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State, society and protest under post-communism

Ukrainian miners and their defeat

Vlad Mykhnenko

Introduction

Why did Central and Eastern Europeans protest less about the brutal social conditions of systemic change than the people of Latin America had a decade earlier? How did it happen that less disruptive forms of protest emerged as dominant social responses to economic grievances? These questions are addressed in a recently published work on patience in post-communist societies (Greskovits 1998). Leaving the volume's answer aside, one might ask, alternatively, what happened when Eastern Europeans did protest? How have their opponents reacted to disruptive rather than 'stabilising' forms of protest? Are we really witnessing the birth of civil society where 'it is not clear who is boss' (Gellner 1996) or is the old boss still in place?

This chapter focuses on one of the most militant examples of post-communist contentious politics — the movement of the Donbas coal miners in Ukraine.¹ This social movement was born in 1989, when over 500,000 Soviet coal miners went on strike. The miners' action soon became a symbol of the emerging civil society, that is, a group or mass of people who can check and counterbalance the state (Gellner 1996). In the 'hot summer' of 1989, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS) capitulated to the triumphant miners. The Soviet state collapsed soon afterwards. Yet a decade after their victory, a spirit of depression has hovered over the Donbas miners.

Notwithstanding the justice of their cause and their countless waves of disruptive protest, the Donbas miners have failed to achieve their goal. The miners' movement did challenge the state. However, the outcome of this challenge has lagged far behind the expectations generated after the miners' symbolic victory in 1989. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to understand why this was the case and how the labour movement has influenced Ukraine's political transformation. The first part examines basic properties of the miners' movement, before turning to the evolution of its contentious politics. Subsequently, possible explanations for the apparent failure of organised labour are considered. In the conclusion, the impact of

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the miners' contentious politics on the process of democratisation in Ukraine is discussed. It is argued that the dynamics of contentious politics rather than the alleged patience or apathy of Eastern Europeans provide a better insight into the apparent failure of organised labour to sustain its role under post-communism.

The Donbas miners' movement

Basic properties

Social movements are defined by Sidney Tarrow as 'collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities' (1998: 4). Such a sustained interaction leads to shifts within movements and to changes in their basic characteristics. Therefore, before moving towards the interaction generated by the Donbas miners, one should briefly examine the historical and socio-economic context of their movement at its initial stage, that is, before the movement was actually born in the sequences of contention. Following the concept of Donna Della Porta and Mario Diani (1999: 14-16), four characteristic aspects of the miners' movement need our special attention: (a) informal interaction networks, (b) shared beliefs and solidarity, (c) collective action focusing on conflicts, and (d) use of protest.

Historical environment and informal networks

The initial development of the Donbas was similar to that of the Ruhr area in Germany or Upper Silesia in Poland. The industrialisation of the region began after the discovery of hard coal. As early as 1917, the Donbas was producing 87 per cent of the Russian Empire's coal output, 76 per cent of pig iron, 57 per cent of steel, and more than 90 per cent of coke (Afonin 1990: 45). After the Bolshevik revolution and Stalin's industrialisation, the Donbas remained the largest producing area of coal, iron and steel in Ukraine and one of the world's major metallurgical and heavy-industrial complexes (Mykhnenko 1999).

For centuries, the area of the Donbas was an empty field. The Industrial Revolution and Stalin's Great Terror opened the region to massive migration. People were attracted to the Donbas by the region's vast employment opportunities as much as by its image of a 'safe haven for fugitives' (Kuromiya 1998). The Donbas eventually became a highly urbanised and densely populated 'melting pot' of various ethno-linguistic groups. The Donbas population of about 7.5 million people is mainly a mixture of ethnic Ukrainians (51 per cent) and ethnic Russians (44 per cent) (Derzhkomstat Ukrainy 2000: 344; Goskomstat SSSR 1991: 80—2). However, due to the prolonged powerlessness of the Ukrainian cultural tradition, over four-fifths of the Donbas population are Russian speakers (Smith and Wilson 1997: 847).

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Therefore, the area has been widely regarded as the eastern pole in a cultural identity cleavage claimed to divide the country along the 'Western Ukraine—Eastern Ukraine' ethno-linguistic, religious, economic and historical axis (Shulman 1999; Wilson 1995).

Another particular feature of the Donbas is its social class structure. In general, the region has been a base for over 23 per cent of Ukraine's industrial labour force. During the 1989 Soviet census, 70 per cent of the Donbas inhabitants were classified as working-class (workers); a quarter of the population were identified as white-collar personnel (public servants); and only 5 per cent were classified as peasants (collective farmers) (Goskomstat SSSR 1993: 16). By the late 1980s, coal mining accounted for 21 per cent of the region's industrial output. About 35 per cent of the Donbas industrial labour force were employed by 254 coal mines and mining-related firms (Zastavnyi 1990: 262). Working in extremely dangerous conditions, the Donbas miners developed close informal networks of reliance and socialisation. Common cultural traditions facilitated the extension of miners' informal interaction networks beyond their work place. In general, the informal ties observed among the Donbas miners are similar to those that used to exist among coal miners and their communities in other parts of the world (see Warwick and Littlejohn 1992).

Shared beliefs and solidarity

It has been already emphasised elsewhere that the main belief shared by the Donbas miners was based on the materialist understanding of their work (Crowley 1997; Siegelbaum 1997). In particular, the miners believed in the Marxist labour theory of value, where the quantity of labour used in the manufacture of a product determines its real, fundamental and immutable value. With the beginning of democratisation in the USSR, the miners' belief was increasingly related to a feeling of social injustice:

The problem, according to many miners, was that people were not getting paid according to their labour: those that worked hard, and produced something of material value, were being cheated out of its worth, while those that distributed this wealth, were enriching themselves without real work. The miners soon drew a connection between their sense of exploitation and the state's ability, through the self-appointed communist party, to distribute wealth as it saw fit. Indeed, the class based anger directed at managers within the enterprise was soon aimed towards a system the miners believed to be exploiting them.

(Crowley 1995: 59)

'Every worker feeds five to seven managers,' one miner remarked in 1989. 'We are like Negroes under slavery! There is no respect for us. No one listens to our demands!' (Kostiukovskii 1990: 63-4).

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Such perceptions of social injustice and exploitation were prevalent among the miners and were fostered by horrifically unsafe working conditions. In 1988, 80 per cent of the Ukrainian coal mines were over forty years old (Reshetilova et al. 1997: 103). Given the persistent under- investment into the industry, the number of industrial accidents has been growing (Rusnachenko 1993: 66). In the late 1980s, there were four deaths and six serious injuries for every one million tons of coal mined in the region (Sarzhani 1998: 163). In the 1990s, one miner was killed at work every day. The Donbas coal mining has become the lowest paid and most deadly mining profession in the world (CNN World News 20 August 2001). A deep feeling of social injustice and exploitation, the hazardous

working conditions, combined with a much-celebrated heroic image of miners, resulted in a strong sense of occupational solidarity.

Conflictual issues

Despite celebrating the miners as ‘quintessential proletarians’, state socialism was unable to adequately compensate them for the hard labour and human losses. In terms of monetary gratification, the miners were among the best-paid professions in the postwar USSR (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990). Underground workers were also provided with fairly high pensions as early as the age of fifty. Nevertheless, few miners have been able to reach pension age. In the early 1990s, the average life expectancy for the main coal mining occupations was about thirty-eight years (Siegelbaum and Walkowitz 1995: 121-2). Being paid officially for a six-hour working day, miners worked, in fact, for ten to eleven and sometimes even sixteen hours a day (Rusnachenko 1993: 67). A large number of coal workers were not provided with appropriate housing accommodation and lived in poor sanitary conditions. The predominance of ‘smoke-stack’ industries in a highly urbanised area led to large-scale environmental devastation. More over, with the beginning of perestroika, food and goods shortages became widespread and queues appeared to be endless. The lack of consumer goods, according to one 1989 survey, headed the list of miners’ grievances (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990: 14-16). A labour conflict was emerging:

Working deep below the surface, where temperatures and concentrations of methane gas were high, and frequently compelled to use ‘grandpa’s methods’ (that is, jack hammers and shovels) to extract coal, Donbas workers had the distinct sense that ‘Moscow’ did not care how much hard labour they expended or how many lives were sacrificed in the process.

(Siegelbaum 1997: 5-6)

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Use of protest

Della Porta and Diani have suggested that protest reflects a view of politics as a power struggle, in which involvement in civil society is not limited to elections (1999: 176). The participation in elections did not provide citizens under state socialism with a possibility to influence political decision-making in the country. Protest, thus, was the only resource for politically impoverished miners.

Working-class discontent in the Donbas became apparent at the early stage of Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika, democratisation and glasnost. In 1987—8, there were several local collective actions, ‘refusals to work’, and hunger strikes at some Donbas enterprises (Burnosov 1995). By the spring of 1989, the miners’ contentious action included about twelve brief local strikes and hundreds of telegrams, letters and petitions demanding enterprise independence and higher wages (Rusnachenko 1993: 68). During a visit to Donetsk in June 1989, Gorbachev himself was warned about miners’ discontent (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990: 8).

The main purpose of the emerging contention was miners’ endeavour to obtain a ‘normal’ or ‘civilised life’. According to some observers, what the miners called a ‘normal life’ was Western or American(ised) mass media, video or billboard images of

affluence ranging ‘from Disneyland to Pittsburgh’ (Walkowitz 1995). To be sure, there never was a coherent picture of what may constitute a ‘normal life’. Some naiveté with regard to the ‘civilised West’ existed among various social groups in Ukraine and other post-communist countries. Nevertheless, the hazardous situation in the Donbas coal industry simplified what can be regarded as reasonable living and working conditions:

People live to be just thirty-eight years old (...) [But] people’s dreams are different. My kids dream of being able to live in an apartment, in normal conditions (...) We want our kids to live like human beings. We don’t want luxuries or excesses, just to have some certainty about tomorrow. We want people to lead normal lives, to have acceptable, decent working conditions. This is all we are striving for. We don’t want anything else.

(interview with Donetsk City strike committee, May 1991, in Siegelbaum and Walkowitz 1995: 122)

The opportunity to work and earn money was considered to be among the main elements of such ‘normal life’ (see the interviews with miners in Siegelbaum and Walkowitz 1995).

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Cycles of contention

By the late 1980s, the Donbas miners acquired all the basic components needed for collective contentious action. Miners perceived state socialism – ‘the system’ – as their collective challenge. They recognised the existence of exploitation as their shared belief and striving for a ‘normal life’ as their common purpose. Oppressive working conditions, high levels of occupational density as well as existing Soviet rituals of celebrating ‘the heroes of labour’ forged the miners’ solidarity.

Mobilisation: 1989—91

The first wave of contention materialised in the summer strike of 1989. The strike started at a single mine in the Kuzbass² town of Mezhdurechensk. From Siberia, industrial action expanded to all other coal- fields in the Soviet Union. In the Donbas, the strike was initiated on 15 July 1989, also by a single mine. Soon, 173 out of 226 Donbas collieries went on strike. The overall number of strike participants in Ukraine exceeded 500,000 workers (Rusnachenko 1995). Demands of the miners were articulated by openly elected mine and city strike committees. According to most of the accounts, the strike was triggered by frustrated expectations, arbitrariness of authorities, lawlessness and anxiety that perestroika was passing the miners by with no improvement in living standards (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990; Kostiukskii 1990; Gavrillov and Lavrov 1989). A sociological survey conducted among the striking Donbas miners reported that ‘people were tired of waiting for promises to be fulfilled, that they had felt freed from “serfdom” by *glasnost*, that fear had vanished, thinking awakened, and that the media had

encouraged a popular rejection of the bureaucracy' (in Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990: 13-44).

The emphasis of the miners was put on economic demands. Some strike committees succeeded in purging the mine management as well as KPSS and municipal officials. Nevertheless, the miners produced mainly economic, welfare-related demands and not anti-communist slogans. The most radical among them was for full economic and legal autonomy of mining enterprises. The miners also demanded improvements in pay, holidays, pension, work, housing, and various welfare conditions. To make their demands publicly justified, the miners rebuffed 'outsiders', the emissaries of intelligentsia opposition groups from Kiev and western Ukraine, who had tried to turn the strike into a political struggle for Ukrainian independence.

Most observers have stressed that the party line was against the strike (Rusnachenko 1993; Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990). Local authorities and some mine managers tried to stop the spread of the strike around the region by threatening and provoking the workers. Although the majority

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of the region's population fully supported the miners' action, public opinion constructed by central mass media considered the miners as being already 'over-privileged' and selfish. The miners' demands were satisfied only after Gorbachev supported them in several public statements (Burnosov 1995). The miners also received the widely publicised support from Boris Yeltsin and members of the USSR Supreme Soviet elected from the Donbas (Gavrilov and Lavrov 1989). To the strike observers, the 1989 events produced an emerging sense of civic empowerment: 'In every sphere, the conviction grew that the worker should have a direct and clear input into the political system, and that the old system that had proved so corrupt and hypocritical must be radically changed' (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990: 19).

The civic competence of the miners grew further with the gradual decline of central authorities and the de-legitimisation of Gorbachev's reforms. The Donbas miners did not dissolve their strike committees, which were transformed into standing institutions. Some commentators predicted, however, that 'unless miners forge links with workers in other industries and further develop their new-found sense of civic competence, they will be outmanoeuvred by the forces of rationalisation, and their victory will have been short-lived' (Friedgut and Siegelbaum 1990: 32).

To initiate co-operation with the Ukrainian intelligentsia, shortly after the 1989 strike, a delegation of Donbas miners attended the inaugural congress of the Ukrainian Popular Movement, Rukh. The delegation openly declared their struggle to be not purely economic but also political. The lack of understanding between workers and national intelligentsia was said to be caused by the 'divide and rule' policy of the KPSS-controlled media. 'We drank before, they pushed bottles in front of us. Enough!' said one of the miners. 'We need to learn. Organise us lectures. Only not "schools of young Communists" — we need legal, economic and political knowledge' (in Kuzio and Wilson 1994: 105-6).

No 'lectures' have followed. Nevertheless, the miners' movement was drifting to an open disapproval of the communist regime. The First and the Second All-Union Congresses of Miners, held in Donetsk in June and October 1990 respectively, became political rather than trade-unionist events. Resolutions adopted by the First Congress accused KPSS and the central government of blocking transition to market and

democracy (Burnosov 1995). The miners called for the resignation of the Soviet government and organised several strikes and rallies to support their political demands. In July 1990, about 256 mining, steel and transport enterprises held a one-day political strike supporting the resolutions of the congress (Rusnachenko 1995). Donbas miners began to withdraw from KPSS en masse. During the Second Congress, activists of the movement declared a need for establishing an independent trade union (Burnosov 1995). The Second Congress laid down the basis for the establishment of the Independent Miners' Union as an organisation aimed at defending the

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economic and social rights of miners. In turn, standing strike committees took upon themselves all the 'dirty' political work (see Siegelbaum and Walkowitz 1995).

In March—April 1991, the standing strike committees began to fulfil their function by holding the second all-Union miners' strike. This time the miners called openly for the resignation of Gorbachev and the central government, the dismantling of the Soviet parliament, and for granting constitutional status to the Ukrainian Declaration of Sovereignty (Rusnachenko 1995). The Donbas miners were not wary of provoking repression since the weakness of the Soviet state had long become apparent. The participation in the strike by individual mines was not as representative as in 1989 though (Burnosov 1995). Moreover, the strike demands were not supported by other groups of workers, who could not join the Donbas miners for the prevalence of enterprise paternalism (Crowley 1995). All post-Soviet workers heavily depended on their enterprises for the distribution of social goods, benefits and privileges. However, it was other industries with their large multifunctional plants and not coal pits that possessed a greater social infrastructure. Social grievances appeared to be more widespread among the coal miners than anybody else. And it was the miners who did not have much to lose in their contention with authorities. Thus, the radicalism of the miners' movement was unable to attract a broad working-class support. This notwithstanding, the mass media had no restrictions on publicising the 1991 strike and the authorities in Kiev and the Donbas supported the political demands of the miners. The strike leaders also co-operated with Ukrainian pro-independence and anti-Communist groups.

Although the 1991 strike did not assume a proportion capable of bringing down the Soviet state, it became, nevertheless, 'both a reflection of and a further impetus to the decline of the Soviet "centre"' (Siegelbaum 1997: 11). After the failed coup d'état of August 1991 in Moscow, the Soviet Union collapsed. In the referendum held on 1 December 1991, a Russified Donbas voted overwhelmingly for the independence of Ukraine. With the turnout approaching 80 per cent, 84 per cent of Donbas voters supported independence (Kuzio and Wilson 1994: 198). On the same day, Leonid Kravchuk, a KPSS functionary turned nationalist, was elected president of Ukraine. The first phase of the miners' movement was over.

Adjustment: 1992-4

With Ukraine independence, all demands of the Donbas miners seemed to be finally realised. Yet post-communist transformations and Ukraine's nation-building process soon generated new challenges for the miners' movement. The goals of the miners and other vocal Ukrainian opposition groups in opposing the Soviet state and 'Moscow bureaucracy' were almost identical. This similarity, however, was based on different beliefs.

Ukrainian national intellectuals perceived independence as their greatest objective per Se. As Taras Kuzio and Andrew Wilson (1994) emphasise, the intelligentsia approached ‘practical’ demands of the workers as some thing to be solved by itself through tackling the political issue. Members of Rukh, the largest opposition force, concentrated on cultural and political issues. At the First Congress of Rukh, promoting ‘democratisation and the expansion of glasnost’ was supported by 75 per cent of the delegates; 73 per cent advocated ‘the development of Ukrainian language and culture,’ but only 46 per cent prioritised ‘the solving of pressing economic problems’ (Kuzio and Wilson 1994: 111). Contrary to the intelligentsia, the workers supported Ukraine’s independence because they believed it would improve their material conditions. The Donbas miners thought Ukraine’s independence would assure enterprise autonomy and the accountability of the state (Crowley 1995).

The miners’ victory appeared to be short-lived. Independence did not bring economic improvement. Despite pressing economic needs, the main effort of the state authorities was placed not on economic transformation, but on the institutionalisation of the new Ukrainian nation (von Hirschhausen 1998). New Ukrainian authorities appeared to be embedded in economic nationalism and habits of central planning. Central ministries continued to prescribe quantitative economic plans and the state retained its tight control over the economy (VRU 1994). Ukraine’s government ‘tried to preserve an industrial structure which could not be preserved’ (von Hirschhausen 1998: 452). By the end of 1993, gross domestic product fell by more than 40 per cent (Havrylyshyn *et al.* 1998). In 1993, real wages were only 57.6 per cent of the 1991 level. Consumer prices skyrocketed by 13,046 per cent (Lavigne 1999: 290-1). As late as 1994, Ukraine, in fact, made no progress in reforming its economy (EBRD 1994). The vague economic policy of successive Ukrainian governments pushed the country into ‘one of the deepest post-Soviet recessions experienced by any of the transition economies not affected by war’ (EIU 1998: 16).

By 1993, the most common feeling among Donbas workers was a sense of approaching ‘civil war’, ‘revolution’, or ‘social explosion’ (interviews with miners in Siegelbaum and Walkowitz 1995: 186, 209). At this moment, regional elites entered the political stage to champion ‘the region’s interests’ (Smith and Wilson 1997: 849—50). In the first few years after the restoration of Ukraine’s independence, Donetsk held establishing congresses and conferences of six political organisations: the Socialist Party (SPU), the Communist Party (KPU), the Labour Party (PP), the Liberal Party (LP), the Party of Slavonic Unity (PSE), and the Civic Congress of Ukraine (HKU) (Bolbat *et al.* 1994). Besides the communists, headed by Petro Symonenko — the Donetsk oblast KPSS committee secretary in the 1980s — other parties failed to gain a broad country-wide support. However, as some observers noticed, all the parties succeeded in developing a similar political agenda for the Donbas, advocating regional

autonomy, self-government, legal status for Russian as the official language in the Donbas and as a second state language in Ukraine, and closer ties and re-integration within the CIS (Nemyr’ya 1995; Wilson 1993). As the Donbas was significantly contributing to the national budget, radicals accused Kiev of ‘expropriating all the Donbas money’ and pumping it into nationalist and ‘culturally alien’ west Ukrainian provinces (Nemyr’ya 1995: 457). The regionalist political agenda set by newly established parties and informal groupings gained support from local mass media.

Donbas miners joined the campaign. In February 1992, Ukrainian miners established the Independent Miners' Union of Ukraine (NPH). First, NPH, alongside the once official Trade Union of Coal Mining Industry Employees (PPVP), began to pursue trade-unionist demands bargaining with Kiev for subsidies, pensions and wages. Given the unresponsiveness of the Ukrainian government preoccupied with ethno-nationalising policies, the Donbas miners began to support the idea of developing the region's own economic policy. After several waves of picketing the Ukrainian parliament, the offices of the central government, and the regional administration, the miners resorted to the most successful mechanism of their movement.

On 7 June 1993, the first mine in Donetsk stopped working. The next day, another seventy-five mines joined the strike. The industrial action was co-ordinated by the Donetsk strike committee, which put forth two radical political demands: (1) Regional independence for the Donbas, and (2) a country-wide referendum on (no) confidence in Ukraine's president and the parliament (Crowley 1995; Rusnachenko 1995). Up to 400 mining and major industrial enterprises in the Donbas took part in the strike (Rusnachenko 1995: 218). The political demands of the miners enjoyed full support from coal mining trade unions, mine managers and other industrialists, Donbas-based political parties and movements, local officials, the mass media, and the majority of the region's population:

It was therefore not simply a strike of miners and other workers, nor a 'directors' strike' with workers performing the role of foot soldiers, but a regional protest against the government in Kiev, its president, and policies that had brought the Donbass to its knees.

(Crowley and Siegelbaum 1995: 72)

Reacting militantly, President Kravchuk declared the state of emergency in the country and took over the cabinet. To prevent civil unrest, Ukraine's parliament finally agreed to hold a referendum on Kravchuk's presidency and on new parliamentary elections. The government's emergency commission agreed to consider 'economic independence' for the Donbas and satisfy demands for wage increases and indexations (Burnosov 1995; Crowley and Siegelbaum 1995).

The June 1993 strike was the most successful contentious collective

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action of Donbas miners. Their movement succeeded in sustaining interaction with antagonists, elites and society. It also managed to become the most powerful mobilising structure and framing process for public protest in the country. However, the subsumption of the movement 'within a larger regional framework altered its character and placed it at the disposal of other economic and political forces' (Crowley and Siegelbaum 1995: 72). The scale of popular discontent turned the miners' strike into not so much an economic struggle 'as a struggle between the Donbas region and the rest of the country' (Siegelbaum 1997: 18). Though the 1993 strike was initiated by the miners, it had been eventually headed by the regional elites — local administration officials, clientelistic groupings, and industrial lobbies.

Hiroaki Kuromiya (1998) has argued that the miners' demand for a free economic zone was, in fact, a rejection of the old, centrally planned economy preserved by the

central government in Kiev. Nonetheless, pro-market features of the 1993 strike were engulfed in the broader regionalist protest. Consequently, during the March—April 1994 parliamentary elections, opposition forces headed by hard-liners from the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) won the majority of seats in the region. In the aftermath of the strike, Donbas voters assured the victory of Leonid Kuchma, a pragmatic eastern Ukrainian industrialist, over Kravchuk in the June—July 1994 presidential elections. The miners' movement entered the last phase of its development.

Fragmentation: 1995 — present

Actively contending the governing authorities, the Donbas miners perceived democratisation and marketisation as means of achieving their main aim. 'Moscow bureaucrats' and 'Kiev nationalists' were consequently seen as the main obstacle to a civilised way of living. With the election of Kuchma, the miners' last rival had fallen. However, as Lewis Siegelbaum (1997) has put it, the 'fruits of miners' victory' were to become their new and ultimate challenge.

In October 1994, the administration of President Kuchma launched a programme of market-oriented reforms. Within three years, the government achieved macro-economic and monetary stabilisation. The inflation rate fell from a skyrocketing 10,000 per cent annually in 1993 to 15 per cent in 1997. If between 1991 and 1996, Ukraine's national currency lost 18,000 times its value against the US dollar, during the next four years the national currency was devaluated 3.3 times 'only'. Substantial progress was also made on price and trade liberalisation and small-scale privatisation. The majority of state-owned enterprises was formally privatised or commercialised. By mid-1999, the non-state sector share of GDP reached 55 per cent (EBRD 1999: 24). Nevertheless, Ukraine's GDP continued to fall until a 6 per cent recovery in 2000. Household incomes contracted by 3.7

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times since 1991 (*Uriadovyi Kur'er* 14 April 2001). To be sure, the official statistics do not report on Ukraine's vast and fast-growing black economy. Nonetheless, such data provide a picture of miners' deprivation, since they have been earning their living in the official public sector.

The mismanagement of Ukraine's economy has badly hit the energy sector. International Energy Agency and World Bank reports have described Ukraine's coal industry as being in 'a deep crisis' and in 'a painful decline' (IEA 1996; WB 1996). The lack of any significant structural reforms was blamed for the collapse of the industry. Indeed, it suffered a 50 per cent slump in coal output between 1990 and 1995. This notwithstanding, labour rationalisation efforts were minimal. According to independent reports, Ukraine's coal industry employed 650,000 miners in 1995, which produced 65.6 million tons of coal in 276 mines and 64 coal washing plants. Taking into account people employed in supporting functions, mining-related industries, managerial and technical staff, and social services (such as kindergartens, hospitals, canteens and sanatoriums), the total number of Ukraine's coal industry employees was around 1,000,000 (Lovei 1998). One-third of Ukrainian mines produced coal at a price above the average import price (IEA 1996: 157—8). Following a famous observation, 'the spectre of the Iron Lady has hung over the "bloated" mining industry, the miners' movement, and the miners themselves' (Siegelbaum 1997: 22).

While trying to curb inflation and reduce budget deficit, Ukraine's government decreased the amount of subsidies given to the coal industry. The first restructuring efforts resulted in mounting financial losses and payment arrears across all sectors of the economy. A new cycle of miners' protest began in November 1995, when all NPHU branch leaders went on a hunger strike over unpaid wages and the deterioration in living conditions. Coal deliveries to customers were halted (*Monitor* 3 November 1995). In February 1996, miners in Russia and Ukraine started a simultaneous mass strike recalling the events of 1989. However, there was a critical difference between the previous and new phases of contention. Contrary to the events of 1989 and 1991, the miners now had 'eschewed political demands to focus instead on their empty wallets' (*Monitor* 2 February 1996). Over 600,000 Donbas miners took part in the protest refusing to load coal and demanding about \$122 million in back wages. Gaining support from steel workers, the trade union leaders called for a general strike. However, after some government's promises to pay the wages, the strike was suspended.

Notwithstanding the resignation of prime minister Evhen Marchuk, industrial action was soon resumed. In July 1996, about 140,000 Donbas miners took part in blocking roads and railway tracks, and in picketing the regional governments. Given the paralysis of highway and rail traffic in the Donbas, Ukraine's new prime minister, Pavlo Lazarenko, and other government officials concluded a strike settlement with both miners' trade

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unions. The government assured a full repayment of the overdue wages. The Donetsk governor was dismissed by President Kuchma for having lost control of the situation in the region. Nevertheless, radical leaders of the Donetsk strike committee did not accept the settlement and continued the strike and the traffic blockage. This time, the governing authorities resorted to repression. The leaders of the committee were arrested and put on trial in a remote provincial town. The riot police forced the miners to clear roads and railway tracks.

After the July 1996 protest, the fragmentation of the miners' movement was furthered by the government's restructuring programme. All collieries were divided into four categories, ranging from profitable mines to mines where production was stopped in anticipation of immediate closure (Lovei 1998). The non-payment crisis accompanied by a 'Thatcherite solution' had an immense impact on the miners' movement:

Many who were once active became disgusted with the failure of the movement to improve conditions for miners and their families or even arrest their deterioration. Some have taken advantage of skills honed in strike committees to go into business or another profession. Mutual recrimination and rivalry between the two unions, among different regions and within them, profitable and unprofitable mines, repeatedly fractured the movement causing further leakage. Tensions within the movement were exacerbated by the unequal distribution of subsidies which virtually invited miners to engage in locally organised protests to obtain their share.

(Siegelbaum 1997: 21)

From then on, wildcat strikes, spontaneous hunger strikes and pickets became a daily occurrence in the Donbas. The repertoire of contention included the blocking of roads and

railway lines, a bomb threat, marches of miners to regional capitals and Kiev, 'indefinite' refusals to work, and underground strikes. Clashes with police, collective suicide threats and several committed protest suicides were among the most extreme contentious actions that miners resorted to. The payment of wage and pension arrears became the most repeated demand.

In May 1998, when the wage arrears approached \$1 billion, NPHU called a strike supported, nevertheless, by 100,000 Donbas miners at forty- five mines only. The participants demanded the payment of wage and pension arrears, restoration of the 1990 parity of wages, pensions and social benefits, and priority public financing for the coal industry. PPVP did not support the strike, labelling it 'counterproductive'. Given the lack of co-ordination between the two trade unions, some miners resorted to spontaneous measures. Some 3000 miners from the western Donbas marched circa 100 kilometres on foot to the regional capital of Dnepropetrovsk and camped outside the county administration building to

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claim wage arrears. Some 1000 miners reached Kiev on foot. Notwithstanding the mass media publicity, the state and societal responses to the miners' protest were becoming increasingly hostile:

Popular support for miners weakened when, starting in mid-1998, representatives of other professions that were also suffering from unpaid wages (such as teachers and nurses) argued publicly against giving special treatment to miners. Recognising an opportunity, the government decided to revitalise the process of coal industry restructuring. A new coal minister was appointed in early June, and agreement was reached with the World Bank about a revised reform programme (...) bringing to fifty-two the number of mines closed or under closure.

(Lovei 1998: 6)

Donbas miners were again accused of being only interested in 'pulling the whole blanket on themselves'.

The miners' reaction this time was not anger but desperation. The suicide rate in the Donbas grew. On 14 December 1998, on the 155th day of picketing the county administration building in Luhansk, one of 200 miners, Oleksandr Mykhalevych, set himself on fire. On 22 January 1999, another miner, Oleksandr Konariov, burnt himself to death to protest against the humiliation of not being paid (*Associated Press* 20 February 1999). Common depressive feelings among the region's population were reflected in the results of the 1998 parliamentary elections, when extreme left and populist parties scored the biggest victories in the region (see Table 6.1).

The miners' protest voting led to an additional \$300 million allocated to the industry by the new parliament. Nevertheless, the elections did not appear to succeed in halting the pit closures. In line with official data the first twelve mines were closed in the region by the end of 1998. Around 372,000 employees left Ukraine's coal industry that year. In 1999, another

Table 6.1 Ukrainian parliamentary elections of April 1998, percentage of party votes

	Left*	Centre**	Right***
Donetsk oblast	54.3	10.7	0.0
Luhansk oblast	61.1	4.7	0.0
National average	37.3	19.2	9.4

Source: Ukraine's Central Electoral Committee (1998).

Note

Table contains votes for parties that overcame the 4% threshold either in the Donbas or in Ukraine as a whole. *Left-wing parties: Communist Party, Socialist/Peasants' Bloc, Progressive Socialist Party, and 'Working Ukraine' Bloc. **Centrist parties: Greens, United Social Democrats, Popular Democratic Party, Hromada, and Labour/Liberal Bloc. ***Right-wing parties: Popular Rukh.

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twenty mines were shut. The government planned to close another forty- nine mines in 2000. Thus, the fragmentation of the miners' movement was followed by the start of their industry's destruction.

In February 1999, 171 mines stopped dispatching coal to customers. The miners, organised this time by both trade unions, demanded the payment of wage arrears and the increase of subsidies to the coal industry. NPHU threatened to put forth political demands, including the resignation of the government and the president and to organise massive riots unless the miners' demands were met. Having decided to run for re-election in October 1999, President Kuchma was ready to intervene in the labour conflict. He ordered the cabinet to prioritise payment of the miners' wage arrears. To mitigate social unrest and mainly to gain support from the ambitious Donbas elites, President Kuchma finally granted a status of 'free economic zone' to Donetsk oblast, the most populous of the two Donbas provinces. According to a law adopted by the parliament just before the October 1999 presidential elections, Donetsk oblast was designated for the establishment of two special economic zones with preferential tax and custom duty havens. Seventeen mining towns in the Donbas were given the status of 'priority development territories' (VRU 1999).

During the 1999 presidential campaign, Kuchma visited the Donbas on several media publicised occasions. Using heavy-handed techniques against his opponents, Kuchma began to re-conquer the Donbas 'Red belt' previously occupied exclusively by KPU. He promised to provide Donbas clientelistic elites with even more 'economic independence'. In return, he was given an overwhelming backing by regional officials, local business circles and mass media (*Kyiv Post* 20 May 1999). 'Kuchma is for the Donbas. So, the Donbas is for Kuchma!' was the message to get the best promotion in the region (*Kyiv Post* 28 October 1999). This message also appeared to be the most widespread. During the first round of the elections on 31 October 1999, Donbas voters gave their preferences to Petro Symonenko, the Donetsk-based KPU leader. Nevertheless, during the second round on 14 December 1999, Kuchma succeeded in defeating Symonenko in the Donbas and, thus, in the country as a whole (see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Ukrainian presidential elections of October/November 1999, second round, percentage of votes

	<i>Symonenko</i>	<i>Kuchma</i>
Donetsk oblast	41.2	52.9
Luhansk oblast	53.9	40.7
Donbas average	48.2	51.8
National average	37.8	56.3

Source: Ukraine's Central Electoral Committee (1999).

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Soon after the elections, the bulk of state-owned property was redistributed to Ukraine's most powerful elites that fully supported the 'old and new' president (*Halyts'ki kontrakty* January 2000). According to several presidential decrees, the Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk oblast governments were given management rights over all state-owned and state-controlled companies and enterprises in their respective provinces, including the two largest energy companies in Ukraine. The county officials were effectively empowered to authorise all economic activity in the two regions (*Halyts'ki kontrakty* February 2000). Moreover, the government and the regional elites initiated talks over the establishment of Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk regional power 'supercompanies'. The two 'supercompanies' would encompass all energy, coal-mining and coal-washing enterprises, as well as research and development and banking institutions that exist in the provinces.

Donbas miners went on strike relentlessly at the beginning of 2000. The industrial action was either spontaneous or organised separately by the NPHU or the PPVP. Almost all steam mines (120 out of the 135 left) halted the delivery of coal to customers, demanding higher subsidies and wages, the payment of wage and pension arrears as well as the stopping of increasing coal imports from Poland and Russia. The Ukrainian government decisively refused 'to cede to the populist demands'. According to a local newspaper, the trade-union leaders did not nourish any particular hopes in the success of their action (*Gorod* February 2000). The following year no strikes were reported at all.

Explaining the failure

Since 1989, Donbas miners have been engaged in a sustained contentious interaction with their powerful opponents, the state and governing authorities. Resorting to various forms of protest, the miners' movement has tried to facilitate the creation of a 'normal life' for its participants. As the sections above have shown, the miners did not succeed in achieving their aim. The sad irony is that the miners' movement failed even to arrest the deterioration in living and working conditions of its participants. The Donbas miners continue to live and perish under increasingly desperate circumstances. Writing in 1997, Siegelbaum noted that 'the miners' movement has been sufficiently powerful to prevent a 'Thatcherite solution', but not strong enough to compel their governments to adopt a more human one' (p.27). By now, the strength of the miners' movement had been weakened even further. Why had the miners' movement failed? Was there any chance of its success?

Social movement theories emphasise the importance of three broad sets of factors that account for the emergence, development or decline of contentious politics. These three determinants are: (1) political opportunities – ‘changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations of a

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given political system’; (2) mobilising structures — ‘those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action’; and (3) framing processes — ‘conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdam *et al.* 1996: 1—20). Tarrow has linked these three broad sets of factors by stressing the degree of turbulence generated by social movements:

Changes in political opportunities and constraints create the most important incentives for initiating new phases of contention. These actions in turn create new opportunities both for the original insurgents and for latecomers, and eventually for opponents and power holders. The cycles of contention — and in rare cases, the revolutions — that ensue are based on the externalities that these actors gain and create. The outcomes of such waves of contention depend not on the justice of the cause or the persuasive power of any single movement, but on their breadth and the reactions of elites and other groups.

(1998: 7)

It is argued that the failure of the Donbas miners’ movement was determined in the first cycle of its contention. During the mobilisation phase, the miners used the changes in political opportunities and constraints provided by glasnost and perestroika to engage into the collective contentious action against powerful Moscow ‘partocrats’. The shifting of alignments within the communist state hierarchy assured the absence of repression against the workers. The division of political elites between communist hard-liners, bureaucratic moderates, and nationalist radicals provided the miners with access to political output. However, it was the nationalist Ukrainian intelligentsia, and not the workers from other industries, which appeared to become the miners’ most influential allies in their fight for the autonomy and independence from the centre.

The opponents of the Donbas miners and the Ukrainian intellectuals — ‘imperialists and exploiters in Moscow’ — were identical. Nevertheless, the framing process of their joint collective action was different. The miners mobilised for welfare gains, believed to be achieved through democratisation and marketisation. On the other hand, the preservation of national culture and language, threatened by Russian and Soviet assimilatory policies, was the main concern of the Ukrainian humanitarian intelligentsia. As long as ‘Moscow’ continued to exist, the link between the workers and the intellectuals sustained itself. That link was weak however. Operating within different cultural frames, the miners and the intellectuals failed to establish a common mobilising structure to reinforce their pro-democracy and pro-market challenges. No joint opposition institution emerged.

In addition to the intellectuals, there was another broader segment of

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the population to whom the miners' striving for a normal life could have been more appealing. Why did not other workers in post-Soviet Ukraine join the Donbas miners? Stephen Crowley (1995) has indicated that the difference in economic deprivation and enterprise paternalism deter mined, on the one hand, the particular militancy of the miners and, on the other hand, the lack of trans-occupational solidarity among workers in general. The apparent lack of working-class solidarity is recognised as the main reason for the failure of labour to 'become an organised political force capable of bringing about permanent social changes' (Crowley and Siegelbaum 1995: 66). Hence no Ukrainian 'Solidarity' was born.

The political opportunities created by the common action of Donbas miners and Kiev intellectuals were eventually hijacked by the former *nomenklatura* and new business elites. During the second phase of the miners' movement, the support previously provided by the national intelligentsia vanished. Coal managers, regional clientelistic groupings, business elites and broad segments of the local Russophone population were to become the miners' new allies. The movement was gradually transformed into a powerful mobilising structure for regionalist protest. The 1993 strike became a significant political opportunity for late-coming local elites in their contentious interaction with the new 'centre'. By opposing Kiev antagonists, the miners' movement became a part of the national power struggle between regional and central clientelistic groupings.

The start of market reforms and industrial restructuring fragmented and further weakened the miners' movement. The Donbas elites gained access to privatisation and property re-distribution mechanisms and lost their interest in the miners' mobilising structure. In the third cycle of contention, the miners' movement was abandoned by its last ally, the broad strata of the Donbas population. The economic crisis increased the cost of collective contentious action enormously. The double dependence of workers on the enterprise and, in turn, of the enterprise on the state budget became the main demobilising factor in the workers' fight for survival (Cook 1995). Growing unemployment and the degradation in living standards among various social groups of Ukrainian society had a delegitimising effect on the miners' movement. The sense of injustice and emotionality eventually turned into a feeling of helplessness, frustration, and depression. Political opportunities previously enjoyed by the miners also declined. The access to political and economic output was closed by the emerging consensus between former antagonists. Under Kuchma, national power struggle games became an internal affair of Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk elites. The elites' selective use of repression (as during the 1996 strikes), fragmentation (e.g. by providing the coal mines with different status) and incentives (e.g. by granting 'regional economic independence') had the effect of demobilising the miners.

The case of the Donbas miners suggests that not all Eastern Europeans were able to sustain their patience under post-communism. Some did

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protest against the draconian economic conditions of post-communist transformation. Moreover, they resorted to violent and disruptive as well as conventional forms of public protest. The militancy of the miners' movement was caused by traditional factors, i.e. economic inequality and deprivation. Their contentious action produced a social movement capable of influencing state policies and the government. Nevertheless, what happened afterwards was not the outcome the social movement had aimed for.

It appears that it is not the mere existence or absence of public protest that matters. Even violent, disruptive and prolonged public protest can be a failure without a constructive response from elites and social groups. As Tarrow (1998) has suggested, policy elites respond not to the claims of any individual movement but to the degree of turbulence generated by it. In the case of Ukraine, first, the cultural framing process associated with the Donbas miners' movement could not generate a country-wide turbulence or a constructive reaction from other societal groups. Second, the political constraints and economic crisis disabled any further turbulence and made it self-defeating. New political opportunities, framing processes and even mobilising structures created by the miners' movement were seized not by the original insurgents themselves, but by others who sought more 'modest', less inclusive utility-maximising goals and were more effective at advancing them (cf. Tarrow 1998). The Donbas miners were effectively outmanoeuvred by rent-seeking latecomers from the regional elite as well as by power holders in the capital. Thus, the labour movement failed to bring about far reaching social changes or, at least, to defend its claims due to an absence of allies rather than to the alleged lack of protest.

Conclusion

Since its birth in July 1989, the Donbas miners' movement has become a symbol of the emerging civil society. The miners were a group of citizens actively balancing and opposing the state and promoting their interests in society. However, what was the long-term impact of organised labour on the post-communist political transformation of the country? Have the miners' contentious politics strengthened or weakened Ukraine's process of political democratisation?

The first and foremost effect made by the miners' movement on the process of democratisation was its open challenge to the Soviet self portrait of a workers' state. If the communist leadership felt less jeopardised by the nationalist movements in smaller republics, the miners presented a clear threat to the founding ideology of the Soviet state in its own back yard. Back in early 1989, Seweryn Bialer made a then widely accepted statement declaring the Soviet workers to be the conservative opposition's greatest source of power, and the workers' vocal dissatisfaction with perestroika to be the greatest danger to Gorbachev (as quoted in

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Connor 1991: 16). The workers have indeed appeared to be the Soviet leadership's greatest danger. They did, nonetheless, successfully shatter the image of a ready-made constituency for conservative communists:

while the regime wished to undertake a transformation of the mode of legitimation by supplanting the old social contract, the miners' strike initiated a process of delegitimation from which the regime never recovered. From this point on, the workers' movement which emerged from the July strikes was the most organised proponent of the further democratisation of the Soviet system, and provided the foot

soldiers for the liberal opposition, which would otherwise have remained an elite phenomenon.

(R. Simon 2000: 66)

The miners' movement has strengthened the process of democratisation by creating the first powerful and (at least initially) independent labour organisation with a broad political programme. The miners' trade union congresses and following strikes have had a significant impact on shaping the political discourse in the country towards further liberalisation and the eventual collapse of the Soviet state socialism.

It may appear that organised labour has also complicated Ukraine's political transformation. On several occasions, it was hard-line communists, populists and rent-seeking elites who benefited from the miners' contentious action. To a certain extent, during the 1993 events the miners have even threatened Ukraine's survival as an independent state (Solchanyk 1994). Nevertheless, through their active application of 'voice' contrary to 'exit' protest strategy, the miners' movement has stimulated the democratisation of Ukrainian society as a whole. The miners' 'voice' has confronted unsound policies of the government and made the state more accountable. The miners' vocal opposition to the disastrous economic policy of the Kravchuk administration has resulted in an essential political change. Moreover, the institutionalised and organised contentious action of the Donbas miners has prevented a possible emergence of the more violent ethno-regionalist protest witnessed in Trans-Dniesteria, Abkhazia, or elsewhere in the former USSR.

Thus, the impact of the miners' contentious action on Ukraine's political transformation has been profound. Initially, on several occasions, the miners' movement has approached a victory for civil society, 'when the state was checked by an institution with an economic base' (Gellner 1996: 211). Nevertheless, the role of the workers' movement in the political life of the country has been constantly diminishing. The Donbas miners have begun their contention as a broad civil reformist opposition. They mobilised hoping for changes in the economic and political system to be obtained through democratisation and market-oriented reforms. The miners' movement has ended, however, as a marginal labour group from a

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declining industry, trying to save jobs and income. Eventually, the workers' weight in the political life of Ukraine has lost its significance. As Rick Simon has emphasised:

The overall picture (...) of labour's influence on the political transformation of Russia and Ukraine is unfortunately a gloomy one. Whereas workers' action played a significant role in the downfall of the USSR, a combination of circumstances has ensured that labour has not enjoyed similar influence in the post-communist period.

(2000: 184; cf. Ashwin 1999)

It has been argued that such a drastic trajectory could have been avoided, had the miners forged an organised political identity with a social democratic platform (Crowley 1997; Walkowitz 1995). However, no one appeared to be able to ally with the miners to imprint this political identity in a broader institution.

The failure of the miners' movement has suggested that during post-communist transformation the elites, through the agency of the state, can preserve and increase their power over other public spheres. The role of the state and power holders in conducting economic transition or re-distributing public property can be very significant. When it is the case, polity and economy continue to be an interconnected entity. To be stable, such a system relies on informal bargains and personal rewards within the elites, rather than on economic growth for all. The miners' movement has failed because of a negative societal response. Other social groups did not join the movement due to their dependence on the state budget and on the bureaucrats responsible for the re-distribution of public funds. Growing poverty and the lack of a vibrant private sector have deprived Ukrainian citizens of resources to support and take part in associational life. Thus, under the circumstances where there is no economy independent from the state and governing authorities, civil society and its institutions have no autonomous base for existence. Paraphrasing Gellner, one must conclude that it is still clear who is boss in some post-communist countries. And it is the behaviour of the boss that matters.

Notes

1 In geographical terms, the entire Donets Coal Basin lies in Donetsk, Luhansk and Dnepropetrovsk oblasts (provinces) of southeastern Ukraine and in the neighbouring Rostov oblast of southwestern Russia. Politically, the Donbas usually covers the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

2 Kuznets Coal Basin (nickname Kuzbass) is located in southwestern Siberia.

3 This chapter uses the term 'elite' as it was defined by Higley and Burton (1989: 18), i.e. 'people holding key positions in powerful organisations, institutions and movements, who regularly and substantially affect decision-making and shape political outcomes'.

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