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‘Our Folk Who Have (Not) Become Foreign…’: Political Loyalties in the Donbas During the War of 2014–2024 (In Light of Oral History Sources)

Summary: The military conflict that started in the Donbas in 2014, which, in 2022, turned into a full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war, has created a specific way in which it is remembered. This article is based on more than sixty interviews with residents of the Donbas and other regions of Ukraine who fled the country in the period between 2014 and 2024. It addresses the distinctive way in which the events of 2014–2024 affected the formation and evolution of political loyalties; characterises the key factors that have influenced the circumstances of the refugees; analyses the specifics of adaptation in a new place and the practicalities of interaction with the environment; and identifies key socio-political challenges that the region may face after the war.

The gathered recollections paint a complex picture of the political positioning of the Donbas populace in the context of the 2014–2024 war. Worldview attitudes formed over the years, propaganda influences from opposing sides, as well as the direct military experience of the region’s residents were crucial to the formation of different models of political loyalties. It is noteworthy that the decision to flee or to stay in the Donbas was determined by several factors, such as the physical security situation, family circumstances, opportunities for adaptation in a new place, the ability to find new accommodation and a job, fear of discrimination, political and ideological preferences, etc. Situations in which some refugees were forced to return home, to the combat zone, demonstrate a set of problems related to the lack of a consistent state policy towards this category of the population. It is emphasised that a fully representative depiction of the formation and evolution of the system of political loyalties requires that, in the future, the experiences of people who have left for Russia or Belarus and those who continue to live in the occupied territory should also be taken into account.

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Introduction

Between the 16th and 20th of August 2023, the Ukrainian sociological group Rating conducted an anonymous survey on the occasion of Ukraine's Independence Day. It analysed the problems and challenges facing Ukrainian society. Among other things, it raised the question of Ukrainian citizens' attitudes towards several categories of their compatriots: 59% of respondents expressed an unfriendly attitude towards residents of the 'people's republics' of the Donbas, while only 5% expressed an unfriendly attitude towards residents of the occupied territories of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblast, as well as towards internally displaced persons.[1] There is no representative sociological research on the mood in the non-government controlled territory of the Donbas, but the author's personal observations during her last trip to Donetsk in July–August 2019, monitoring of the 'DPR/LPR' media resources, as well as constant contact with relatives and friends who still live in the Donbas, allow her to observe a growing trend of alienation among the population of the occupied Donbas region in relation to residents of other regions of Ukraine. Thus, it is logical to assume that several factors have been developing over the years, and these are now influencing the socio-political discourse, including the formation of perceptions of each other.

The political cataclysms of 2013–2014 were accompanied by the formation of two quasi-state entities in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts — the Donetsk and Luhansk 'people's republics'. Active hostilities in the region from the spring of 2014 have resulted in massive migration. In the years 2014–2021, about 2.5 million people left their homes, and a new category of people emerged — the so-called 'internally displaced persons' (hereinafter: IDPs) from the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, whose number was about 1.5 million (about 1 million people fled abroad, mainly to Russia and Belarus).[2] Given that at the beginning of 2014, the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts was about 6.6 million people,[3] the scale of migration of residents from one region was unprecedented in the history of Europe after 1945. According to preliminary estimates, by the end of 2021, around 14,000 persons had lost their lives on both sides of the frontline, including about 3,500 civilians, while about 40,000 people

1 *Sotsiolohichne doslidzhennia...*

2 Gulina O. 2015, 135.

3 *Chyselnist naselennia...*

were wounded.[4] The experience of hundreds of thousands of children in the region, whose socialisation since 2014 has taken place amidst the military conflict, has been traumatic and long-lasting.[5] The losses of industrial potential are colossal, as is the ruination of housing and social infrastructure. There are serious problems with securing the basic rights of people who have either left the region or remained. All of this suggests that the population of the Donbas (both in the territory of the 'people's republics' and in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government), having been involved in military confrontation since 2014, had developed a specific wartime experience and a corresponding worldview by 2022.

The full-scale war that began in February 2022 has only deepened this experience, leading to the total exodus of virtually the entire population of the most affected settlements (Bakhmut, Popasna, Kreminna, Avdiivka, Maryinka, Soledar, Vuhledar, etc.) and to a sharp increase in the number of casualties in cities such as Mariupol, Volnovakha, Donetsk, and Horlivka. Hundreds of thousands of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, who had already experienced internal displacement (*de facto* refugee status) between 2014 and February 2022, had to go through the refugee experience for the second time. They were forced to leave the frontline areas and either move further west within the country or flee abroad. Fatal human losses on both sides of the Donbas conflict since 2014 are estimated at several tens of thousands of lives.

It is fair to conclude that by 2022, the events in the Donbas had reshaped many stereotypes and perceptions of 'our folk' and 'foreign' and formed an 'image of the enemy' for many people, which was reflected in the political, psychological, and moral evaluations of millions of people who have lived on opposing sides of the frontline since 2014, within different systems of political coordinates. These features were partially reflected in interviews conducted with participants in commemorative events dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazism,[6] local residents who witnessed World War II personally,[7] residents who crossed the line of contact demarcating parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts controlled by the Ukrainian and separatist sides,[8] as well as residents of the region who were interviewed at the behest of the Rinat Akhmetov Voices of the Peaceful Museum Foundation.[9] A book dedicated to analysing the key myths that were formed around the Donbas[10] utilised extensive interviews on various aspects of the pre-war reality in the Donbas.

4 *Conflict-related…*

5 Tytarenko O. 2017, 225–229.

6 Hellbeck J., Pastushenko T., Tytarenko D. 2017, 41–66.

7 Tytarenko D. 2021, 146–179.

8 *Monitorynh kontrolnykh punktiv…*

9 *Museum of Civilian Voices…*

10 Bilokobylskyi O. et al. (eds), 2024.

Since February 2022, the new phase of the war has prompted a number of academic and civic initiatives aimed at collecting the memories of war witnesses, including oral histories of refugees from Ukraine. At the same time, it has become apparent that analytical research on the long-term and multidimensional experiences of residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, who have been at the epicentre of the war since 2014, is lacking. This often leads to the falsification and dissemination of inaccurate information in the media, the manipulation of public opinion in Ukraine, Russia, and the West, stereotyping, the use of hate speech, and mistakes in developing a strategy for reintegrating the Donbas into the Ukrainian state.

In view of this, the oral history project 'Their Ten Years of War...', initiated in 2023 at the Department of Public History at the Fern University in Hagen (Germany) — as part of the international project 'Witnessing the Now' — has considerable potential. It aims to analyse the specifics of social transformations, political loyalties, and survival strategies of the Donbas population between 2014–2023, based on oral history interviews.[11] The key objectives of this article are as follows: to describe the impact of the military and political events of the last ten years on the formation and evolution of political loyalties; to highlight the key factors that influenced the refugee situation; to analyse the specifics of adaptation in a new place and the practices of interaction with the environment; and to identify key socio-political challenges that the region may face after the war from the respondents' perspective.

The Project 'Their Ten Years of War...' — Donbas Residents During the 2014–2024 War: Methodological Aspects

During the course of the project, 50 interviews were conducted with residents of the Donbas region, as well as 12 interviews with residents of other regions of Ukraine. Additionally, four of the interviews were conducted with people who did not give permission to keep the audio recordings in the project archive but nevertheless allowed the author to use the material for research purposes on the condition of anonymity. The respondents were given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the purpose of the interview and the list of questions prepared by the project in advance. One of the key methodological challenges of the project was to ensure maximum representativeness. To this end, the experiences taken into account were those of men and women alike, representing various social, professional, and age groups (with the exception, for ethical reasons, of persons under the age of 18).

The respondents consisted of people who lived in the government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and other regions of Ukraine, as well as in

11 The interviews were recorded by a team from the Public History Department at Fern Universität Hagen within the international documentation project: '24.02.22, 5 am: Testimonies from the war.'

the non-government-controlled/occupied territory ('DPR/LPR') between 2014 and 2022. However, the vast majority of respondents interviewed in Germany and Poland had, until they fled the country in 2022, lived in the Ukrainian government-controlled territory since 2014. The general consensus, however, is that a fully representative view of the formation and evolution of political loyalty systems can only be made in the future, when the experiences of people who left for Russia or Belarus, as well as those who continue to remain in the occupied territory, have also been taken into account.

Given that the study was conducted as part of a wider project, the questionnaire did not include a separate set of questions related to the political views or political sympathies or antipathies of the interviewees. At the same time, as the interviews formed part of autobiographical narratives, most respondents addressed these issues by themselves, either openly or implicitly. During the interviews, most respondents deliberately limited the content of their stories. The main reasons for this were the risks of pressure and persecution from the Ukrainian or Russian authorities and special services and fear of social isolation should those opinions, which did not conform to the 'mainstream', become known to others. In some cases, the interviewees felt pressured by their kin (children, wives, husbands), who were present at the time of the interview, to express officially accepted and socially approved opinions. These and other factors interacted and triggered mechanisms of self-censorship. During the interviews, most of the respondents tried to integrate their autobiographical narratives into the framework of official discourse. At the same time, the narrators became more frank and willing to analyse many events and phenomena, especially those of a political nature, after the recorder was turned off. This allows us to recognise certain limitations of oral history sources in terms of reconstructing the socio-political atmosphere and the respondents' attitudes towards certain political processes. Moreover, this situation opens up an interesting research perspective for conducting repeated interviews with these respondents after the war to analyse the evolution of their worldviews.

One important aspect is confronting information from official sources with one's own experience: 'What was shown on TV at the time and what was happening in our city were different things. […] What they say is one thing. What people see in reality is altogether another thing.'[12] Given the high level of potential risk for the respondents, all of them were assured of anonymity and confidentiality regarding their participation in the project; any information that could potentially identify them was removed from the quoted interview fragments. It should be noted that this approach is followed by other researchers working on similar issues.[13]

12 Interview with a woman, born in 1988, lived in Kramatorsk. Place and time of the interview: Munich, 18.01.2024.

13 Schäfer K. 2024, 50.

Fractured Donbas: The Events of 2014–2024 as a (Dis)integrating Factor

It would be a simplification to present the political, social, and cultural landscape of the Donbas as homogeneous or static. From the very beginning, the region was populated by people with different political views, life experiences, and visions of the future. The first signs of the country's polarisation appeared in Ukraine back in 2004 during the presidential elections, when foreign policy factors demonstrated the significant influence from the Russian (pro-Russian) political vector.[14] The events of 2013–2014 gave a new stimulus to the manifestation of dissent among the populace, which regional and global political actors successfully exploited. This was the time of clear demonstration of political disloyalty by a part of the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which for a long time had not only shared a border with Russia but also a long historical tradition of coexistence. The percentage of Russians in the 2001 census was 38% in Donetsk and 39% in Luhansk,[15] while the level of intermarriage was extremely high. The language issue raised after the victory of Euromaidan, as noted by several respondents, became one of the catalysts for the radicalisation of sentiment in the region and the formation of an anti-government stance: 'Why can't I speak Russian? People were afraid that they would immediately be oppressed. When people are told that they will not be able to speak Russian, it scares them.'[16]

One of the key factors, if not the key factor, in destabilising the situation and turning it into a violent confrontation was the external interference, which was all too obvious to many respondents, in particular the arrival of provocateurs from Russia to the region:

> Everyone saw how it developed gradually. No one came to these rallies at first [...]. No one went to them — the rallies against Ukraine, for Russia. Gradually, it was gaining steam. Then I personally saw lots of buses coming to Donetsk from the Rostov region with crowds — we call them 'titushki' — but they were full of grim-faced men dressed in grey and black... You could tell that these people were the lowest of the low. In short, they came to Donetsk and staged rallies.[17]

This phenomenon of instigating anti-Ukrainian demonstrations was observed not only in Donetsk:

14 Nahorna S. 2008, 223.

15 *Natsionalnyi sklad naselennia...*, 56.

16 Interview with a woman 1, born in 1984, who lived in Donetsk.

17 Interview with a man, born in 1963, who lived in Donetsk, later – Mariupol.

> I stayed in Bakhmut — then Artemivsk — during the entire period of occupation by pro-Russian mercenaries […]. I saw it all, this 'Russian spring'. Rallies in the central square. I have never seen such rallies in Bakhmut. No one has ever gathered in such numbers before! These people were brought in. There were, of course, some local crazies.'[18]

The most significant events in terms of their consequences were those in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, which, according to eyewitness accounts and supported by analysts' findings, were marked by the participation of numerous militant groups in armed confrontations, groups consisting of both Russians and local residents, many of whom hailed from marginalised groups.[19]

The recollections show the rapid process of changing political identities and loyalties, which is generally characteristic of major social upheavals. At the same time, the question remains: to what extent was this a consequence of shifts in mentality, and to what extent was it a manifestation of conformism in the face of real or potential threats? According to the respondents, symbolic space was an important external marker of political positioning:

> Our school headmaster immediately began to repaint the railings from yellow and blue to blue, white and red. The stairsteps were repainted in the national flags of this upcoming DPR […]. One of my friends, when I met him in the city, said: Look what I've got", and he pulled out a yellow and blue flag on one side. From one pocket. And from the other pocket, he pulled out a St. George's ribbon […]. People were changing their colours, of course, they were changing them on a large scale. Those who were pro-Ukrainian became pro-Russian in a matter of two or three weeks.[20]

In this situation of uncertainty, the respondents felt threatened:

> The feeling that you will be betrayed everywhere […]. People seemed to have gone mad. People who were quite normal, but they suddenly became angry and started to betray one another, they saw everyone as a potential Ukrainian. For speaking Ukrainian over there, you could be sent to the basement.[21]

At the same time, it should be noted that for many residents of the region, especially the older generation, the issue of ethnic identity has always played a secondary role compared to preserving the memory of the Soviet identity that integrated them in the past.

18 Interview with a woman, born in 1979, lived in Bakhmut.

19 Mitrokhin N. 2020, 113–144.

20 Interview with a man, born in 1963, who lived in Donetsk, later in Mariupol.

21 Interview with a man, born in 1962, who lived in Luhansk.

Luhansk sociologist Ilya Kononov described the events that took place in the spring of 2014 in the Donbas, particularly in Luhansk, as the 'Luhansk syndrome.'[22] Similar processes took place in the Donetsk region. Stereotypes and phobias that had been accumulating for decades pushed people seeking existential safety towards the aggressor. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that political loyalty as '[...] a complex phenomenon that cumulatively reflects the relations of power, trust, identity, tolerance, legitimacy, solidarity'[23] could not be secured either by the old, politically compromised elites or by the new ones, elites incapable of integrating the society split apart by the political events of 2013–2014. This found its manifestation in the rather large participation of the inhabitants of the Donbas in the 'referendum' of 11 May 2014.

> We received a piece of paper inviting us to our usual polling station. [...] And on the day of that pseudo-referendum, I was also in the centre, in that English office, and I sat outside all morning and looked at the crowd – well, not a crowd, people were going in files to this central area, the polling station. And I remember my thought: when you see an educated, cultured person, they are dressed and look completely different. Those people were dressed in low-quality, synthetic clothes, they just dressed their best clothes and went out. You could see a parade of people with bad teeth, dumb faces, I just sat there for several hours, looking at these citizens of our city – who were these people?[24]

The respondent emphasising the unattractive appearance of people and their allegedly limited intellectual capabilities is nothing new in terms of social psychology. This approach should be viewed in the context of building a dehumanised image of one's enemy.

The respondents' comments noted increasing levels of radicalism on the street towards real or perceived opponents:

> I remember one day I was teaching extra English classes near Central Square and I saw those people and I shouted "Assholes!" or something like that. They ran up to me, so I locked myself in my office. It had an iron door, and they were knocking on it, but we had a back door to the other side. I went out through that door afterwards, sat there, waited, but they were not yet warmed up, it was still March. It was in the centre of Bakhmut.[25]

Respondents were particularly disappointed with the shift in political views among those who taught the Ukrainian language or promoted Ukrainian history or culture:

22 Kononov I.F. 2016.

23 Khanstantynov V.O. 2014, 63.

24 Interview with a woman, born in 1979, who lived in Bakhmut.

25 Interview with a woman, born in 1979, who lived in Bakhmut.

> When only yesterday you were teaching Ukrainian at a university or school, when you were advocating for national Ukrainian culture, and today, literally a month and a half later, you are already running around with a St. George's ribbon. How can you respect such people?'[26]

It is an obvious mistake to explain the socio-political split that has been observed in the Donbas since 2014 solely by external propaganda factors. Analysis of socio-political reactions should take into account age, generational characteristics, and the specifics of political socialisation, even within the same family: 'Even Mariupol was divided, as it were, into two camps. Each family had two camps. That is, some were ardently supporting Russia, while others were for Ukraine.'[27]

In everyday reality, the family is traditionally seen as a defence against the negative influence of the outside world.[28] However, as the wartime actions in the Donbas show, this stereotype is not always valid: 'I have two brothers. One is married to a pro-Russian woman, and I don't communicate with the other because I am a "Ukrofascist".[29] We have no contact with him.'[30]

When describing the overall atmosphere of political division, the respondents generally illustrated this with examples from their immediate environment: neighbours, work colleagues, relatives, including even the closest people — parents.

> In 2014, our neighbours' parents had a very strong fight with their son on this issue… They were pro-Ukrainian, and their son was pro-Russian. They did not speak for several years after that.[31]
>
> My mother went to Russia to live with my sister. They fled to Russia in 2014 because her husband supported the DPR. One can say, we ceased communicating with her on those grounds.[32]

The prolonged nature of the military-political conflict has only exacerbated the breakdown of contacts between family members. Having one's close relatives or friends in the ranks of the opposing army has become a typical phenomenon in the Donbas since 2014:

> The war has taken away not only material things from us – it has divided our relatives into two camps. My relatives are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian Armed

26 Interview with a man, born in 1963, who lived in Donetsk, later in Mariupol.
27 Interview with a man, born in 1955, who lived in Mariupol.
28 Uehling G.L. 2023, 86.
29 A pejorative label that has become widespread since 2014.
30 Interview with a woman, born in 1988, who lived in Mariupol.
31 Interview with a woman, born in 1979, who lived in Sloviansk.
32 Interview with a woman, born in 1988, who lived in Kramatorsk.

> Forces, my husband's relatives are on the side of the occupiers. I want them (the DPR) to get what they deserve.[33]

As the state lost control of the situation and power went into the hands of separatist groups, certain forms of protest activity emerged:

> We were also posting stickers, walking around — we had these printed somewhere else; "Artemivsk is Ukraine". And we'd go around at night in pairs and put them up along the trolleybus routes. We also spray-painted Ukrainian flags. That was very scary. Because we understood that if someone saw us now, they would send a car and take us away, and we would disappear. So we were very careful.[34]

However, these forms of protest did not become widespread in the uncontrolled territory due to demoralisation and disorientation of the local community. In total, since 2014, 6.5 million residents of the region have found themselves in separate military-political, socio-economic, and cultural realities, developing different forms of political loyalty, adopting or conforming to defiant ways of activity, and deciding to temporarily or permanently leave their 'little homeland'.

Stay, Leave, or Return? — The Challenges of Displacement

One of the popular markers, widely perceived as a manifestation of ideological sympathies and political views, and an indicator of political loyalty and patriotism, is the act of staying in (or fleeing from) the territory under the jurisdiction of a particular regime.

The factors that prompted people to stay in the NGCA varied. Key amongst them were fears of changing their everyday surroundings, losing their homes, discrimination in a new place, having sick or elderly relatives who needed care, negative experiences of those who had left earlier and later returned, and finally, the expectation that the war would soon end and Ukrainian control over the territory would be restored. In most cases, these factors acted in combination.

> Starting from the 15th, we all saw that it was going to be a long time. I really believed every year that it was about to end. And then we all got used to it. The reason I didn't leave right away was because I lived with my grandmother. My grandmother... she was like a mother. Like any old person, she didn't want to leave her husband's grave... The stories of many of us who left in 2014 were being told, and many of my

33 Interview with a woman, born in 1980, who lived in Donetsk.

34 Interview with a woman, born in 1979, who lived in Bakhmut.

> friends went to Kyiv… and they started to return… Ukraine couldn't support the IDPs properly. It was hard to settle in a new place and I saw it all… When the 14th year happened, I really didn't think it would last… If I knew it would last as long as it did, I would have taken my grandmother and everything I could [take] to Ukraine, of course. I waited every year. And there are a lot of people like us, by the way…[35]

The opinion about the significant number of pro-Ukrainian residents, at least in the first years of the military confrontation, is shared by Ukrainian journalist S. Aseejev, who lived in the uncontrolled territory for several years and observed the processes taking place in the territory of the 'people's republics.'[36]

The motives for leaving varied. The analysis of the interviews shows that the key motivation for Donbas residents who began moving to other regions of Ukraine in 2014 was the desire to ensure their own, and their families', safety. In some cases, the impetus was the feeling of the lack of freedom in seemingly basic everyday situations:

> The most dramatic moment was when we were celebrating a big family holiday in a restaurant. It was a restaurant called 'Bavarian cuisine' in Donetsk… And the essence of this restaurant is Tyrolean and Bavarian tunes… And then one day a particular audience comes in — maybe 8 people in burnt camouflage overalls… They were probably the first to arrive after the capture of Sloviansk. And the first person who came to this restaurant made a sign of the cross and said to everyone 'stop playing these fascist tunes, let's play something of ours…' The waiter said that we will play what they asked for, like 'Vladimir Central' (a popular Russian chanson song — O.T.)[37]

Situations of moral turmoil and emergent existential threats influenced the decision to leave for many respondents. In some cases, the decision to leave was facilitated by the fact that relatives, friends, and colleagues had already left and thus they lost their familiar and comfortable social environment.

The key date that put an end to the hopes of many people who had maintained pro-Ukrainian sentiments while living in the territory of the 'people's republics' since 2014 was 2022:

> After [20]22 years, the [pro-Russian] percentage started to grow. Many started to work in the education system, many started to serve, and they and their families support the DPR, Russia… I left Donetsk only because when they started to take people

35 Interview with a man, born in 1980, who lived in Donetsk.

36 Assejew S. 2020.

37 Interview with a man, born in 1963, who lived in Donetsk, later in Mariupol.

> away by force on 18 February, I heard that there were even videos of people being snatched. They started snatching people in the city to enlist them.[38]

Oral history sources are seen as an important tool for studying the evolution of human spirituality. Also, it would be unwise to dismiss their role in reconstructing certain historical phenomena that are not reflected, for example, in other sources. For example, information about unsuccessful attempts by the Donbas refugees to obtain legal refugee status in Europe in 2014–2022 is virtually unobtainable.[39] The reason for the refusal was the official position of the Ukrainian government, which did not report the scale of refugee flows from eastern Ukraine and did not ask for European support in this regard.

Strangers Among Our Own

The events of 2014, which marked the first wave of refugees from the Donbas, made it difficult to adapt to new places of residence. The state's response to the challenges of 2014 was superficial and inadequate. It was only in 2016 that the Ministry for the Temporarily Occupied Territories was established. The issue of compliance with anti-discrimination legislation and key principles of tolerance, as well as the fulfilment of the state's obligations, has always been a hot topic in relation to the IDPs. The mere fact of coming from a region that has been stigmatised as 'separatist' has, in many cases, served as the basis for political accusations from ordinary citizens living in other regions.

Sheer physical distance from the military events led to psychological alienation towards Donbas residents and contributed to the formation and consolidation of perceptions of the region's inhabitants as imaginary or latent 'separatists', as 'foreign', which was noted in the statements made by residents of other regions: 'There was a feeling that it wasn't about us, that this was happening somewhere far away... This was not just in statistics but in everyday life. When I studied at university from 2019 to 2023, I met a few Donbas-born people... So I can say that after having had conversations with them, after what I heard, my attitude changed. Many of those people just didn't want to talk about it, as if they were afraid of something. But for us at the time, they seemed pro-Russian. It was outrageous and caused a very strong negative feeling. When you met people from that region and they said "It's not all so clear-cut", we took a prejudiced and cautious stance with these people'.[40] The tendency to ignore the circumstances that forced people to stay in the uncontrolled territory became the

38 Interview with a man, born in 1980, who lived in Donetsk.

39 Interview with a woman, born in 1968, who lived in Donetsk.

40 Interview with a man, born in 2004, who lived in Chernihiv.

norm, bearing in mind the silence from government officials, the unpopularity of the topic in the media, the lack of a clear position of the Ombudsman, and the lack of influence of human rights organisations:

> There was an unfriendly attitude, it was common in my environment. They were simply called separatists, residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. It didn't cross anyone's mind if they could leave or it was their own choice.[41]

Even relocating to Ukrainian government-controlled territories to continue living and working in the region did not save IDPs from discrimination and, in some cases, open hostility, based solely on their place of birth or registration:

> As I said, they wouldn't rent apartments. They didn't even want to hire me when they saw my residence permit. They didn't want to hire me once they saw my Donetsk residence permit. They said: 'Sorry, the job is taken.'[42]

In some situations, the causes and manifestations of aggression against IDPs from the NGCA were more complex. For example, one of the respondents, who had worked in one of Donetsk's municipal enterprises until 2014, moved to Kramatorsk in early 2015. After finding a job there a few months later, she was forced to resign and return to Donetsk. The reason was a life-threatening surgery she underwent in the summer of 2015 while visiting relatives in the uncontrolled territory. The refusal of her employer (a higher education institution relocated from Donetsk!) to recognise her sick leave, as well as the rude accusation by a colleague in Kramatorsk that 'the war started because of you, Donetsk people' — clear acts of discrimination and gross violation of her rights[43] — caused a deep moral shock to that person. Accusations of alleged political disloyalty and latent separatism became widespread in 2014–2022, according to respondents' memoirs, in particular when looking for a job or housing, enrolling children in school or kindergarten, studying at university, or completing documents, etc.[44] As a result of such difficulties, IDPs from the Donbas found themselves in situations where their identity and origin worked against them, shutting off or significantly limiting their social and economic opportunities.[45]

41 Interview with a man, born in 2004, who lived in Chernihiv.

42 Interview with a woman 3, born in 1984, who lived in Donetsk.

43 Interview with a woman, born in 1971, who lived in Donetsk.

44 Interview with a woman 2, born in 1978, who lived in Donetsk; Interview with a woman 1, born in 1978, who lived in Donetsk; Interview with a woman, born in 1991, who lived in Donetsk, after 2014 in Dnipro.

45 Gyidel E. 2022, 118.

The situation with pension payments was an important factor that contributed to the growth of distrust of and disloyalty to the state. Since the summer of 2014, payments to pensioners living in the uncontrolled territory have been suspended. According to the current Ukrainian legislation at that time, pension payments could be resumed only for those who had left the uncontrolled territory, re-registered at a new place of residence, and actually stayed there (this position of the Ukrainian government drew criticism from many international human rights organisations).[46] A similar opinion was expressed by some influential representatives of Ukrainian politics.[47] The key factors that negatively affected levels of loyalty to both the Ukrainian state and the separatist quasi-state entities were the hours-long artificial queues at checkpoints (often under fire, on mined roadsides, and during weather disasters), humiliating frisk searches, and sometimes dismissive and rude attitudes of border guards and customs officers:

> I used to go to Makiivka very often... I have my mother in Makiivka, my brother stayed there... And we would stand in these queues at the checkpoints, and we heard the attitude of the military towards us. They even called us cattle! 'These are cattle! Why are you talking to them? They are cattle![48]

A particularly depressing impression was made by systemic corruption on the part of law enforcement and controlling structures at the checkpoints:

> This war has become a source of profit on both sides of the border. Anyone who has not seen what was happening at the checkpoints in the Donbas will not understand this war. How can you mock your citizens like this? How can we trust this state?[49]

The perception of state institutions in Ukraine, the 'DPR/LPR', Russia, Germany, and Poland was significantly influenced by the presence or absence of problems in obtaining IDP/refugee status, finding a job, the level of social protection, the possibility of exercising electoral rights, and the spread of hate speech by representatives of official structures. The facts of direct and indirect discrimination against internally displaced persons were recorded by human rights advocates who appealed to Ukraine's obligations to increase protection of human rights of internally displaced persons.[50] In some cases, problems in exercising their rights caused frustration among IDPs and

46 Tytarenko D. 2021, 173–175.

47 Schuller K. 2016.

48 Interview with a woman, born in 1983, who lived in Mariupol.

49 Interview with a woman, born in 1946, who lived in Donetsk.

50 *Natsionalna sudova praktyka...*, 34.

forced them to return to the uncontrolled territory, providing their housing had not been damaged during the hostilities:

> But, again, a large-scale war started here… And when you come to Kyiv and see life is quiet there, while you are already somebody else, you have changed, and you look at people from a different angle, and you realise that you are not understood and you do not understand them, you do not understand how one can live so quietly, yes, as if we live in the same state. But you are already a stranger to them… I mean, I was the most ardent patriot of Ukraine in Donetsk… as ridiculous as it may sound… When I came to Kyiv… my patriotism faded a little bit, [we lived] in this wait-and-survive mode for a very long time. You lived unwanted there for eight, nine months, however long we were there.[51]

Obviously, many IDPs/refugees from the Donbas faced similar difficult life situations related to the exercise of their rights in the Russian Federation. Under these conditions, state and political loyalty became a highly variable category that could be determined not only by one's political views and beliefs, but also by the specific experience of interacting with state and social institutions. There have been numerous cases where Donbas residents, having arrived in Russia, would later return to Ukraine. Such non-linear situations require thorough and methodologically balanced work with the memory resources of such refugees in the future.

'The War is Elsewhere…' — Reactions to Military Events from Other Regions

Until February 2022, the majority of the population, especially in western and central Ukraine, was removed from the military conflict zone both geographically and mentally. This reduced the sense of immediate threat or impact of events on their daily lives:

> The attitude towards people from these regions (Donetsk and Luhansk) was… People and people, nothing special. I lived in Kyiv. People reacted: It's over there. They kept saying it was somewhere in the East… A lot of people were guided by: My house is far away. They chose not to know.[52]

One of the reasons for the lack of understanding of the events that took place in the Donbas from 2014 to 2022, implicitly articulated by respondents, was the lack of

51 Interview with a woman, born in 1976, who lived in Donetsk.

52 Interview with a woman, born in 2002, who lived in Kyiv.

experience of war in the environment in which they found themselves. Only the events of 2022 prompted residents of other regions to reconsider their views and assessments:

> Life was normal. The war was out there. Not here. Our attitude toward them (people from Donetsk and Luhansk regions) was absolutely different... After the full-scale invasion, I reconsidered my views.[53]

Paradoxically, in some cases (at least until February 2022), this type of attitude could be found even among residents of large cities in the Donbas that were in close proximity to the line of contact. Living in an area that was under constant shelling proved the decisive factor in assessing the war, including its political goals. In particular, living in such districts of Donetsk as Petrovsky, Kyivsky, Kuibyshevsky, and the neighbourhood of Tekstilnyk, which were constantly under fire, contributed to a more expressive articulation of certain radical political views (with responsibility being placed on one side or the other, depending on the political views of the interlocutors). The author also noticed this phenomenon in her communication with friends and former colleagues during a trip to Donetsk in the summer of 2019.

Even in cases where respondents refrained from making political assessments of what was happening, everyday life contributed to the formation of a double reality:

> When there are very expensive cars on Pushkin Boulevard, beautiful women in mink coats walking around, smelling of perfume, cafeterias and restaurants working, life is in full swing, some institutes and universities. You know, something there, something so civilised, beautiful, pretentious. And just around the corner, across the bridge, there's the Kirovsky district, yes, it's under constant fire, something is constantly collapsing, and someone is dying all the time, over there... I mean, the city is divided into the area of total madness and mayhem, yes, ruination and the area where people pretend that nothing is happening.[54]

A certain sense of disconnect from the war was observed among people living in urban areas relatively distant from the frontline, for example, in Mariupol prior to 2022, although several dozen residents of the city became victims of hostilities between 2014 and January 2022: 'It's their war in Donetsk — we don't have a war here'[55] (this assessment often depended on the presence or absence of personal wartime experience — for example, the main reason for the author's family's refusal to accept the

53 Interview with a woman, born in 2002, who lived in Kharkiv.

54 Interview with a woman, born in 1985, who lived in Kharkiv.

55 Interview with a woman, born in 1971, who lived in Mariupol.

official housing provided to them in Mariupol in the spring of 2021[56] was the night-time artillery cannonade and the unwillingness to relive the wartime experience of 2014).

The events of February 2022, which initiated a new and much larger wave of internal migration and refugee flows, gave rise to the phenomenon of 'victim competition', which is new to this war. Different levels of traumatic experience, and varying geographic origins of refugees, as well as the socio-cultural characteristics of refugees from different regions, in some cases led to conflicts among them and to instances of 'hate speech'. The language of communication could be one of the contributing factors for such reactions:

> We went to the store with the child. At home, we speak Russian. So the dialogue between me and my child is naturally in Russian. Well, we just went to the supermarket… And he was telling me something, talking to me… And one woman came up and said, 'Hey, you Muscovite, — she said, — grab your freak and get the fuck out of here.' I left the store shaking.[57]

Life After the War

The respondents' various plans for their lives after the war are important elements of their testimonies. Many of them tried to avoid answering this question. The absolute uncertainty about the course of military and political events, the presence of relatives in the Donbas (on one side or the other of the frontline), and the fear of harming them through openness were the main reasons for this. Since February 2022, there has been a noticeable trend of increasing radical anti-Russian sentiment, even among those who, before the events of 2022, did not consider Russia a hostile state due to their ethnicity,[58] family ties or the fact that Russian is their primary language of communication.[59] Some respondents, especially those who completely lost their property during the war, are considering options to remain in the host countries. Some are considering returning to Ukraine, although their readiness to do so is inversely proportional to the duration of the war (this trend is also evidenced by the results of sociological studies conducted with Ukrainian refugees).[60]

At the same time, there is a high level of concern about the prospects for returning among those who left for Germany after 2022 from the territory of the Donbas,

56 This house, along with the apartment, was destroyed in the spring of 2022.

57 Interview with a woman, born in 1992, who lived in Kramatorsk.

58 According to the 2001 census, more than 38% of the population of Donbas identified themselves as Russians, with the vast majority of families having representatives of two or more nationalities.

59 According to the 2001 census, 75% of the population of Donbas declared Russian as their mother tongue. Its use as a language of everyday communication, especially in urban areas, was much higher than this.

60 *Pres-reliz…*; *Bizhentsi…*

which has been under the control of the 'DPR/LPR' since 2014, and was officially incorporated into Russia in the autumn of 2022. The situation of these people seems to be the most difficult, given the risk of persecution by two political and legal systems. If Russia retains control (which is seen as the most likely scenario), they fear a ban on entry to Russia (and thus the Donbas), or potentially persecution for travelling to the territory of 'unfriendly states' if they attempt to return.[61] On the other hand, in the event of a return from Germany to Ukraine, or the restoration of Ukrainian control over the territory of the Donbas, these respondents' fears are related to possible stigmatisation and discrimination by their compatriots, as well as repression by state authorities for living and working in the non-government controlled area until 2022.[62] It is noteworthy that they expressed their disbelief in the injustice of what they believe to be a totally corrupt and politically biased Ukrainian justice system.[63] This is compounded by information available in the media regarding convictions on charges of collaboration, as well as reports from international human rights organisations concerning the indiscriminate application of criminal code articles that provide for liability for collaboration,[64] reinforcing their doubts about the possibility of fair decisions:

> I am afraid that Ukraine will come to my Yenakiyevo. I don't know what Ukraine will do. I'm just afraid... What will they do to us, who have been under Russia for ten years and did not leave, and received these Russian DPR passports... They are accused of being separatists. I'm scared for my mother if Ukraine comes there... My mother's friend lives near Mariupol and says 'Finally, the Russians have come.'[65]

Obviously, such concerns are much more widespread among residents of the 'DPR/LPR'.[66]

An important factor that could influence the decision to return to the Donbas after the war is the availability or loss of housing. Some respondents stated that they would be willing to return to their hometowns if they could recover their homes. Respondents gave examples of Mariupol residents they knew who left the city during the hostilities in 2022 and ended up in Germany but returned to occupied Mariupol because their houses remained undamaged.[67] Examples of this kind demonstrate

61 Interview with a woman, born in 1946, who lived in Donetsk; Interview with a woman, born in 1971, who lived in Donetsk.

62 Interview with a woman, born in 1946, who lived in Donetsk; Interview with a woman, born in 1971, who lived in Donetsk.

63 Interview with a woman, born in 1946, who lived in Donetsk; Interview with a woman, born in 1971, who lived in Donetsk.

64 *2022. Country Reports...*; Mykhailov D. 2024.

65 Interview with a woman 1, born in 1984, who lived in Donetsk.

66 This thesis is based on the author's experience of communication with acquaintances who currently live in the annexed territory of Donbas or have left for Russia.

67 Interview with a woman, born in 1983, who lived in Mariupol.

a state of deep uncertainty about a future abroad and, probably, disillusionment with the system of social and political values of Western countries or Ukraine, as well as nostalgia for their homeland.

The comments reveal the coexistence of differentiated images of the homeland — namely, the state and the place of birth or pre-war residence. Respondents tend to demonstrate a stronger sense of nostalgia for the small — cosy, familial, and comfortable — homeland, where different peoples and cultures interacted: 'What Donetsk was like. A city of mining waste heaps and roses... My dad came from Russia, by the way, and my mother was Ukrainian — and life went on... The city provided very comfortable surroundings and no horrors.'[68] It is the image of the pre-war city that refugees cherish, extrapolated to the present and serving as a key incentive for them to consider the prospects of returning to the city that has already undergone devastating changes:

> My situation is very simple — [I will just grab] my suitcase and goodbye, farewell. And I will not be going to anywhere within the territory of Ukraine. I will go to my city, I will continue to work there, I will continue to develop there. And I will do everything there. But it will be the city where I grew up, where I studied... As my grandfather says "Where you were born, you are useful. That's it!". When we get back home, everything will be fine, everything will be fine in any case. I have a clear goal — I will survive here, and then I'll just go live there. That's it.[69]

Some respondents attributed the irreversible loss of their familiar and comfortable space to the political events of 2013–2014, which, in their opinion, triggered destructive processes in their personal lives, within Ukrainian society, and specifically in their local communities. Both sides were responsible for this:

> [...] the Maidan split Ukraine because those who came to power by bloody means thought not about the country, but about how to seize power and plunder the country even more. Human life did not matter to them at all. We have felt this well in the Donbass since 2014. I feel sorry for ordinary people who were forced by politicians on both sides to hate and kill each other for their own interests. The Donbas was being murdered from all sides.[70]

Taking into account the entire spectrum of opinions, it is clear that the Donbas, which was 'peaceful' in the past but now 'destroyed and lost' (temporarily or permanently),

68 Interview with a woman, born in 1969, who lived in Mariupol

69 Interview with a woman, born in 1969, who lived in Kramatorsk.

70 Interview with a woman, born in 1946, who lived in Donetsk.

will remain the paradigmatic image of the Motherland in the memories of a significant number of residents of the region, regardless of their place of residence and political views.

Conclusions

The military events that began in 2014 in the Donbas — accompanied by devastating material damage and loss of life — resulted in the formation of certain features within the region's collective memory and, accordingly, an oral history tradition. The phenomenon of refugeeism of Donbas residents, and the decision to stay or leave the war zone, as evidenced by the interview materials, was a combination of personal, social, political, economic, and psychological factors. Each case is unique, and it is possible to understand the motivation of a particular person only by considering the full range of circumstances in which they found themselves.

According to the materials of the interviews, by 2022, the events in the Donbas had already actualised many stereotypes and ideas about 'own folk' and 'foreigners', and had formed an 'image of the enemy' for many people, which was reflected in the political, psychological, moral and value orientations of millions of people who had been living on opposing sides of the frontline in different political coordinate systems since 2014. Their comments reflect a complex and varied picture of the political positioning of the region's population in the context of the 2014–2024 war. A key role in the formation of different models of political loyalty was played not only by the worldview attitudes that had been formed over the years, but also by propaganda influences from different sides and the direct military experience of the region's residents.

The decision to flee or stay in the Donbas was determined by a number of factors: the physical security situation, family circumstances, opportunities for adaptation in a new place, the ability to find housing or a job, fear of discrimination, and political or ideological preferences. The circumstances in which some refugees were forced to return home to the war zone demonstrate a systemic failure related to the lack of a consistent state policy on internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The challenges faced by IDPs during 2014–2022 could have significantly affected the evolution of political loyalties, in some cases creating a sense of distrust towards the Ukrainian state and towards a part of Ukrainian society that, in their opinion, lived without noticing the war. The full-scale invasion of 2022 led to significant changes in the political attitudes of the population of the Donbas, which was particularly affected by the war.

According to oral history research, the competing experiences of the war in the Donbas — which began in 2014 and has gained a new, more destructive impetus since February 2022 — have significantly affected their vision of the future. This outlook is the result of profound suffering, the loss of thousands of lives, aggravated

by competing propaganda from each side, and the daily realities of interaction between people from different regions. Some residents of the region, especially those who lost their property and homes because of the war, expressed a desire to stay and integrate into the states that hosted them. Others expressed a desire to return, guided primarily by idealised and nostalgic images of their pre-war lives. A phenomenon revealed during the interviews that should not be underestimated, and which requires an appropriate response, is the fear of some refugees from the territories not controlled by Ukraine since 2014 to return to Ukraine due to the risk of being prosecuted for 'collaboration'.

It is obvious that the problematic issues and visions of the future voiced by the respondents must be taken into account by the state when developing realistic scenarios for the implementation of social, humanitarian, and legal policies in the Donbas.

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