeed, Gairbekov. Does that actually mean he was there because the Russian government explicitly sent him? Perhaps he is just a freelancer now.

The "local self-defense forces" in eastern Ukraine are a pretty mixed bag. There are members of the Ukrainian security forces who have defected individually or collectively to the pro-Russian cause. Many of the so-called Russian special forces are actually former members of Ukraine's Berkut riot police. Their relatively professional tactics and homogenous appearance may help explain why they have been assumed to be Russian commandos.

Alongside them are local volunteers, often sporting a variety of camouflage uniforms and toting rifles from police stockpiles. There are also "war tourists" — Russian volunteers and irregulars who have joined the cause because of they are looking for adventure, excitement, or the opportunity to loot and receive pay. They may be outright mercenaries or zealous Russian nationalists. Many militants have come from Crimea. To be sure, a significant number of these outsiders bear weapons that imply a Russian connection.

It is hard to believe that substantial numbers of Russians can assemble military weapons and stroll across the border without Moscow being aware of it. Most likely, the Russian government is at least turning a blind eye to Russians taking part in the "self-defense forces" in eastern Ukraine when it isn't encouraging, arming and sometimes engaging them.

This is a crucial aspect of the new "great game" — the increasing penetration of military, political, intelligence and economic operations using a bewildering array of assets. These assets include Russian spies and provocateurs, mercenaries, local gangsters and even unknowing dupes. Moscow's signature new subversive strategy is a shadowy combination of war, terrorism, subversion and diplomacy. The West is clearly ill-equipped to respond to this type of warfare.

Russia does not need to take the risk and shoulder the expense of a substantial deployment of special forces in a foreign adventure. Instead, the primary role of the Russian military is

to loom on the border, a potential threat that is clearly unnerving Kiev and deterring more robust armed responses.

On the ground, the primary actors appear to be the local political and security elites. They are closely connected to Russia and have every reason to fear coming under the control of a new Ukrainian government. Just as in the Cold War, when the KGB was stirring up revolutionary wars and insurgencies around the world, the Kremlin's men are not on the front line. They are behind the scenes, coordinating, recruiting, training, arming and supporting.

This strategy of undermining Kiev is cheap, easy, cynical and effective. But it also means that when some kind of political settlement is reached, it will be harder to control these militants.

Just as Maidan Square, the source of a popular uprising, has become the crucible of violent nationalism, the militants from the pro-Russian side have dug in their heels in the battle for Ukraine. They will unlikely be comfortable returning to their normal lives. It is hard to see the thugs of Slovyansk and Mariupol duly handing in their shiny new guns. The new breed of local "commanders" — often linked with organized crime — will need to be co-opted or crushed.

In short, Moscow's decision not to fight this conflict through conventional means and with its own men may mean that it wins the war, but it will have a much harder time keeping the peace after that.

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