

COMMENTARY

The Institutional Battlefield: Why Irregular Warfare Must Contemplate Path Dependence

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ABSTRACT

This commentary argues that the field of irregular warfare must expand its focus beyond operational and tactical dimensions to include the institutional battlefield. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war serves as a case study in which Russia has systematically imposed new governance, economic, and educational institutions in the occupied Donbas region. This institutional imposition is not a byproduct of occupation, but a calculated strategy designed to create a new long-term reality by permanently altering the adversary's political and social equilibrium. Drawing on the concept of path dependence from economic development, this analysis demonstrates how deliberate institutional changes—such as forced passportization and Russification—produce a new equilibrium from which there is no return, regardless of the military outcome of the war. This commentary urges the irregular warfare community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into its analysis to better understand how states use institutions as instruments of irregular warfare in modern conflict.

KEYWORDS

Path Dependence;
Institutional
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Russia; Ukraine;
Political Geography

A Conceptual Blind Spot: Institutions in Irregular Warfare

Discourse on irregular warfare often focuses on its operational and tactical dimensions—guerrilla tactics, insurgency and counterinsurgency, plausible deniability, and even the will to fight. This is understandable, as these aspects have defined much of the discourse since the days of Mao and T. E. Lawrence. However, this focus has created a conceptual blind spot: the role of institutions in long-term irregular conflicts. This article argues that institutions are not merely an afterthought in irregular warfare but a fundamental domain of it, serving as a battlefield in

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their own right. From governance to education, economic systems, and infrastructure, the deliberate manipulation and imposition of new institutions can serve as a tool states use to alter an adversary's political and social equilibrium, creating new realities that persist long after kinetic fighting has ceased. The field of irregular warfare, therefore, would benefit from a more systematic study of how states shape societies and warfare through institutions and their long-term, path-dependent effects.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war offers a contemporary case study of institutions being used as a method of irregular warfare. While the world's attention has been captivated by shifting front lines and the introduction of new technologies and tactics, a subtler—yet perhaps more permanent—struggle has been waged in the Russian-occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Here, Russia has systematically imposed new governance structures, currency, educational curricula, and citizenship requirements. This institutional imposition is not a random byproduct of occupation; it is a calculated form of irregular warfare designed to sever these regions from Ukraine and absorb them into a Russian sphere of control. Even in a scenario where Ukraine reclaims military control of these regions, it will face long-term, potentially irreversible consequences stemming from these institutions. Regardless of military victory, Ukraine will have to confront the enduring outcomes of an irregular war fought not with bullets, but with bureaucracy. This commentary seeks to stimulate debate on this crucial yet underexamined aspect of irregular warfare, urging the IW community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into its thinking and future analysis.

A Deep-Seated Culture of Control: Russia's Imperial Continuity

The current actions undertaken by the Russian Federation in occupied Ukrainian territories—specifically Donetsk and Luhansk—represent not a spontaneous geopolitical maneuver but the modern execution of a deep-seated Russian imperial culture of control. At several points in history, leaders of the Russian core have embraced Russification campaigns through linguistic and educational suppression, deportations, and other forms of social and territorial engineering. Even a brief examination of just one of these historical parallels—linguistic and educational suppression—provides important context for understanding how Russia's current institutional imposition in the Donbas reflects a long-standing historical pattern rather than a novel approach.

The institutional strategy of Russification—through linguistic and educational suppression—was refined during the Tsarist and Soviet eras to prioritize state control and the suppression of distinct national identities through targeted administrative, linguistic, and demographic coercion.¹ This historical pattern illustrates how post-Soviet Russia's difficulty in establishing a stable post-imperial identity has shaped its institutional behavior toward a pattern of “reimperialization”: an attempt to reassert influence and control over former domains through increasingly coercive cultural and military means.²

The suppression of Ukrainian identity was institutionally formalized in the Russian Empire well over a century ago. The Valuev Circular of 1863 serves as a foundational example of targeted linguistic policy aimed at institutional suppression rather than simple censorship. Based on the opinion of the Kyiv Censorship Committee, the Circular institutionalized the claim that “a separate Little Russian language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist.”³ Instead, the Circular framed support for Ukrainian national identity as the work of “enemies of both Russia and Ukraine.”⁴⁵ This claim is crucial. By officially denying the ontological

existence of the Ukrainian language, the state justified subsequent policies aimed at dismantling the structures necessary for Ukrainian national development.

The Circular ordered censorship committees to ban the publication of religious, educational, and beginner-level books in Ukrainian, thereby preventing its standardization and dissemination as a modern language.⁶ The significance of this Tsarist policy lies in its establishment of a doctrine of institutionalized identity denial: first negating the existence of an identity and then systematically dismantling the educational, religious, and publishing institutions required to sustain it. This Tsarist precedent is directly mirrored in modern Russian rhetoric concerning the existence of Ukrainian statehood. While the Russian Empire often lacked the centralized resources and consistent political will to carry out comprehensive programs of national assimilation,⁷ the Soviet project of Sovietization was far more systematic. Sovietization aimed ambitiously at a “total transformation of human existence” and the extension of state control over a diverse population.⁸

A key institutional innovation of the Soviet era was the masking of its assimilation policy. Unlike the overt legal prohibitions of the Tsarist period, Soviet leadership rarely openly advocated Russification, especially after the Stalin era.⁹ Instead, the policy was concealed beneath euphemisms such as “international politics” or the “internationalization of public relations.” This framing allowed the state to promote Russian as the primary all-Union language, linking its adoption to expected “modern” lifestyles that drew on idealized Russian cultural models.¹⁰ This shift from straightforward prohibition to sophisticated ideological masking and administrative incentivization made the assimilation process appear voluntary—or an inevitable function of modernization—thereby providing a complex template for contemporary cultural subjugation.

This institutional subtlety was evident in education policy, known as de-Ukrainization, during the 1960s and 1970s. The 1959 Law on Strengthening the Connection Between School and Life, while granting parents a nominal right to choose the language of instruction, became a “powerful tool of purposeful Russification.”¹¹ The policy ranged from encouraging Russian-language learning to the outright substitution of Ukrainian with Russian in educational institutions. This process increased the number of Russian-language schools, imposed requirements to conduct examinations and dissertation defenses in Russian, and expanded mandatory instructional time for Russian within school curricula.¹²

The intellectual foundation for the invasion and subsequent annexation policies is contained in President Vladimir Putin’s 2021 essay, “*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*.”¹³ Though widely recognized as propaganda and pseudohistory, the essay asserts that Russians and Ukrainians are fundamentally “one people,” united by spiritual and civilizational ties, with Putin directly insisting that:

“I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.”¹⁴

This rhetoric of conditional statehood is a direct ideological continuation of the Tsarist policy established by the Valuev Circular, elevated from the denial of a language to the denial of the state itself. By openly questioning Ukraine's borders and legitimacy, and by claiming that Russia was "robbed" of historical Russian lands, the essay provides justification for subsequent military and administrative actions.¹⁵ This shift marks the transition into a phase of "militarized reimperialization" in post-imperial conflict, following the failure of softer diplomatic and cultural outreach.¹⁶

Forced Assimilation in Contemporary Donbas: Weaponizing Education and Ideology

In addition to Putin's essay, Russian governance in eastern Ukraine is underpinned by a powerful ideological narrative intended to legitimize its actions. Russian state propaganda repeatedly claims that it is "liberating" the Donbas region and protecting "Russian speakers" from an alleged "genocide."¹⁷ This narrative is used to justify both the invasion and the subsequent suppression of Ukrainian culture. The rhetoric aligns with long-standing Russian chauvinist concepts, including the idea of a "Russian World" (русский мир, *Russkiy Mir*) and the historical notion of "New Russia" (Новороссия, *Novorossiya*), which once referred to regions of modern-day southern and eastern Ukraine under Russian imperial control.¹⁸ These ideas are deployed to articulate Russia's ambitions and justify its actions in countries such as Ukraine.

The concept of the Russian World refers to a transnational community united by Russian language, culture, and Orthodox Christian faith, often extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation itself. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the Donbas region is considered "critical to fulfilling the vision of the 'Russkiy Mir' that Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin is trying to create."¹⁹ This vision implies a sphere of influence and control in which Russian identity and interests are paramount. The term *Novorossiya* is a historical concept that was "rescued from the imperial past" by Vladimir Putin, referring to an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century designation for southeastern regions of contemporary Ukraine.²⁰ Within this framework, the Donbas is cast as a prized objective at the heart of Putin's vision for Russia's future. Complete control over this industrial belt would represent a major strategic victory for Russia and pose a risk of further expansion toward Kyiv and other European states with significant Russian ethnic populations.

The Russian state's claim of "protecting" the Donbas population is sharply contradicted by realities on the ground. The post-2022 full-scale invasion has led to a catastrophic population decline, with barely half of the approximately six million people living in eastern Ukraine in 2022 remaining—either killed or displaced in the wake of the supposed "liberation."²¹ This profound discrepancy between stated motives and lived experience highlights a cold, transactional logic: the so-called "people of Donbas" are not treated as a population to be defended, but as a strategic resource to be exploited in service of Russia's military and geopolitical ambitions.

A central pillar of Russian governance in the occupied territories is the forced "passportization" of the local population, a process that coerces Ukrainian citizens into accepting Russian citizenship. This policy functions as a powerful tool of control and assimilation. Those who refuse to take a Russian passport face severe penalties, including denial of access to essential services such as healthcare, employment, and social security benefits. A decree signed by Vladimir Putin in April 2023 further threatened individuals who

refuse Russian citizenship with deportation if deemed to pose a national security risk. This policy also carries direct military implications. By coercing residents into Russian citizenship, the state can legally conscript men into the Russian armed forces, forcing them to fight against their home country. This practice reveals a calculated strategy to extract military manpower from the local population, directly contradicting the narrative of “liberating” a “brotherly people.” In the initial stages of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, Russia imposed L/DPR passports (from the so-called “Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics,” Russia-financed and supported terrorist organizations) rather than Russian passports, as was the case in Russian-occupied Crimea. This distinction served to portray Crimea as part of Russia proper while framing eastern Ukraine as a breakaway region embroiled in a civil war.

In addition to forced passportization of the Ukrainian population already under its control, Russian authorities are engaged in a systematic campaign to suppress Ukrainian culture and language. Ukrainian-language education has been effectively banned and replaced with a Russian curriculum, a move the Kremlin justifies as reflecting “changes in the geopolitical situation.”²² Schools in the occupied territories are now forced to use Russian textbooks that present a pro-Kremlin narrative of history and legitimize the invasion. Perhaps most alarming is the militarization of the education system. Schools are being repurposed as instruments of war, with a focus on “military-patriotic education.” In 2022, local education systems in these occupied areas were forcibly integrated into the Russian system, with textbooks shipped directly from the Russian Federation.²³ Political indoctrination targeting the younger generation is widespread. Donetsk and Luhansk have established militarized youth organizations for this purpose. Educational institutions, along with local media and other public services, are dominated by Putin loyalists, leaving no space for independent political activity.

Alongside forced passportization and military education, Russia has taken steps to integrate the Donbas economy into its own. The Russian ruble has been established as the de facto circulating currency in both Donetsk and Luhansk.²⁴ In an effort to further sever ties with Ukraine and consolidate control, telecommunications systems have been integrated into Russia’s network, and the regions now operate under the Russian telephone numbering plan (+7). In Donetsk Oblast, the telecommunications numbering plan switched to +7(949), and in Luhansk Oblast, the numbering plan switched to +7(959).²⁵

These policies of passportization, economic integration, and educational Russification are not isolated actions but interconnected elements of a broader, long-term plan for demographic and cultural absorption. The objective is to create a new generation that is ideologically loyal to Moscow, thereby extinguishing Ukrainian identity and ensuring that a future return to Ukrainian rule is not only politically difficult but culturally unimaginable.

The Myth of Russian Reconstruction in the Donbas: Industrial Colonialism

The Donbas region has historically been a key industrial center and economic powerhouse for Ukraine. Before the war, its metallurgy and mining industries were a significant driver of Ukraine’s economy.²⁶ On the eve of World War I, this region was producing a large percentage of the Russian Empire’s coal, iron ore, cast iron, steel, and electricity, indicating its industrial importance to Eastern Europe.²⁷ The agricultural sector in Ukraine previously contributed 10 percent of the nation’s GDP and accounted for over 40 percent of exports.²⁸ However, the Donbas’s economic output has been decimated by the war. The conflict has ruined the area’s economy and industries. For example, the coal industry in the Donbas experienced a production

drop of over 22 percent in 2014 alone.²⁹ In cities like Mariupol, factories are now rubble, and job opportunities are limited to small shops and construction, often focused on restoring facades rather than complete interior and structural work.

Publicly, Vladimir Putin has pledged to rebuild destroyed cities, residential buildings, schools, and industrial enterprises in the occupied territories. He stated that Russia would “restore and develop industrial enterprises, factories, infrastructure, as well as the social security, pension, and healthcare and education systems.”³⁰ Despite these promises coming from the man who started this war, there is evidence suggesting a profound discrepancy between grand pledges and actual reconstruction efforts. Ukrainian experts and regional analysts dismiss the narrative of reconstruction as Kremlin propaganda designed to project legitimacy over occupied territories and distract local populations with “grandiose promises.”³¹ Projects such as multi-story hospitals, industrial parks, and recreational facilities have been presented to support these claims of reconstruction, but few of these plans have made tangible progress.

This gap between Russia’s rhetoric and its actions indicates that the primary objective is not to restore the Donbas for its people, but to extract its strategic military and economic value for Russia. Reports suggest that reconstruction efforts are slow, superficial, and reliant on exploitative labor practices. Russian companies, including military-industrial firms, have been establishing a presence in the region, with some reports indicating the construction of new production facilities. This economic strategy constitutes a form of industrial colonialism, mirroring historical patterns of Russian economic control over Ukraine and other former Soviet territories as sources of raw materials and labor. By creating a dependent workforce and integrating the region’s infrastructure into Russia’s own systems, these so-called “reconstruction” efforts further entrench Russian control without genuinely rebuilding the region for the people they claim to protect.

The History Versus Geography Debate

To fully understand the future of the Donbas region, it is essential to understand the mechanisms by which the influences of man-made historical events or God-given geography shape long-term development. The “history versus geography” debate in economic development explores whether a country’s long-term prosperity is primarily determined by static, unchanging geographic factors or by the legacy of historical events. On one side of this debate, scholars such as Jeffrey Sachs have argued for the primacy of geography, suggesting that factors such as climate, natural resources, or disease environments directly influence a nation’s wealth today. In contrast, there is a growing body of evidence contending that historical events are the key determinants of long-term prosperity. Researchers such as Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson argue that historical events shape a society’s institutions and cultural norms, which then persist over centuries to influence economic outcomes.³² However, Nathan Nunn provides a framework that encourages a more nuanced, interactive understanding of societal development. His framework identifies three primary channels of causality: institutions, culture, and path dependence leading to multiple equilibria. Rather than viewing history and geography as binary determinants of a society’s future, it is through history that we can better understand geography—and thus better predict the future.

For instance, the Donbas's geography—its location and industrial, coal-rich landscape, combined with a sizable pre-war ethnic Russian population—is not a static determinant of its current condition. Instead, this geography heavily influenced the historical events that began unfolding in 2014.³³ When considering the value of resources the Donetsk region provides to a potential invader, alongside Russia's narrative that the ethnic Russian population was being unduly suppressed, the Donbas's geographical conditions alone did not make invasion particularly compelling. Vlad Mykhnenko notes that the Donbas was “neither outstandingly prosperous nor excessively economically depressed—relative to the rest of Ukraine—to warrant an armed uprising of its own volition.”³⁴ On their own, the Donbas's resource endowments and demographic makeup held little meaning until Russia initiated its hybrid warfare campaign in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 with the goal of shifting the regional equilibrium.

The Russian occupation and administration of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts provide a clear illustration of Nunn's argument that geography most strongly affects economic development through its influence on history.³⁵ The Donbas's developmental trajectory is not a simple product of geography, but rather the result of geography operating through history. The region's historical ties, industrial base, and demographic composition—shaped in large part by earlier Russian settlement and industrial policy—became the tinder for Russian annexation efforts, which evolved from covert gray-zone operations in 2014 to the full-scale invasion in 2022 and the subsequent imposition of institutions. The resulting developmental schism is therefore the product of the interaction between historical forces and geography, not a simple reflection of the innate, unchanging geographic characteristics of Eastern Ukraine.

The Role of Institutions in Path Dependence

The concept of institutions as a primary channel is central to Nunn's discussion of development, which highlights the work of Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson on the persistence of colonial institutions.³⁶ Their research found that colonies with high European mortality rates—and thus low settlement—had extractive, rent-seeking institutions imposed upon them, which persisted long after independence and had a strong negative effect on per capita income.³⁷ A similar dynamic is unfolding in the Donbas. The Russian-imposed governance structures, characterized by a lack of political pluralism and an opaque economic system, are not an accident; they are a deliberate imposition of an extractive institutional model. The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics were never genuinely sovereign entities, despite their constitutions' outward appearance of democracy and human rights, and despite militia commander Alexander Zakharchenko's calls for a cease-fire to allow humanitarian aid to enter Eastern Ukraine.³⁸ Instead, they were designed as transitional mechanisms for institutional absorption, with local political parties and leaders eventually absorbed into Russia's ruling United Russia Party. This systematic co-optation of political institutions under Moscow's centralized control stands in direct opposition to the democratic reforms and property rights protections Ukraine has been pursuing.

The long-term effects of such institutional imposition are demonstrated by Melissa Dell's research on the colonial *mita* labor system in Peru and Bolivia.³⁹ Dell's study found that the negative legacy of the *mita* system—which was implemented by the Spanish in 1573 and abolished in 1812—continues to be felt today, resulting in stunted growth, lower household consumption, and a less developed road network. The channels for this persistence were traced

to impacts on landownership and the ability to procure public goods.⁴⁰ In the Donbas, institutional changes have produced a non-competitive, closed economic system designed to benefit Moscow rather than the local population. For example, local metal and coal are sold at steep discounts to Russia, while Moscow provides subsidies to keep the region afloat.⁴¹ This extractive model stifles local economic growth and independent market activity. It is also structurally designed to perpetuate underdevelopment—a pattern likely to persist long after any “peace” agreement.

Nunn’s framework also emphasizes that historical events can permanently alter a society’s cultural norms and behavior.⁴² In the Donbas, Russia has actively weaponized education and media to engineer a profound cultural shift that did not previously exist in the region. Russia’s forced Russification policies are not merely temporary wartime measures, but a systematic effort to alter deep-seated cultural norms and collective identity.⁴³ The deliberate falsification of history, the suppression of the Ukrainian language, and the militarization of youth through state-mandated propaganda and organizations such as “Yunarmia” (Юнармия, “Young Army”)⁴⁴ are all part of a long-term strategy to ensure that the “history” of Russian rule creates a permanent schism in cultural norms and collective memory.

This process is a deliberate and central component of institutional imposition. The contrast between this top-down cultural engineering and the evolution of cultural norms examined in Nunn’s work—such as the Protestant work ethic or the persistence of a culture of honor in the American South—is striking.⁴⁵ Whereas Nunn’s examples describe organic, historically evolving cultural traits, the situation in the Donbas involves a coercive, state-directed campaign to replace one national identity with another. The long-term result is likely to be a generation shaped by a fundamentally different worldview and value system from their peers in the rest of Ukraine, rendering future social and political reintegration nearly impossible.

Multiple Equilibria and Path Dependence

The final channel of causality—multiple equilibria and path dependence—is the most powerful in predicting the long-term fate of the Donbas. As Nunn notes, in models with multiple equilibria, a temporary shock can cause a permanent shift from one equilibrium to another.⁴⁶ The German airport study by Redding, Sturm, and Wolf provides a concrete example. They found that the temporary shock of Germany’s division after World War II caused the country’s air hub to permanently shift from Berlin to Frankfurt, creating a new equilibrium from which it did not return even after reunification.⁴⁷

The ongoing conflict and institutional imposition have already acted as a massive shock that has shifted the Donbas to a new equilibrium. The sunk costs and path dependence created by the conflict are so significant—including destroyed infrastructure, forced migration, and the widespread cultural indoctrination of a generation—that a return to the pre-2014 equilibrium is no longer feasible, even if politically desired. This renders divergence a self-reinforcing and permanent condition, in which any future peace will merely institutionalize the schism rather than bridge it.

Conclusion

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is more than a conventional war fought with military force; it is a case of irregular warfare waged through the deliberate manipulation of institutions. By

systematically imposing new governance structures, currency, educational curricula, and citizenship requirements, Russia has created a new reality in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This strategy is not a temporary byproduct of the invasion, but a calculated effort to sever these regions from Ukraine and absorb them into a Russian sphere of control.

Irregular warfare analysis must expand beyond tactics and operations to account for the long-term, path-dependent effects of institutional imposition. Russia's actions in the Donbas—including passportization, the suppression of Ukrainian culture and language, and economic integration—are interconnected elements of a broader strategy of demographic and cultural absorption. The objective is to create a new generation loyal to Moscow and a cohort of future fighters prepared to carry out the Kremlin's bidding, rendering any future return to Ukrainian rule culturally unimaginable.

Drawing on frameworks from economic development, we can see how this form of institutional warfare is shifting the Donbas toward a new and permanent equilibrium. The immense sunk costs created by the conflict make a return to the pre-2014 state of affairs no longer feasible, even if politically desirable. The imposed institutions, characterized by opaque and extractive models, will continue to stifle local growth and perpetuate underdevelopment long after any potential peace agreement.

Ultimately, regardless of the military outcome, Ukraine will be left to confront the enduring consequences of a war fought not with bullets, but with bureaucracy. The developmental schism between the occupied territories and the rest of Ukraine is becoming a self-reinforcing, permanent condition. This analysis urges the irregular warfare community to integrate the study of institutional path dependence into future analysis, as it remains a crucial yet underexamined aspect of modern conflict.

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⁴⁷ Stephen J. Redding, Daniel M. Sturm, and Nikolaus Wolf, "History and Industry Location: Evidence from German Airports," CEPR Discussion Paper Series no. 6345 (2007).