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**“Playing Government.”**  
Analyzing Civilian Behavior and Endogenous Identities in Separatist Donetsk

“My mama used to tell me her favorite proverb. There is a cat and there is a dog. The cat lives in warmth next to her owner, and the dog is in the doghouse, in the cold. It seems like they live close to each other, right? But one’s got a dog’s life, the other’s got a cat’s. One’s got a good life, the other doesn’t. It’s just like that here.”

- Valentin, 72, lifelong resident of Donetsk

“Russia spilled a bucket of legos and now [the separatists] are trying to build something. They are just playing government.”

- Maxim, 23, lifelong resident of Donetsk

### Abstract

This essay uses empirical evidence from interviews to argue that the “pro-Russian” and “pro-Ukrainian” identities often perceived as having caused the conflict in Donbas are largely endogenous to the conflict.

The main finding of this essay is that individual actors’ behavior cannot be predicted from pre-conflict political attitudes or generalized ethnic identities. Political and even ethnic identities are fluid and subject to change, especially when actors experience violence. They therefore do not appear to be a good predictor of individual political behavior. This essay shows that noncombatants’ political behavior seems to be strongly influenced by organizations in power and by the systems of incentives that these organizations set up. Interviews with Donetsk locals reveal that the political polarization imposed by the media ultimately does not appear to govern people’s decisions to the extent that the media implies.

If interested in seeing the full-length essay, please contact [alinasidorova4@gmail.com](mailto:alinasidorova4@gmail.com).