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## Identity, war, and peace: public attitudes in the Ukraine-controlled Donbas

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### ABSTRACT

Contrary to Russia's expectations, military intervention into Ukraine only strengthened the Ukrainian civic nation. As a number of polls demonstrate, since 2014 there is a growing trend that the vast majority of Ukrainians, also in the government-controlled areas of the Donbas, identify themselves, first and foremost, as Ukrainian citizens. Regional and local identity is not their primary choice anymore and there are clear indicators of a strong civic identity that favors a unitary Ukraine. The lack of progress for a solution of the conflict in the Donbas impacts upon Ukrainian public opinion which, in turn, puts pressure on the Ukrainian authorities: there is a wide acceptance of a diplomatic solution to the conflict and readiness for some compromises but the reintegration of the occupied territories should take place according to pre-war conditions, without any federalization of Ukraine. Also, without establishing a stable security regime in the Donbas there is little support for an implementation of the political part of the Minsk-2 agreement. However, closer to the frontline, the more Ukrainians are ready for compromises. The promise of peace by new President Volodymyr Zelenskyy puts a question on what compromises his team may accept and justify in the eyes of Ukrainians.

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## Article

Since the Euromaidan public opinion in Ukraine has become one of the most meaningful factors for shaping both domestic and foreign policy agendas. In its turn, ongoing conflict in the Donbas and lack of progress in the search for its solution both have a tremendous impact on public opinion formation. Despite dramatic changes in Ukrainian public opinion at nation-wide level since Euromaidan and the beginning of Russia's aggression, it is important not only to compare public opinion between different regions but to see the

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regional internal dynamics. At the national level an understanding of trends and opinions can also provide a valuable explanation for the views and perceptions of the conflict in the Donbas and their links to national and regional identities in Ukraine.

The article starts with a brief analysis of the Donbas regional specifics and changes in the self-identification and geopolitical preferences of its population after 2014. This is followed by an analysis of the attitudes of Ukrainians as well as residents of the Donbas regarding the price of peace, namely what compromises are acceptable according to the public opinion. Finally, we analyze public attitudes toward the tools which may lead to a reintegration of non-government controlled areas (NGCA). These opinions are also seen as indicators of a common Ukrainian civic identity that values readiness for compromises and willingness to accept a diplomatic solution but not on Putin's terms.

This article draws on *Constructing a Political Nation: Transformation of the Attitudes of Ukrainians during the War in the Donbas* (2017) prepared by the School for Policy Analysis at Kyiv Mohyla Academy and based on polls conducted, first of all, by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) in cooperation with DIF's traditional partners, the Razumkov Center and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). The accent is made on the regional polls in the Donbas as being more accurate than those conducted nationally.

This article covers the situation in the government-controlled areas (GCA) of the Donbas. There were several polls conducted in the occupied areas.<sup>1</sup> While appreciating these attempts, one should be careful as to what extent these data may be representative when it comes to politically sensitive topics in the NGCA (Arel 2018, 89; Volosevych 2017) as these areas are totally controlled by Russia and military formations of its proxies with no hint of freedoms.<sup>2</sup>

Even before Euromaidan scholars (Barrington, Herron 2004; Barrington, Feranda 2009; D'Anieri 2007a, D'Anieri 2007b; Kulyk 2014; Sasse 2007, Sasse 2010) warned against simplifications of explanations of Ukrainian politics based only on ethnicity and language, not to mention classic Huntington (1993, 30) approach, which viewed Ukraine as an example of a country split by a civilizational conflict between the Orthodox Ukraine and the Catholic-influenced Western Ukraine. However, even now despite visible trends connected with Euromaidan and numerous research data, the stereotypes of pro-Western Western Ukraine vs pro-Russian East, Ukrainian ethno-nationalism "repressing Russian-speakers" or Ukraine as a battlefield between Russia and the West still appear in some publications (Hahn 2018, de Ploeg 2017; Sakwa 2015, 2017; van der Pijl 2018).<sup>3</sup> Some authors specialize not on Ukraine but on a variety of different ethnic conflicts in the post-Communist space, thus projecting the causes of the conflicts in the Caucasus, Central Asia or

Yugoslavia to Ukraine. As a recent example, Driscoll (2019) suggests that recognition of the conflict in the Donbas as a civil war will help its solution.

In contrast, Gomza (2019) criticized this approach under the eloquent title “Quenching fire with gasoline” viewing “transnational insurgency” in the Donbas as part of a broad Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Brik (2019) refers to the International Criminal Court and to the Rule of Law in Armed Conflict Project (RULAC, an initiative of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights), both of which state that in addition to the domestic armed conflict, there is a “parallel international armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia.”

Russia’s involvement in the conflict means that the broad concept used in the literature on conflict resolutions (CR) of “CR as a transformation process” including “peacebuilding and reconciliation” on the ground is connected to another concept of “CR as a settlement process” which appeared since the Cold War and includes “strategic bargaining” and “making a deal” (Babbitt and Hampson 2011). Deal with Russia means that its military withdrawal from the occupied part of the Donbas with subsequent reintegration of NGCA into Ukraine are possible if the cost of the occupation becomes too high (international sanctions, depressing economic situation in the NGCA and Russia itself) and/or bargaining for de facto recognition of the Russia’s occupation of Crimea by the West. While this issue is not the topic of this paper, the article discusses, in particular, the attitudes of Ukrainians to some compromises which may be important to the Russian side in this “deal”.

The academic literature suggests that the war, in general, leads to polarization of ethno-political identities. Euromaidan and Russia’s aggression increased the role of Ukrainian language as the symbolic marker of the affiliation with Ukrainian state and Ukrainian civic identity (Alexseev 2015; Kulyk 2016, 2018a, 2018b). However, as Sasse and Lackner (2018, 142–143, 153) conclude, in the Donbas “while there is some polarization of self-reported identities, mixed or civil identities are also being preserved or even strengthened ... The identity ‘Ukrainian citizen’ is clearly not a linguistically exclusive category but explicitly imagined as one accommodating a mixed-language identity ... It therefore cautions against the polarization hypothesis emanating from the literature on conflict and support recent research on the growing sense of political unity inside Ukraine.”

Ukrainian ethnicity appears to be a multi-faceted phenomenon. Based on relational theory, Onuch and Hale (2018) suggest that Ukrainian ethnicity is best understood in terms of four distinct dimensions that overlap only partly: individual language preference, language embeddedness, ethnolinguistic identity, and nationality. There is a growing research and data confirming the trend toward increased civic identity and its inclusive nature (Kulyk 2016; Sereda 2016; Onuch and Sasse 2016).

Since the search for peace in the Donbas is a highly politically sensitive issue, which targets the foundations of the statehood and political system of Ukraine, it is of vital importance to understand how Ukrainians perceive themselves and whether there are significant differences in self-identification in the conflict-affected areas. Moreover, these issues were actively used by Moscow since the beginning of the conflict as arguments for the lack of civic and political consolidation of Ukrainian society and justification for its intervention in the Donbas. In the next section, we analyze changes in national and civic identity in contrast to regional and ethnic self-identification and changes in the geopolitical orientations in the GCA of the Donbas. These transformations contribute to understanding the nature of public response toward painful compromises as scenario for the conflict-resolution discussed in the second part of the paper.

### **“Donbas is Ukraine”: changes in self-awareness after 2014**

The formation of the Donbas region was connected with development of coal mining and metallurgy industries in the XIX century. The very term “Donbas” means Donetsk [Coal] Basin. This industrialization and urbanization led to the influx of workers from Russia resulting in a highly industrialized region with Russian-speaking cities surrounded by a Ukrainian-speaking countryside. Soviet politics paid special attention to the Donbas as an industrial, “proletariat” base and contributed significantly to the formation of a specific regional identity (Kuromiya 1998; Kuzio 2017; Osipian 2015; Stebelsky 2018; Yakubova 2015b), with a strong self-perception of “real workers feeding other parts of the country”.

Kuzio (2017, 22) describes the Donbas as a melting pot which in that context meant Russification. In the 1991/92 academic year, the number of secondary school students studying in Russian was 96 percent in Donetsk and 93 percent in Luhansk oblasts (though in independent Ukraine it considerably decreased: to 50 percent and 46 percent correspondingly in the 2013–2014 academic year) (Stebelsky 2018, 35–37). With the exception of the Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts had the largest share of Russians in Ukraine: 43.6 percent and 44.8 percent according to the 1989 census (compared to 22.1 percent in Ukraine as a whole). According to the 2001 census these figures decreased to 38.2 percent and 39.0 percent respectively (Derzhavnyy komitet statystyky Ukrayiny 2003; Yakubova 2015a).

Despite heavy Russification, the mining movement in the Donbas in late *perestroika* years supported Ukrainian independence (Haran 1993, 114–115, 170–173; Rusnachenko 1995). Miners and their leaders were afraid that Ukrainian coal mines would not be able to compete with cheaper Russian energy resources. Therefore, they hoped that they would be economically better in independent Ukraine (Haran 1993, 170). In the 1991 referendum on

independence, 83.9 percent in each of the two Donbas oblasts supported Ukrainian independence, though 6.4 percent less than in Ukraine as a whole (90.3 percent) (Tsentralnyj derzhavnyj arhiv 1991).

The deep economic crisis after the USSR collapse transformed the Donbas into Ukrainian “Wild West”, controlled by new local elites based on a mixture of former Soviet nomenklatura, “Red Directorate” and criminality (Kuzio 2015, 2017; Zimmer and Haran 2008). Faced with poor living standards, and because of the lack of competitiveness and modernization of the local industrial enterprises, the predicament of ordinary people was explained by the local elite as inevitable “to feed” Kyiv and “agrarian” Western and Central Ukraine. It should be also noticed that the economic structure of the majority of small and even medium sized towns and cities in the Donbas in independent Ukraine suffered from the Soviet planned economy: many cities relied on a single employer, such as an obsolete factory or a coal mine (Slyvka, Slyvka, and Atamaniuk 2017), with almost no alternative employment opportunities. This made the population dependent on the “Red Directors”, many of which later became the owners of the former Soviet factories, known in Russian as *gradoobrazuyushchie predpriyatiya*, or town-forming enterprises (Maiorova 2017, 22). Dependence on trade ties with Russia and cheap Russian gas for outdated industry contributed to pro-Russian geopolitical orientations of the population.

These perceptions were artificially aggravated to the point of antagonism during the 2004 presidential elections, when former Donetsk governor and Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych was chosen by President Leonid Kuchma as his “successor”. His team, dominated by Kremlin’s political technologists (spin doctors), used mass media to actively promote the thesis that Ukraine was a divided country where the Donbas needed to counteract “nationalist” Western Ukraine (Kuzio 2005; Wilson 2005). Billboards with democratic opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko in a Nazi uniform were spread in Donetsk.

After the 2004 Orange Revolution, Yanukovych’ Party of Regions and Moscow’s propaganda machine continued to actively use divisive topics (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Pelnēns 2010). The political map became split roughly in half, between the Ukrainian-speaking electorate in the West and Center, which preferred the path of European integration, and the mostly Russian-speaking East and South (the main electoral basis for the Party of Regions), which preferred the Russia-led Customs Union (Bekeshkina 2017, 6). The Donbas became the region with almost absolute political monopoly of the Party of Regions which was based on economic control and client–patron relations (Kuzio 2015, 2017; Zimmer and Haran 2008).

At the same time, Ukrainian oligarchs including those based in the Donbas were fighting for control of Kyiv: their businesses demanded unity of the state and that is why separatism was not on their agenda. Although the Party of Regions flirted with the idea of federalization of Ukraine, it was never included

into their programmatic demands. It was used more as a bargaining chip in its relations with Kyiv. Moreover, in 2013–2014 when Yanukovych was officially in favor of signing the Association Agreement with the EU, he had to explain and sell it to his traditional voters. Given the conformist approach of his electorate, it was quite possible that he could persuade at least part of them (Haran and Zolkina 2014).

After the Euromaidan Revolution, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and Crimea stood out for their more pro-Russian orientations compared with other oblasts in the South and East. Nevertheless, according to an April 2014 KIIS poll, in response to the key question, “Do you support the opinion that your oblast should separate from Ukraine and join Russia?” only 15 percent of the residents of eight oblasts in the South and East regions said “yes” (70 percent were “against”) (Vedernikova, Mostova, and Rakhmanin 2014). It meant that Putin’s plans to create *Novorossiia* failed as they were based on incorrect assumptions about the identity of Russian speakers and because of their greater loyalty to the Ukrainian civic nation and territory over far lower levels of loyalty to the *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) (O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016, 2017).

However, 27 percent and 30 percent of respondents in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, respectively, supported separation from Ukraine, two times higher than the average in the East and South. Nevertheless, 52 percent of the residents in each of two Donbas oblasts did not support it. 72 percent of respondents in Donetsk and 58 percent in Luhansk oblasts did not “support the actions of those, who capture administrative buildings in your region with arms” (18 percent and 24 percent, respectively, supported it). Finally, 66 percent of respondents in Donetsk and 53 percent in Luhansk oblasts were against Russian troops in Ukraine (with 19 percent of respondents in each of Donbas oblasts in favor) (Vedernikova, Mostova, and Rakhmanin 2014).<sup>4</sup> Research done by Giuliano (2018) also showed that a minority of ethnic Russians supported separatism, though in larger numbers than Ukrainians or those with mixed identities. As Wilson (2016) concludes, it is a “civil conflict perhaps, but not civil war”. Without Russian support for violence against the Ukrainian state, pro-Russian protestors in the Donbas would not have evolved into violent separatists in spring 2014.

By August 2014, pro-Russian fighters were on the verge of defeat and they were saved only by the invasion by regular Russian troops which led to the occupation of one-third of the Donbas. Further Russia’s military advance was stopped by international pressure and Ukrainian resistance. Contrary to Putin’s expectations, the military intervention actually cemented Ukrainian civic and national identity. Thus, throughout Ukraine there were important changes in self-identification (with the nation versus with a subnational unit) (Bekeshkina 2017, 10–13).

This happened in the GCA of the Donbas as well. Before 2013–2014 the residents of the Donbas were divided almost in half into those who preferred

to be identified, first and foremost, as citizens of Ukraine (42 percent), on the one hand, and those who felt themselves to be, first of all, residents of either a populated settlement (29 percent) (“I am a resident of my city, town, or village”), or the region in general (15 percent) (“I am a resident of my region”) on the other hand (Zolkina 2017, 160).

However, changes in the Donbas followed changes in Ukrainian identity in other regions and at the national level. “Donbas is Ukraine” was a motto of volunteers from the Donbas who joined the volunteer battalions in spring-summer 2014 to defend the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In October 2015, polling in the government-controlled Donbas showed a higher percentage identifying first and foremost as citizens of Ukraine: 53 percent in Donetsk oblast and 63 percent in Luhansk oblast. The civic Ukrainian identity became dominant in the GCA of the Donbas. The regional or local identity was chosen as primary one by 39 percent in Donetsk oblast and 28 percent in Luhansk oblast (DIF 2015b).

The higher percentage of civic identification with Ukrainian citizenship in the GCA of Luhansk oblast can be partially explained by the fact that it is mostly the northern, more rural districts, which can be considered a part of Ukraine’s historic region of *Slobozhanshchyna* (Stebelsky 2018, 41, 45; Slyvka, Slyvka, and Atamaniuk 2017) which is more Ukrainianized than other parts of the Donbas. In these northern districts, support for separatist ideas in 2014 was considerably lower.

Public opinion research regarding self-identification in the cities that in 2014 were occupied and were returned to the control of Ukraine provides for more targeted results. DIF conducted two rounds of such studies, the first one in November 2014 in Slovyansk and Kramatorsk (Donetsk oblast) and the second one in spring 2015 in Starobilsk and Severodonetsk (Luhansk oblast).

Slovyansk and Kramatorsk in 2014 shared almost an identical recent history: these cities had been occupied for approximately the same period of time and were liberated almost at the same time. However, certain differences were uncovered in the polling conducted five months after their liberation. 35 percent of the residents of Slovyansk indicated that they identified themselves first of all with their city while for Kramatorsk this figure was only 15 percent. The latter to a considerably greater extent considered themselves first and foremost citizens of Ukraine (47 percent versus 33 percent of the residents of Slovyansk) (in both cases the sample error is 4.4 percent) (DIF 2014a). Zolkina (2017) suggests that this difference can perhaps be partially explained by the fact that the occupation of Slovyansk was harsher as the city was chosen as the base for the activity of Russian and separatist forces in this part of Donetsk oblast. Upon liberation, the general sociopolitical confusion and some frustration on the part of residents could have been more pointedly expressed in Slovyansk than in neighboring Kramatorsk. Another reason for the more pronounced “pro-state” identity in Kramatorsk could hypothetically have



been the distinctive economic structure of the city's life, as industrial activity did not envisage a severance of ties and a halt in the operation of large enterprises but rather stability and continuity in the production process. Zhukov (2016) comes to the conclusion:

“Rebel control lasted longer in municipalities where a high proportion of the population was employed in the machine-building and mining industries prior to the war. Where the more competitive metals industry was a major employer – such as the port city of Mariupol – rebel control was far briefer. Russian language was far less predictive of the loss of rebel control than of its initial establishment”.

Giuliano (2018) also suggests that separatism is not so ethnolinguistically motivated but relates more to perceived, potential deprivation.

However, regarding Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, Zhukov points out that they had practically same share of employment in the Russia-dependent machine-building industry. He suggests<sup>5</sup> that it could be the post-2014 dynamics driving the difference. For example, Kramatorsk became the administrative seat of Donetsk oblast administration (since October 11, and the poll was conducted in November), and there may be some social desirability bias due to the more visible state presence there.

In any case, as Zolkina (2017) stresses, the main point is that Donbas is very heterogeneous, and this fact must be taken into consideration in efforts to understand its internal variation with respect to public opinion.

A similar DIF study conducted in Luhansk oblast in March–April 2015 using the same methodology showed that the overwhelming majority of residents of two cities, Severodonetsk and Starobilsk, considered themselves first and foremost to be citizens of Ukraine (54 percent and 58 percent, respectively). Even though the inhabitants of the two cities reacted differently to the expansion of separatism in 2014, resistance in the local community in Starobilsk was considerably higher and the control exercised by the pro-Russian forces manifested with different degrees of severity (Severodonetsk was fully under the control of the occupation regime). In addition, the linguistic situation was different: in Severodonetsk, 65 percent of the city's residents speak exclusively Russian, while in Starobilsk 28 percent do so (DIF 2015a). Opinion polling thus only confirmed that overall national identity is not directly connected to language. It supports Pop-Eleches and Robertson (2018) suggestion that ethnic identities and language practices changed little after 2014 but there was an increase in self-identification as a “citizen of Ukraine”.

Several recent publications (Giuliano 2018; Kulyk 2018a, 2018b; Sasse and Lackner 2018; Shevel 2018) confirm that mixed identities not only survived but even strengthened despite the war but, at the same time, the attitudes held by those with self-declared dual identities are closer to the attitudes present

among self-declared Ukrainians than they are to those held by self-declared Russians.

One of the recent polls conducted by the Center for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Berlin, in February–March 2019 showed that compared to their 2016 poll the self-identification of being “Ukrainian citizen” decreased from 53 percent in the GCA of the Donbas to 26 percent. During the same period the identity category of “ethnic Ukrainian” increased from 11 to 29 percent (Sasse and Lackner 2019, 6–7). The difference with DIF polls may be explained by different set of options for answers (citizenship, ethnicity, and language). But in any case, in ZOiS poll the sum of identification of being the “citizen of Ukraine” and “ethnic Ukrainian” (55 percent) clearly dominates over being the “person from the Donbas” (13 percent), “ethnic Russian” (7 percent) or “mixed ethnic Ukrainian and Russian” (12 percent).

One of the most regionally pronounced cleavages in Ukrainian public opinion prior to 2013–2014 were attitudes toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The country was actually divided on the issue what geopolitical unions to join. Majority in the East, especially in the Donbas, wanted to join the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and even military union with Russia and other CIS countries. Moscow’s aggression led to a dramatic decrease of the share of proponents of accession to the Customs Union with Russia by a high two-thirds: from 62 percent in May 2013 to 19 percent in October – November 2018 in the Donbas. However, people have not automatically switched to supporting membership in the EU despite an increase from 12 percent to 25 percent in November 2018. Instead, the share of those in favor of non-accession to either the EU or the Customs Union more than doubled, from 14 percent to 32 percent, and additionally, 24 percent of respondents are undecided (DIF 2014b, DIF 2018c). This in turn could create new regional differences, but probably less tangible than the previous polarization regarding two vectors: EU as opposed to the Customs Union with Russia (since 2015 Eurasian Economic Union) (Zolkina and Haran 2017, 129).

As to the attitudes toward NATO, the changes in the country were even more pronounced. As Bekeshkina (2017, 10) puts it, “Putin got the Crimea but lost Ukraine”. A potential referendum on NATO membership, had it been held in August 2018, would have been won in a landslide with 67 percent “for” and 28 percent “against” (with the turnout of 63 percent) (DIF 2018e). Although it would be lost in the South and the East, the positive changes in these regions were dramatic as well. People in the Donbas became disenchanted with the possibility of a military union with Russia as a guarantee of Ukraine’s security (this support collapsed from 50 percent in 2012 to 9 percent in October – November 2018), while support for NATO grew (from 1 percent to 16 percent over the same time period) in the macro-region that was the most skeptical about NATO. Today in every region of Ukraine the percentage of those who see in NATO a guarantee of national security is higher than it was on average

across the entire country in 2012 (13 percent). However, the non-bloc status for Ukraine remains the most widely preferred option among the local population in the Donbas as a guarantee of security and it even grew from 41 percent to 54 percent (DIF 2016b; DIF 2018c). In the event of a freezing of the conflict in the Donbas, with a population accustomed to the status quo, and should adequate support from Ukraine's Western partners be lacking, a non-bloc approach will continue to dominate (Zolkina and Haran 2017, 130–131).

### **Attitudes toward the conflict: what is the price for peace?**

The ending of war and fighting corruption always feature as the two most important priorities for Ukrainians. However, according to SCORE Ukraine (2018, 37), the average level of fatigue due to the conflict is 6.8 on a 10-point scale, where 0 means total lack of fatigue and 10 means maximum presence of fatigue feelings. To overcome a deepening people's apathy, it is important that people see real progress in bringing peace.

The prevailing attitude toward politico-diplomatic solution for the Donbas conflict was formed in Ukraine in 2014–2015 and has remained stable up to nowadays. In 2018, only 17 percent believe that a military solution is possible. However, only a similar figure of 20 percent of population all over the country are in favor of “peace at any price” while 50 percent insist on selective compromises. The closer respondents live to the zone of active conflict, the greater is their readiness to reach an agreement at all costs. The share of those in the Donbas (46 percent in October 2018) substantially exceeds average results of the country (DIF 2018b; DIF 2018c).

Therefore, of special importance are the attitudes toward what can be accepted and what is not. The two Minsk agreements were signed after the direct Russian military offensives and the subsequent negotiations in “Normandy format” (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France), in September 2014 and in February 2015, respectively. Both Minsk agreements were signed by Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE (participants of trilateral Minsk talks), and supported by the U.S., the EU, and the UN Security Council. Leaders of the so called “Donetsk/Luhansk People's Republics” (DNR and LNR in Ukrainian abbreviation) signed it as well, but neither their position, nor the “people's republics” were mentioned, only names (as these “republics” were not formally recognized by any country).

The Minsk agreements, though in a contradictory and complicated way, outlined the ceasefire, exchange of prisoners, withdrawal of foreign troops and illegal military formations from Ukraine, and restoration of Ukraine's control over border with Russia. The security component of the Minsk agreements is favorable for Ukraine. It goes in line with the findings of the conflict resolution literature that security is the most important prerequisite for peacebuilding (Babbitt and Hampson 2011, 50). However, Russia

followed its idea of the “Bosnianization” of Ukraine using the political component of the Minsk-2 agreements, especially Clause 11. In contrast to the Ukrainian Constitution, it demands “special status” and more power to the NGCA in the Donbas while formally keeping them inside the Ukrainian state and making Kyiv pay for the reconstruction of the destroyed Donbas economy (Minsk Ceasefire Deal 2015).

Therefore, in the eyes of Ukrainians, it appears to be “appeasing” Russia. Kyiv stresses that it can have dialog only with those representatives of NGCA who are legitimately elected, that is, according to Clause 9, under Ukrainian laws and OSCE monitoring. Kyiv also demands the withdrawal of foreign troops, according to Clause 10.

Not surprisingly, despite generally demonstrated support toward compromises, in the Ukrainian public opinion there is no “local ownership” of the political provisions of the Minsk-2 agreements viewed as unjustified concessions to Russia and its proxies (Zolkina 2016). As of June 2019, the most unacceptable were the following proposals: to hold local elections on the conditions of the militants (according to the Minsk agreements, these elections should be based on Ukrainian laws) (66 percent of the respondents were against and only 13 percent in favor of it); full amnesty to all participants of military actions against Ukraine (62 percent and 16 percent, correspondingly); formation of the local police, the courts and the prosecutor’s offices in NGCA by “local authorities” (58 percent and 18 percent). Moreover, securing the “special status” of NGCA in the Constitution is not acceptable for 50 percent of the respondents (30 percent in favor), and the special political and economic relations of these territories with Russia were also challenged (53 percent against and 23 percent for, respectively) (DIF 2019b). Importantly, therefore, several provisions of the political part of the Minsk agreements are rejected by a substantial majority of Ukrainians.

In addition, most Ukrainians do not agree to Russia’s exit from the Donbas in exchange for the recognition of its annexation of Crimea (66 percent “against” and 16 percent “for”). This figure is lower in the East, though even there, a plurality rejects this option (41 percent “against”, 27 percent “for”, and 31 percent undecided) (DIF 2018a). This also speaks for a common civic Ukrainian identity that encompasses the whole of Ukraine and does not see any part of it as something to be traded with.

Thus, public opinion and civil society were able to establish “red lines” for Ukrainian decision-makers.<sup>6</sup> It was extremely important in 2014–2016: despite the formal support for a stable cease-fire as a precondition for the start of implementation of the political provisions of the Minsk agreements (as prescribed in the documents), in practice Ukraine’s Western partners, and even more so Russia itself, attempted to push Ukraine toward realizing first the political component of the Minsk agreements. Unjustified concessions from the Ukrainian side could lead to domestic destabilization and even potential

ousting of the government which could be accused of “treason” (Haran and Burkovskiy 2017, 54–55, 71).

The most important and dramatic example of this threat is represented by the long-awaited changes to the Constitution regarding decentralization. The process of decentralization started by the new Ukrainian government after the Euromaidan Revolution. Necessary constitutional changes were adopted in the Verkhovna Rada in the first reading in August 2015. However, the changes included, allegedly on the advice of Western partners, the transitional clause in the Constitution that the status of NGCA would be regulated by a special law (the presence of Victoria Nuland, US Assistant Secretary of State, during the voting in the parliament was telling). This clause disturbed Ukrainian society and political opposition and it led to clashes outside parliament with four national guard troopers killed. Further negotiations in the parliament revealed that there was no constitutionally demanded two-thirds majority in the Rada to approve the changes in the second reading. As a result, the whole package regarding decentralization was stalled and, as of today, its prospects remain bleak.

Regarding the holding of local elections in NGCA, public support of the formula “security comes first” would entail in particular the withdrawal of Russian troops and the renewal of, at least international, control over the border with Russia (as Ukrainian control is not envisaged in the Minsk agreements until the end of peace process). Public opinion influenced and hardened the position of both Ukrainian and Western governments, preventing them from making political concessions to Russia ahead of the implementation of any security measures (Haran and Burkovskiy 2017, 72–73).

But if security measures are provided, can compromises be achieved? In order to shed more light on this, we need to slightly reformulate the polling question (“what compromises are acceptable”) to “what steps are favorable/not favorable for the peace process in the Donbas?” It appears that while “hardline” measures (international sanctions, peacekeeping mission, strengthening of Ukrainian Army) continue to be seen in a positive way, “soft” (politico-diplomatic) measures also receive the support of a plurality of Ukrainians (see Table 1).

Regarding the “special status” for the NGCA, we do not agree with the conclusion of SCORE (2018, 51) about the “broad nationwide support for some form of special status.” As demonstrated above by the DIF poll, this status is not supported by a majority of Ukrainians. Moreover, according to SCORE (2018, 38), only 34 percent of Ukrainians consider “special status” as the first step toward full reintegration, while 48 percent consider it as a first step toward the final partition of these territories from Ukraine. Only 27 percent agree that such a status would be “an opportunity for these regions to gain their much-wanted autonomy and thrive in the long-run” while 46 percent disagree.

**Table 1.** What steps are favorable/not favorable for the peace process in the Donbas? (Dec. 2017) (percent).

	Favorable	Not Favorable	Difficult to say
Strengthening EU and US sanctions against Russia	54.9	25.8	19.3
<b>Canceling transport and trade blockade of the occupied territories</b>	<b>40.8</b>	<b>29.4</b>	29.8
<b>Restoration of social payments to the inhabitants of the occupied territories</b>	<b>46.4</b>	<b>22.9</b>	30.7
<b>Amnesty for rank-and-file members of illegal military formations</b>	<b>36.8</b>	<b>28.8</b>	34.4
Strengthening of the Armed Forces and special operations for gradual liberation of the occupied territories	46.8	27.2	26.0
UN transitional administration and peacekeepers in the occupied areas during withdrawal of Russian troops and disarmament of the militants	48.9	19.5	31.6
<b>Recognition of DNR and LNR as terrorist organizations and their leaders as criminals. No talks with their leaders who are declared criminals<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>32.6</b>	<b>35.3</b>	32.1

Source: DIF 2018d.

<sup>a</sup>Division of opinion which appeared in the last line is also reflected in DIF (2019b) poll: 41% of respondents think that these direct talks would be acceptable for peace process, while roughly 41% are against.

At the same time, while the most supported option for the future of NGCA is the decentralization of Ukraine (63 percent), according to SCORE (2018, 39), special autonomy is supported by 56 percent of Ukrainians as the second-best option (22 percent consider it satisfactory, 33.5 percent “tolerable if necessary”) with 27 percent seeing it as “entirely unacceptable”. So, it seems that while rejected at emotional level, some forms of compromises might become acceptable at the rational level as favorable for the peace process. As one of the pro-Ukrainian activists in Rubizhne, Luhansk oblast, put it: “I accept it with my brain but reject it in my heart”.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we may come to the conclusion that formulations of the political part of the Minsk agreements may be at least partially accepted. As an example, a poll by the Kalmius group (analysts and journalists originally from the Donbas, now based in Kyiv) conducted in April–May 2018 by the GfK Ukraine (the same company which conducted survey for SCORE Ukraine) demonstrated that the majority of Ukrainians (59 percent of all respondents and 65 percent in the government-controlled Donbas) would support amnesty to people who did not commit serious crimes. A considerably lower share of the population (28 percent among all respondents and 37 percent among the Donbas residents) would support amnesty to everyone.

Transitional justice has become an important element of reconciliation supported by international organizations and Western governments (Aiken 2013; Babbitt and Hampson 2011, 53–54). It is noteworthy that 57 percent among Ukrainians and 45 percent of the Donbas residents support the idea that judges from abroad should participate in the decision-making as to whom the amnesty should be granted. However, even in this case more than 40 percent of the respondents in Ukraine, as well as in the government-controlled Donbas, have doubts that amnesty can be conducted honestly and without abuses (Kalmius Group 2018).

The “people’s militia” in NGCA as written in the Minsk agreements appeared to be unacceptable for the Ukrainian public. One should keep in mind that “militia” in Soviet lexicon was the same as police but the original meaning (“armed self-defense”) could lead to the legitimization of the militants’ formations. However, “municipal police” is what Ukrainians may accept in the process of police reform throughout the country. In the process of its creation, only 14 percent among all Ukrainians and 27 percent of Donbas residents would let the local authorities in NGCA appoint local police as envisaged in the Minsk-2 agreement. At the same time, almost a half of the population in Ukraine and one-third in the Donbas believe that Kyiv should appoint police in NGCA, as it does elsewhere in Ukraine. Another third among total population as well as among Donbas residents would allow local authorities to decide about middle/low-level staff, with managing staff appointed by Kyiv. Regarding another controversial issue of the Minsk agreements, only 13 percent among the total population and 25 percent of Donbas residents would allow the local authorities to appoint judicial bodies (Kalmius Group 2018).

The compromises in the lustration process<sup>8</sup> are much more acceptable for Ukrainian public. Up to 90 percent of Ukrainians as well as the Donbas residents agree that people in NGCA who work in healthcare, public utilities, education and social protection spheres as middle or lower-level specialists should be allowed to keep their positions after reintegration. But about three fourth of Ukrainians as well as two thirds of Donbas residents do not agree that senior representatives of DNR and LNR authorities can keep their positions (Kalmius Group 2018).

These data confirm that some compromises are available if there is a political will on both sides and if political provisions of the Minsk agreements are interpreted flexibly, although in line with the basic provision that “security comes first”.

### **Future reintegration? What are the tools?**

According to DIF polls, for several years in a row the idea of applying international pressure to Russia as a tool to foster peace in the Donbas, has remained option number 1 at the national level (in these polls, respondents have the right to choose several options). The second most widely accepted tool for establishing peace in the Donbas is the successful return to a normal life for residents of GCA of the Donbas. Nevertheless, the popularity of these two measures has changed over last two years. Indeed, in 2016 the option to mount international pressure on Russia to stop its aggression gained 41 percent, but in 2018 it dropped to 32 percent, while restoration of a normal life in GCA of the Donbas perceived as the main tool slightly increased from 28 percent to 31 percent (DIF 2018b, DIF 2018c). One can suggest that with the continuation of the conflict and lack of progress in its resolution, belief in the

prospective effectiveness of international sanctions on Russia could decrease. On the other hand, SCORE (2018, 21) findings show a strong positive association between support for reforms and support for reintegration of the Donbas. In the Donbas this trend is seen clearly. In October – November 2018, 48 percent of respondents identified “reestablishing a normal life” as their preferred solution for restoring peace while the idea of international organizations applying pressure upon Russia was favored by 18 percent. At the same time, in the Donbas belief in a positive after-effect from granting “special status” to DNR/LNR is significantly higher than in other regions. It has almost doubled from 13 percent in 2016 up to 24 percent in 2018 while in Ukraine as a whole this view is supported by only 13 percent (DIF 2016a; DIF 2018c).

However, if asked directly about the future status of NGCA, most Ukrainians consider that these areas should be reintegrated on the same conditions as existed prior to 2014 (see Table 2).

Moreover, in its 2018 poll, the Kalmius group asked about the possibility of limiting self-government in the reintegrated NGCA. This option received support of 73 percent of respondents. At the same time, the idea that NGCA remain the part of Ukraine with the same decentralized status as all other oblasts of Ukraine is considered acceptable by 77 percent of Ukrainians

**Table 2.** In the matter of the political future of the territories of the DNR and LNR, which option would you prefer? (percent).

	Ukraine, Oct. 2015	Ukraine, June 2017	Donbas, Oct.- Nov. 2018
<b>That these territories remain a part of Ukraine on the same conditions that were set earlier</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>55.0</b>	<b>49.9</b>
That they remain a part of Ukraine but are more independent from Kyiv	22.4	20.1	28.0 <sup>a</sup>
That they become independent states	4.5	6.6	1.7
That they become part of the Russian Federation	2.0	2.1	1.6
That these territories create an autonomous unit within Ukraine	9.5	—	—
Difficult to say	12.2	16.3	18.4

Source: DIF 2015c, DIF 2017, DIF 2019a

<sup>a</sup> In this poll the option was “That they remain a part of Ukraine but with special status and more independent from Kyiv.”

**Table 3.** What kind of policy of Ukraine toward the uncontrolled territories would be reasonable, in your opinion, in the future? (percent, only one option).

	2017	2018
A – <b>Officially recognize these territories as occupied areas and stop any trade, services, payments and contacts</b> (including movement of people from these territories).	23.0	16.8
B – <b>Keep the economic blockade but maintain humanitarian ties</b> (movement of people, payment of pensions, water and electricity supply)	21.6	20.5
C – <b>Allow the trade in essential goods</b> (everyday products and food from Ukraine, anthracite from the uncontrolled areas), <b>maintain humanitarian ties to the best extent possible</b>	21.9	22.3
D – <b>Try to develop both humanitarian and commercial relations with uncontrolled areas</b>	15.2	19.7
Other	1.0	0.6
Difficult to say	17.2	20.1

Source: DIF 2017, DIF 2018b



(Kalmius Group 2018). These two options are mutually exclusive ones, but both are accepted by Ukrainian public opinion.

The idea of the federalization of Ukraine, which the Russian side had attempted to impose in 2014, lacks support not only throughout the country but also in the front-line territory of the Donbas. Indeed, in the summer of 2015 residents of the Donbas came out in favor of a unitary Ukraine, with 38 percent favoring some expanded rights of the regions, another 25 percent favoring preservation of the current powers of the regions and only 15 percent in favor of federalization (Zolkina 2017, 167).

The idea of a final separation of NGCA from Ukraine as a way of solving the conflict has very little support, with only 6 percent in favor in the GCA of the Donbas in October – November 2018 (which is basically the same figure as that in Ukraine as a whole) (DIF 2018c).<sup>9</sup>

While Ukrainians are becoming less enthusiastic about the effectiveness of the sanctions, the support for the idea of international peacekeeping mission in NGCA and on Russian-Ukrainian border increased from 53 percent in October 2015 to 61 percent in May 2018 while negative attitude to this mission decreased from 27 percent to 20 percent (DIF 2018b). The reason for this support might be lack of progress in implementing the Minsk agreements and attempts to make Ukraine implement their political provisions before the security ones. It also reflects the lack of trust in any state-to-state compromises and, instead, hope in the international community's direct involvement in the establishment of peace.

From a regional perspective, a negative position toward peacekeepers is prevalent in only one Ukrainian macro-region, the East (which in this poll includes the Donbas): 34 percent for and 40 percent against (DIF 2018b).<sup>10</sup> It could be explained by the presence of a strong anti-Western information campaign which has been polarizing the country since the 2004 presidential election. Now, after several years of war, the residents of the Donbas are afraid to see armed peacekeepers, whom they associate with armed foreign soldiers in war-torn Iraq and Somalia,<sup>11</sup> a perception imposed by Russian propaganda and pro-Russian channels and lobbyists operating in Ukraine. Thus, an educational information campaign is needed, though at this point a positive decision on a UN peacekeeping mission remains hypothetical as Putin does not seem to want to withdraw from the Donbas.

A significant component of public opinion is the lack of certainty about how Ukraine's policy toward NGCA should look like. This appears to be fragmented between four scenarios, situated between two positions located at opposite poles: on the one end, the full termination of all contacts, including the movement of people (scenario A), supported by 17 percent of respondents; at the other end, maximum possible relations with these territories, including wide-range economic relations (scenario D), supported by 20 percent of respondents (see Table 3).

The choice of scenario C, which can also be called *partial isolation-2* (supported by 22 percent), can be justified if Moscow and its proxies meet the security terms of the Minsk agreements. Escalation of the conflict in February–March 2017 gave more arguments to implementing scenario B or *partial isolation-1* (with basic but minimal economic and humanitarian contacts) which is supported by 20 percent of respondents. In response to public demands from Ukrainian war veterans on the one hand, and to the “nationalization” of Ukrainian enterprises by the DNR/LNR on the other hand, a trade blockade of the occupied territory was enforced by the Ukrainian authorities. This decision was supported by a majority in Ukraine as a whole (47 percent for, 37 percent against), by a majority in the Center (47 percent vs. 38 percent) and the West (66 percent vs. 15 percent), but only by a minority in the East (37 percent vs. 49 percent) and South (30 percent vs. 49 percent) (Haran and Yakovlyev 2017, 215). However, it is not a complete blockade, as envisaged by scenario B. Human movement across the frontline (with more than 30,000 people crossing the line daily), and the maintenance of at least a minimum supply of electricity and water in areas with shared infrastructures, are in place.

The fragmentation of public opinion into five fairly equal parts (four scenarios plus those undecided) leads to potentially ambivalent political consequences. On the one hand, when society has not made a clear choice, policy makers have wider space for maneuver. On the other hand, there is a danger that manipulative decisions might be communicated and sold to the public in the narrow interests of politicians as well as international players, both in the West and Russia.

In the April 2019 presidential and July 2019 pre-term parliamentary elections Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his party *Servant of the People* gained sweeping victory. However, new President and his team are inexperienced in international politics, their party is only in the process of formation and it includes people with very different political views. In his inauguration speech, Zelenskyy (2019) was not very clear about what compromises were acceptable to end the war in the Donbas:

“I’m ready to pay any price to stop the deaths of our heroes. I’m definitely not afraid to make difficult decisions and I’m ready to lose my fame, my ratings, and if need be – without any hesitation, my position to bring peace, as long as we do not give up our territories.”

This promise for peace may seduce both Russia and the West to press Kyiv for concessions. However, DIF (2019b) poll confirms once again that Ukrainians, including majority of the electorate of the ruling *Servant of the People* party, continue to reject such compromises as constitutional “special status” for NGCA; full amnesty for the militants; local elections on their terms; militants’ control over judicial and law-enforcement bodies in the NGCA; non-

bloc status for Ukraine; and introduction of the Russian as the official state language.

Continuing Russia's violations of the ceasefire after Zelenskyy's victory also explains what his team is trying to achieve in the beginning: small, though necessary steps on the ground. They include limited withdrawal of troops and dismantlement in hotspots, easing of communication between ordinary people across the contact line. As Zolkina (2019) stresses, even these limited steps are difficult to pursue given no mutual adequate reaction from the other side. Yet, if there is a political will on both sides these steps on the ground may be achieved even without far-reaching political settlement which demands as a pre-requisite stable ceasefire, demilitarization of NGCA, withdrawal of Russia's troops and international control over the part of Ukrainian-Russian state border. It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to achieve a broad "peace deal" guaranteed by great powers and without substantial concessions from Ukraine.

## Conclusion

The Euromaidan Revolution and the fight against Russia's aggression revealed important identity changes in Ukrainian society. There is a dominant identification with the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian political nation, with a civic identity rather than with ethnic, regional or local identities. These changes reflected in opinion polls revealing that a majority of Ukrainians see their country as a unitary state and are opposed to federalization or separation of the part of Ukrainian territory. This is the case in all the regions of the country, including in the government-controlled areas of the Donbas. In this region, as in other parts of the country, support for Russia-led military or economic unions collapsed, and the number of supporters for EU and NATO membership increased. Nevertheless, in the GCA of the Donbas the dominant geopolitical orientation is rather ambivalent, with non-affiliation being the preferred option; that is, neither with Russia nor with the West.

Public opinion in Ukraine about the conflict in the Donbas is in favor of a politico-diplomatic solution, but there are certain contradictions. On the one hand, Ukrainians, including in the GCA of the Donbas, are in favor of returning these territories to Ukrainian governmental control. They are ready to accept some compromises as the main method of resolving the conflict, and it is understandable that the closer to the frontline, the more Ukrainians are ready for compromises. As an example, these compromises may include amnesty to those who did not commit war crimes, the absence of lustration process to those who formally belonged to the so called "state" structures of DNR/LNR but performed the functions of middle and lower level specialists in such spheres as healthcare, public utilities, education and social protection.

On the other hand, the majority of the population believes that the NGCA must be returned on the same conditions that existed prior to 2014 which may not be as realistic as many would want to believe. It also means that political measures within the framework of the Minsk-2 agreements will not be supported by Ukrainian society unless their implementation is conditioned on a stable security regime. Polls indicate that there is a number of concessions Ukrainians are not willing to make (e.g. full amnesty of the militants, elections in the NGCA on Russia's conditions, militants' control over judicial and law-enforcement bodies in the NGCA) which demonstrates the so-called red lines in the public opinion regarding the compromises with Russia.

A clear communication strategy and information campaign would be needed in order to create a favorable public opinion, "local ownership" for any formula for a resolution. This is what President Zelenskyy's team may play well capitalizing on "bringing peace." However, given the political sensitivity, steps that pose a threat to domestic political stability must be subjected to tough scrutiny. Creating effective safety mechanisms to minimize the risks and justify their adequacy and expediency will be a no less complicated task for President Zelenskyy than putting pressure on Russia to withdraw from the Donbas and resolve the conflict.

## Notes

1. In 2016 and 2019 they were conducted in NGCA by telephone within the research project of the Center for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Berlin (Sasse 2017; Sasse and Lackner 2019). Another polls which relied on face-to-face interviews were conducted by the GfK company in NGCA in 2016 and 2018. They were undertaken within The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index. SCORE Index was developed in 2012 in Cyprus by the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (Seed) in partnership with UNDP and funded by USAID. Since then it was conducted in several countries, including Ukraine. The 2016 SCORE and ZOiS polls in NGCA are analyzed by Volosevych (2017). Also, in 2016 and 2017 face-to-face interviews were conducted in Donetsk oblast within the project performed by Fabryka Dumky Donbas (2018).
2. Even in this situation the results showed that in the NGCA a majority is still willing to be part of Ukraine (31 percent of respondents want it in the form of a special autonomy, 24 percent – without it), not with Russia (27 percent and 18 percent, respectively) (Sasse and Lackner 2019, 12). Given almost totalitarian control of political and media life in the NGCA these figures of association with Ukraine are quite remarkable. The SCORE Ukraine (2018, 40) also demonstrated that even in this situation 33 percent of respondents in NGCA agree that they are willing to live in Ukraine (54 percent disagree), 43 percent agree that Russia-created "people's republics" cannot exist without Ukraine (50 percent disagree) and, contrary to Russian propaganda, 45 percent view this conflict as one between Russia and Ukraine, not an intra-Ukrainian conflict (43 percent disagree).
3. For more on this phenomenon see Kuzio (2019).

4. KIIIS data is supported by the poll conducted in Donetsk in March 2014 by the Donetsk Institute for Social Research. See, Kipen (2014).
5. Zhukov, personal communication in e-mail to the authors on 4 January 2018.
6. See the joint analytical memo of several Ukrainian think tanks, including Institute of World Politics, DIF, Donetsk Institute of Information, and School for Policy Analysis at Kyiv Mohyla Academy (Institute of World Politics 2016).
7. DIF's focus group with civil society activists in Rubizhne, Luhansk oblast, on 18 December 2018 (conducted by Haran).
8. In Ukraine, the 2014 law on lustration refers to the exclusion from public office of senior civil servants who worked under President Yanukovich, especially for those who participated in the repressions against Euromaidan. Potential lustration is discussed regarding civil servants in the so called DNR/LNR.
9. This is supported also by data of the SCORE Ukraine (2018, 41).
10. The East in this DIF's national survey is defined as Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.
11. DIF's focus group with civil society activists in Kramatorsk, Donetsk oblast, on 20 December 2018 (conducted by Haran).

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