

# Donbas:

## New Trends in Public Opinion

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For Ukrainian version, see:

[Трансформації суспільних настроїв в умовах протидії агресії Росії на Донбасі: регіональний вимір](#)

English-language version of the book is expected in early 2018

General changes in the public attitudes of Ukrainians in 2014-2017 are most significantly reflected at the regional level. It is precisely the internal regional dynamics of the qualitative and profound nature of changes in public opinion, which does not always become apparent according to nationwide and average indicators. For this reason, the Donbas as a region, which became the target of external aggression, deserves special attention from the vantage point of the transformation of societal sentiments regarding the key socio-political problems the region faces today.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The data below are based on the research conducted in the parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts controlled by Ukraine (two-thirds of the Donbas).

## New approach to self-awareness

The attitudes towards the current socio-political events are an important component of social sentiments. At the same time, changes associated with the issues of identity or perceptions of communities are inherently more significant and profound for the long-term. In the period of external aggression the essential meaning of the image of “We”, the determining of one’s own affiliation to this or another community, is quite meaningful, all the more in a region that became the battlefield for the aggression against Ukraine.

Before the breakthrough events of 2013-2014 unfolded in Ukraine – namely, the EuroMaidan and the start of foreign aggression – the residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were divided almost in half into those who identified themselves as citizens of Ukraine (42%), on the one hand, and those who gave preference to the local dimension of identity and felt themselves to be residents of either a populated settlement, a district (29%) or the region in general (15%), on the other hand.

**Table 1. Whom do you consider yourself first and foremost?, %**  
(Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) <sup>2</sup>

	2013	2014	2015	2017
Resident of the village, district or city in which you live	28.6	18.5	24.7	24.8
Resident of the region (oblast or several oblasts) in which you live	14.8	27.0	20.5	15.8
<b>Citizen of Ukraine</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>34.2</b>	<b>38.6</b>	<b>43.0</b>
Representative of your ethnos	0.4	0.7	2.4	3.6
Citizen of the former Soviet Union	11.7	13.9	5.4	8.5
Citizen of Europe	0.4	0.7	0.6	0.0
Citizen of the world	1.8	4.6	7.2	3.6
Other	0.7	0.4	0.6	0.6

Yet another particular feature of the region was the fact that the nostalgia for the Soviet past in the Donbas region was quite tangible: a part of the local residents, who to this day consider themselves, first and foremost, citizens of an already non-existent state - the USSR, remained the highest in comparison with other regions. Indeed, it was 12% in 2013 and 14% in 2014. But the results of monitoring conducted in 2017 showed a decline in this indicator to 8.5%.

If to look at the results of studies conducted in 2017, it might seem that the overall picture did not significantly change. Indeed, 43% consider themselves, first and foremost, “a citizen of Ukraine”, while 41% associate themselves with more locally oriented dimensions: a resident of a populated settlement or a resident of the region.

In this regard, the results of more targeted research of public opinion in the Donbas are quite interesting. In the autumn of 2015, the results of polling of residents of those parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts controlled by Ukraine were higher than the indicator of one’s affiliation with Ukraine in nationwide polling.

So, in the Donetsk oblast 53% of the respondents named national identity the priority, while in the Luhansk oblast this figure was 62.5%. It is quite possible that such high indicators in the Luhansk

2 Data of annual monitoring of the Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017).

oblast can partially be explained by the fact that predominantly northern districts, which historically can be considered a part of Ukraine’s Slobozhanshchyna, remained under the control of Ukraine.

In these northern districts the scale of support of separatist ideas in 2014 was considerably lower, basically absent, if to compare with the more industrially oriented cities and districts, which ended up under the control of Russia and pro-Russian proxies. Also, the results regarding “local” identity were also considerably distinctive between the two oblasts. In the Luhansk oblast, in particular, only 8% of the local residents affiliated themselves, first and foremost, with local settlements, while in the Donetsk oblast this figure was 19%.

**Table 2. Whom do you consider yourself first and foremost?, %<sup>3</sup>**

	Donetsk oblast		Luhansk oblast	
	2015	2017	2015	2017
Resident of the village, district or city in which you live	19.4	29.3	8.0	13.8
Resident of the region (oblast or several oblasts) in which you live	19.6	17.3	19.8	7.9
Citizen of Ukraine	52.7	40.0	62.5	61.8
Representative of your ethnos	1.4	2.8	4.0	1.2
Citizen of the former Soviet Union	4.4	5.2	0.8	7.3
Citizen of Europe	1.4	4.4	0.4	3.9
Citizen of the world	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.4
Other	0.4	1.0	4.4	3.7

Regional research in 2017 only proved that the data received in 2015 were not a situational result. The higher level of representation of the polling allows us to see those trends that are “dissolved” in the framework of nationwide research. First of all, the average level of identity of oneself as a citizen of Ukraine is generally higher than that which nationwide polling is able to “catch”. Secondly, Donbas to this day remains a heterogeneous region and the sentiments of the people are different in the Donetsk oblast, on the one hand, from those that are evident in the Luhansk oblast, on the other hand.

As an example, in the Donetsk oblast the share of “nationally” oriented identity of citizens from 2015 to 2017 fell (from 53% to 40%) and, at the same time, the share at the local level increased (from 19% to 29%). In the Luhansk oblast over this same period of time the share of the local dimension somewhat increased (from 8% to 14%), but the affiliation of residents with their region significantly fell (from 20% to 8%). Herewith, the share of “citizens of Ukraine” in the Luhansk oblast remained as high as it was in 2015 at 62-63%.

The results of research of public opinion regarding self-identity in the cities that were occupied and in 2014 were returned to the control of Ukraine are more detailed. The Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation conducted two rounds of such studies from the beginning of November 2014 in Slovyansk and Kramatorsk (Donetsk oblast) and later in the spring of 2015 in Starobilsk and Severodonetsk (Luhanska oblast).

3 Press release based on the results of research of public opinion in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts “Donbas-2015”. The polling was conducted on October 3-12, 2015, by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Ukrainian Sociology Service, <http://dif.org.ua/article/press-reliz-po-rezultatam-sotsiologicheskogo-issledovaniya-naseleniya-donetskoy-i-luganskoy-oblastey-donbass2015>. Press release based on the results of research of public opinion in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts “Public Opinion of the People of the Donbas: July 2017”. The polling was conducted on July 1-11, 2017, by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Ukrainian Sociology Service, <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-naselennya-donbasu-lipen2017>

Slovyansk and Kramatorsk in 2014 shared almost an identical recent history (these cities were occupied, liberated and returned to the jurisdiction of Ukraine for approximately the same period of time). However, these cities showed certain differences in the polling conducted half a year after their liberation. Residents of Slovyansk demonstrated that they were more “locally” oriented (35%) than the residents of Kramatorsk (15%). The latter to a considerably higher extent considered themselves first and foremost citizens of Ukraine (47% versus 33% of the residents of Slovyansk). This can possibly 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 the Donetsk oblast. Upon the liberation the general socio-political confusion and certain frustration of residents could have been more concisely expressed in Slovyansk than in the neighboring Kramatorsk. Another reason for the more pronounced “pro-state” identity in Kramatorsk could have hypothetically 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, rather stability and continuity in the production process. However, this is only an assumption. The main thing here is that any generalizations and summarizing the sentiments in the Donbas in a single denominator were and are poorly substantiated. The region is heterogeneous and this must be taken into consideration in order to understand its internal “variegation” if to speak about public sentiments.

**Table 3. Whom do you consider yourself first and foremost?, %**

*(Donetsk oblast: Slovyansk and Kramatorsk)<sup>4</sup>*

	<b>Slovyansk</b>	<b>Kramatorsk</b>
Resident of the village, district or city in which you live	34.9	14.6
Resident of the region (oblast or several oblasts) in which you live	19.2	17.2
<b>Citizen of Ukraine</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>47.4</b>
Representative of your ethnos	1.0	3.6
Citizen of the former Soviet Union	0.0	1.8
Citizen of Europe	7.3	5.4
Citizen of the world	0.2	0.0
Other	2.4	5.0

A similar study conducted in the Luhansk oblast by its methodology showed that the overwhelming majority of residents of two cities – Severodonetsk and Starobilsk – consider themselves, first and foremost, citizens of Ukraine (54% and 58%, respectively).

**Table 4. Whom do you consider yourself first and foremost?, %**

*(Luhansk oblast: Severodonetsk and Starobilsk)<sup>5</sup>*

	<b>Severodonetsk</b>	<b>Starobilsk</b>
Resident of the village, district or city in which you live	12.3	15.9
Resident of the region (oblast or several oblasts) in which you live	18.4	5.2

4 Research titled “Public Opinion in the Liberated Areas: Kramatorsk and Slovyansk” was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center. Polling was conducted on November 22-27, 2014, <http://dif.org.ua/article/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-osvobozhdennykh-rayonov-kramatorsk-slavyansk>

5 The public opinion poll “Luhansk oblast: needs, fears, assessments of the situation and hope for the future” was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Ukrainian Sociology Service. Polling was conducted in March-April 2015 in the cities of Severodonetsk and Starobilsk, <http://dif.org.ua/article/luganshchinapotrebnosti-strakhi-otsenki-situatsii-i-nadezhdy-na-budushchee>

Continuation of table 4		
<b>Citizen of Ukraine</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>57.5</b>
Representative of your ethnos	1.4	7.7
Citizen of the former Soviet Union	0.4	6.0
Citizen of Europe	1.2	0.4
Citizen of the world	0.8	0.2
Other	11.7	7.1

Based on the results of two rounds of polling of residents of the liberated cities certain conclusions can be drawn. The results of polling of residents of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk showed that the community in the Donetsk oblast or, all the more, in both oblasts together cannot be considered monolithic and homogenous.

The results of polling in the Luhansk oblast, however, attested to the probability of a reverse scenario when two cities show fairly similar trends. And this is despite the fact that the communities of these cities reacted differently to the expansion of the separatism in 2014. Resistance of the local community in Starobilsk was considerably higher and control on the part of the pro-Russian forces had different degrees of severity (Severodonetsk was fully under the occupation regime). In addition to that, the linguistic situation was different (in Severodonetsk 65% of the city's residents speak exclusively Russian, while in Starobilsk – only 28%)<sup>6</sup>. These studies only confirm the fact that overall national identity is not directly connected to linguistic indicators and that local residents can consider themselves, first and foremost, as citizens of Ukraine regardless of the language environment in which they live and in which language they feel more comfortable for communication.

### **Views on the territorial system in Ukraine and relations between the regions and the center**

An important part of the Russian discourse was initially concentrated on the topic of federalization of Ukraine. Today it is focused on granting a number of privileged powers to those territories controlled by Russia. But how do the residents of the Donbas controlled by Ukraine envision the territorial system of Ukraine?

In the summer of 2015, the majority of macro-regions in Ukraine, in particular the part of Donbas controlled by Ukraine, supported the preservation of a unitary form of the state, albeit with the expanded powers of the regions. In the Donbas, 38% of local residents supported this idea, in the South – 40%, in the East – 46% and in the West – 48%, respectively. In the Center support of this option was high (37%), though the relative majority of residents of this macro-region remained in favor of preserving the unitary system (44%), without expansion of rights at the regional level.

**Table 5. Which option of a territorial system do you support?, %***(June-July 2015)<sup>7</sup>*

	West	Center	South	East	Donbas
Ukraine should be unitary (united and integral) with the powers that the regions currently have	38.1	44.1	30.6	31.7	24.7
Ukraine should be unitary with expanded powers of the regions	47.2	36.8	39.9	45.9	38.0
Ukraine should become a federative state in which the regions are subject of the federation	3.7	5.9	8.8	10.3	14.5
Separate regions can secede from Ukraine if their residents want this	4.3	5.3	10.4	7.9	8.4
Other options	0.0	0.2	1.6	0.0	0.0
Difficult to say	6.7	7.6	8.8	4.2	14.5

In the Donbas public opinion fully corresponded to the nationwide trends: Ukraine should remain a unitary state. The choice was only between the expansion of the powers of the regions (38%) or preservation of the current powers (25%). Therefore, expansion of the powers of the regions, the implementation of de facto decentralization reform in one or another form turned out to be a national trend. However, it did not contradict the need to preserve the unitary system and it was not associated with the notion of federalization of Ukraine, even for the majority of residents of the Donbas that were polled.

### **“The price of peace” in the context of Russian aggression and recipes for regulating the conflict**

Of course, the most sensitive topic in the Donbas is the conflict with Russia. What is the price of peace, which residents of this warfront territory are ready to pay in exchange for a cease-fire? Does the position of residents of the Donbas region differ from those in the rest of Ukraine? What future do local residents see for the occupied territory?

Already in 2016, in the Donbas controlled by Ukraine the dominant position in public opinion was **“No to peace at all costs”** De facto, this means that the residents of the Donbas were, for the most part, in favor of reaching a selective compromise, meaning that not all that Russia proposed within the framework of negotiations would be acceptable for the Ukrainian leadership. As such, 29% of the residents of the Donbas region supported a compromise with anyone and about anything in 2016, provided that peace was established. This figure was approximately the same in the South (33%) and exactly the same in the East (29%). However, 49% of the residents of the Donbas felt that one should aspire to reaching a compromise, but not all the compromises would be acceptable for Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> Research of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences jointly with the Intellectual Prospect Charity Foundation. Polling was conducted from June 26 to July 18, 2015 – <http://dif.org.ua/article/do-dnya-nezalezhnosti-shcho-ukraintsi-dumayut-pro-ukrainu>

**Table 6. Currently, talks are being held on ways of resolving the armed conflict in the Donbas. In your opinion, is a compromise with Russia and leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics necessary to achieve peace?, %**

(May 2016)<sup>8</sup>

	West	Center	South	East	Donbas
Peace – at all costs, we must agree to any compromise with anyone and about anything	15.4	17.5	32.9	28.9	28.7
For the sake of peace it is worth agreeing to a compromise, but not all	<b>55.5</b>	<b>43.8</b>	<b>42.1</b>	<b>45.8</b>	<b>49.0</b>
Peace can only be established in the Donbas by force, when one of the sides wins	20.3	20.2	15.9	16.8	12.1
Difficult to say	8.8	18.5	9.2	8.5	10.3

Here it is important that since 2014 the following trend of the attitudes of people towards the “price” of peace and the readiness to different forms of compromise was observed: the closer we are to the zone where the conflict is more aggravated, the higher is the readiness to reach an agreement with anybody and do whatever it takes to end the conflict. In general, the readiness of the people in the West and Center of Ukraine to reach any agreements is lower than in the South, the East and the Donbas.

At the same time, regional research done in 2017 showed that public opinion in the controlled part of the Donbas is divided almost equally into those that are in favor of going for any compromise (in the Luhansk oblast – 38%, in the Donetsk oblast – 44%) and those who think it is not worth staking on all the proposals (Luhansk oblast – 35%, Donetsk oblast – 39%).

**Table 7. Currently, talks are being held on ways of resolving the armed conflict in the Donbas. In your opinion, what compromises can be agreed in order that peace is established in the Donbas?, %**

(July 2017)<sup>9</sup>

	Luhansk oblast	Donetsk oblast
Peace – at all costs, we must agree to any compromise with anyone and about anything	38.0	43.9
For the sake of peace it is worth agreeing to a compromise, but not all	34.4	39.3
Peace can only be established in the Donbas by force, when one of the sides wins	6.7	11.6
Difficult to say	20.9	5.2

That said, it is also important that the idea about putting pressure (first and foremost, international) on Russia, which in the opinion of the relative majority Ukrainians (38%) will foster peace in the Donbas, has remained intact for three years in a row.

<sup>8</sup> Sociological research conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the sociological services of the Razumkov Center. Public opinion poll was conducted on May 11-16, 2016, <http://dif.org.ua/article/donbas-poglyad-naselennya-na-konflikt>

<sup>9</sup> Hromadska dumka naselennia Donbasu: lypen' 2017 [Public Opinion of Donbas Population: July 2017]. Polling was conducted on July 1–11, 2017 by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Ukrainian Sociology Service. <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-naselennya-donbasu-lipen2017>

**Table 8. What decisions, in your opinion, should be made in order that peace be established in the Donbas region?, % (no more than 3 options of responses),**

*(June 2017) <sup>10</sup>*

Secession of territories occupied by the “DPR” and “LPR” from Ukraine	8.8
Granting the “DPR” and “LPR” special status within the territory of Ukraine	11.8
Introducing a federative system in Ukraine	4.6
<b>Successful renewal of a normal life on the territories of the Donbas region controlled by Ukraine</b>	<b>28.0</b>
Holding legitimate elections on the territories of the controlled “DPR” and “LPR”	11.7
Granting Russian the status of the second state language	4.9
Amnesty for all those who took part in the military actions in the Donbas	3.8
<b>Force Russia to cease intervention into the conflict in the Donbas (strengthening of international sanctions and pressure of international organizations on Russia)</b>	<b>38.1</b>
Cutting off financing of the territories occupied by the “DPR” and “LPR” (payment of pensions, salaries, etc.)	11.0
Refusal from the prospects of NATO membership, fixing in the Constitution the neutral status of Ukraine	6.3
Reinstating Ukraine’s control over the “DPR” and “LPR” by military force	13.5
Other	3.3
Difficult to say	14.1

According to public opinion, the second most widespread solution for establishing peace in the Donbas is taking measures for the successful renewing a full-fledged life of residents of those regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that are controlled by Ukraine.

Among residents of the Donbas regions the orientation towards the renewal of a normal life in the territory controlled by Ukraine prevails: in June 2017, 42% of residents of the Luhansk oblast and 35% in the Donetsk oblast gave their preference to this solution for renewing peace in the Donbas. In the Donetsk oblast the idea of the pressure of international organizations on Russia “competes” with this option (32%).<sup>11</sup>

### **Correlation between security and political measures in resolving the conflict**

Public debates on the “red lines” between security components of regulation and political measures, such as elections in the occupied territories, are the most poignant. Despite the formal support of a stable cease-fire as a pre-condition for the start of implementation of the political provisions of the Minsk agreements, in practice even moderators of negotiations (western partners of Ukraine), all the more Russia itself, tried to push Ukraine to the political component of the Minsk agreements. In today’s situation, this means ignoring the absence of a cease-fire and any guarantees that should be established. Such a formula seems illogical as the implementation of the political clauses of the Minsk agreements (changes to the Constitution of Ukraine, introducing a law on elections in the occupied territories, permanent legislation regarding the status of uncontrolled region) before

<sup>10</sup> Nationwide research of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation conducted jointly with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center. Polling was conducted on June 9-13, 2017 <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-stosovno-nepidkontrolnogo-donbasu-shcho-zminilos>

<sup>11</sup> Hromadska dumka naselennia Donbasu: lypen’ 2017 [Public Opinion of Donbas Population].

implementation of their security components loses its sense.

Regarding the correlation between the security component and the political part of compromises a fairly concise perception also formed in Ukrainian society. This perception can be characterized as **“security comes first”**.

The idea of approving certain political decisions with the hope that they will lead to peace does not find wide support in Ukrainian society, including in the Donbas.

**Table 9. In your opinion, what decision should be made in order that peace is established in the Donbas?, %**

*(regional breakdown, June-July 2017; no more than 3 options)<sup>12</sup>*

	West	Center	South	East (without Donbas)	Donbass
Secession of the territories occupied by the “DPR” and “LPR” from Ukraine	15.2	8.0	4.8	7.6	7.0
Granting the “DPR” and “LPR” special status within Ukraine	9.7	11.7	11.9	16.5	14.1
Introducing a federative system in Ukraine	0.5	3.9	7.8	9.2	7.7
Successful renewal of normal life on the territories of the Donbas controlled by Ukraine	25.3	24.0	32.4	31.0	38.3
Granting Russian the status of the second state language	1.2	2.9	13.4	15.5	14.4
Amnesty for all those who took part in the military actions in the Donbas	1.9	3.4	5.4	7.5	7.3
Force Russia to cease intervention into the conflict in the Donbas (strengthening of international sanctions and pressure of international organizations on Russia)	49.1	43.6	20.4	28.0	21.9
Suspending financing of territories occupied by the “DPR” and “LPR” (payout of pensions, salaries, etc.)	13.3	13.0	8.9	8.7	10.2
Refusal of Ukraine’s prospects of NATO membership and fixing in the Constitution the neutral status of Ukraine	1.2	3.7	13.3	12.6	12.1
Renewal of Ukraine’s control over the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR” by military force	17.6	13.6	9.3	11.7	8.0
Other	4.8	4.1	2.4	0.7	5.1
Difficult to say	14.9	13.2	15.6	13.3	20.8

In particular, neither granting the so-called “republics” a certain “special status” (14%), nor amnesty to all those who took part in the military actions in the Donbas (7%), nor the idea of federalization of Ukraine (8%), nor denial of Ukraine’s membership in NATO (12%) will find support neither in Ukraine overall, nor in its eastern oblasts, including Donetsk and Luhansk (which, as a reminder, are more ready to agree to concessions “at all costs”). Meanwhile, today the general trend is the lack of readiness of the Ukrainians to apply most of these political instruments and instead focus on international pressure on Russia.

Yet another important trend is increasing approval of the idea of the **international peacekeepers for providing security** in the Donbas. Today, such an idea is supported by the overwhelming majority of society (60%), wherein this support from October 2015 to June 2017 grew from 53% to 60%, while the share of opponents over this same period, on the contrary, fell from 27% to 21%. However, the most significant changes in the attitudes towards such an international force transpired at the regional level.

**Table 10. What is your attitude towards the idea of stationing international peacekeeping forces in the Donbas?, %**

*(regional breakdown, June 2017) <sup>13</sup>*

	West	Center	South	East
Positive	66.5	67.2	36.4	55.3
Negative	12.5	15.7	38.2	28.8
Difficult to say	20.9	17.1	25.4	15.9

Therefore, at the moment the idea of an international peacekeeping mission also prevailed in the macro-region that is closest to the front line (the East which includes the Donbas).

Actually, the hope that quick political decisions based on concessions will lead to a cease-fire in the war in the Donbas is steadily waning in public opinion in the eastern oblasts of the country.

It is totally possible that such a trend is associated with the fact that people are beginning to realize the impossibility of quick, yet painful, application of political instruments, as they are not fulfilling the task of ceasing the conflict and, all the more, will not likely lead to a reinstatement of the pre-war state of affairs.

**Holding elections in the occupied territory of the Donbas** is in principle impossible in the foreseeable future: 43% of the population of Ukraine feels that way and this is the most widespread assessment of the prospects of holding elections in the territories not controlled by Ukraine.

Herewith, 35% of local residents in the liberated part of the Donbas are of this opinion, in the East – 34%, in the South – 33% and the largest number of proponents of such a position is in the West (52%) and in the Center (51%).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Nationwide polling of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation was conducted jointly with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center on June 9-13, 2017, <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-stosovno-nepidkontrolnogo-donbasu-shcho-zminilos>

<sup>14</sup> Nationwide polling conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center on May 11-16, 2016.

**Table 11. At the moment, the possibility of holding local elections on the territories controlled by the “DPR” and “LPR” is actively being discussed. In your opinion, on what conditions is this possible?,%**

*(multiple choice question, May 2016) <sup>15</sup>*

<b>I feel that elections there are absolutely impossible in the foreseeable future</b>	<b>43.4</b>
No conditions should be set, holding of elections must simply be announced	9.4
Elections should be held according to Ukrainian legislation	21.1
All [political] parties registered in Ukraine must be ensured the possibility of participating	13.9
The possibilities of those political parties and organizations that are not registered in Ukraine, but are active on the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR” to participate in these elections should be ensured.	8.6
The OSCE and other international and Ukrainian organizations as observers should have the possibility of full control over the fairness of the elections	22.5
Elections can be hold on condition that Russian troops are withdrawn from the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR”	20.2
Ukraine’s control of the border with Russia should be established	18.0
Militants on the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR” should be disarmed	13.3
Other	1.4
Difficult to say	12.1

That part of the population that allows the holding of such elections sets the conditions. If they are not conformed to, the holding of bona fide elections will be impossible. This is, first and foremost, full control of the process and fairness of the elections by the OSCE and other international structures (22.5%), holding elections that fully correspond to Ukrainian legislation (21%), withdrawal of all Russian military forces from the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR” (20%) and renewal of Ukraine’s control over the border with Russia (18%).

Therefore, the people de facto approve of the formula **“security comes first”**: renewal of at least international, if not of Ukrainian, control over the border with Russia and withdrawal of Russian troops. Accordingly, elections cannot be held without the due conditions for this. The approval of any decision will require internal legitimacy, while society today is fairly integrated and consolidated in its understanding of these so-called “red lines”.

### **Political future of the occupied territories**

The territories not under the control of Ukraine should in the future be returned to the jurisdiction of Ukraine – the majority of the population of Ukraine is convinced of this. And this position has remained fairly stable over three years (See Table 9 for regional dimensions and Table 12 for general dynamics).

**Table 12. If to speak about the political future of the territories of the “DPR” and “LPR”, which option would you give preference to?, %<sup>16</sup>**

	October 2015	May 2016	June 2017
<b>So that these territories remained a part of Ukraine on the same conditions that were set earlier</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>47.9</b>	<b>55.0</b>
So that they remain a part of Ukraine, but were more independent from Kyiv	22.4	24.6	20.1
So that they became independent states	4.5	7.4	6.6
So that they became part of the Russian Federation	2.0	3.2	2.1
So that these territories create an autonomy within Ukraine	9.5	-	-
Difficult to say	0.2	16.9	16.3

In 2017, the percentage of those who support such a variant of the political future of the self-proclaimed “republics” increased to 55%. Meanwhile, those ready to granting to these territories greater independence from the central body of power, on the contrary, somewhat fell to 20%. The main trend is that the absolute majority of Ukrainians is not ready to any form of separation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

At the same time, there is a certain paradox in public opinion that simply cannot go unnoticed. On the one hand, there is the internal issue regarding the return of these territories to the control of Ukraine. This issue is substantiated by the readiness of Ukrainians to go for compromises being the main method of regulating the conflict. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of the population remains steadfast that those territories not under the control of Ukraine must be returned on the same conditions that were set earlier.

Considering the protracted and overburdening conflict, such a prospect as the unconditional reinstatement of the pre-war situation seems to be not as realistic as people want to believe or demand. And over the course of time such unyielding sentiments of the people could become even more resilient. Therefore, the main challenge for any Ukrainian government will be to resolve these poignant issues. That is, any formula of solution (even one that will pose minimal threats to the internal stability of Ukraine and its political system) will be put under tough scrutiny. Creating effective safety mechanisms to minimize these risks and justify their adequacy and expediency will be a no less complicated task than putting pressure on Russia in order that the process of resolving the conflict finally gets underway.

<sup>16</sup> Data compiled from the studies of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation. For 2015 data, see <http://dif.org.ua/article/stavlennya-naselennya-do-podiy-na-donbasi-tsina-miru-i-shlyakhi-podolannya-konfliktu>; for 2016 data see <http://dif.org.ua/article/donbas-poglyad-naselennya-na-konflikt>; For 2017 data, see <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-stosovno-nepidkontrolnogo-donbasu-shcho-zminilos>

## Conclusions

One of the fundamentally important trends in public opinion in the Donbas is strengthening the self-awareness of local residents, first and foremost, as citizens of Ukraine. As such, 40% of residents of those parts of the Donetsk oblast controlled by Ukraine defined themselves as citizens of Ukraine in June 2017, while this figure was 62% in the Luhansk oblast. In both oblasts the idea of national self-identity was the choice number one over local identity (I am a resident of my city, town or village) and over regional identity (I am a resident of my region).

Discourse about the federalization of Ukraine, which the Russian side and its local satellites in the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” tried to develop in 2014, also does not find support not only throughout the country, but also in the frontline territory of the Donbas. Indeed, in the summer of 2015 residents of the Donbas came forth in favor of a unitary form of the territorial system of Ukraine: 38% - with expanded rights of the regions and another 25% - with preservation of the current powers of the regions.

One of the most sensitive topics in public opinion in Ukraine, particularly in the frontline region, was and remains the conflict with Russia.

In 2016, the view of the impossibility of peace at any cost began to prevail not only in the territory of Ukraine, but also in the sentiments of residents of the Donbas (49%). But these changes and fluctuations in opinions are still rather ambiguous. In particular, during a regional poll in June 2017 it turned out that public opinion, both in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, was almost equally divided between those who are ready for peace at any cost and those who are in favor of selective compromises.

At the same time, the Donbas, just as the predominant part of the population of Ukraine, believes that the most needed decisions for establishing peace in the region will be international pressure on Russia, as well as renewal of full-fledged life in the territories of the Donbas controlled by Ukraine. The last option is the most popular in the Donbas.

What is extremely important is that the people in Donbas, just as those in the other regions of Ukraine, do not believe in the potential effect of the ideas of granting the “LPR” and “DPR” “special status”, federalization of Ukraine, holding elections on occupied territories or amnesty for those who took part in the military actions during the conflict.

Instead, in the eastern part of Ukraine, including the Donbas, the overwhelming majority of local residents has a positive attitude towards the prospects of the presence of an international peacekeeping force in the region.

At the same time, the aforementioned “cleansing” of certain lines according to which the country was divided by the sentiments of society is truly happening. However, in the Donbas it has its distinctive features. Indeed, the notions of Ukraine joining the Customs Union and a joint military-political union with Russia and other countries of the CIS has today lost the lion’s share of its proponents in the Donbas. However, on the issue of a choice between integration with “the East” or “the West” people have not automatically changed their point of view to supporting membership in the EU. Today, the overwhelming majority of the residents of the Donbas disenchanted with the prospects of being a part of a joint Eurasian space take a “neutral” position: neither the Customs Union nor the EU.

In the context of security options, the situation is similar. People in the Donbas were disenchanted with the possibilities of a military union with Russia and other CIS countries as a guarantee of Ukraine's security (from 50% in 2012 to 17% in the summer of 2017), the support of membership in NATO grew (from 1% to 20%), which testifies to the formation of a new map of sentiments of the people in the region. At the same time, the idea of Ukraine's non-bloc status remains the most widespread option among the local population in the Donbas as a guarantee of security (38%).<sup>17</sup>

Determining the side responsible for the overt conflict between Russia and Ukraine remains one of the concealed risks. Indeed, the position that both countries should equally bear responsibility for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is considerably stronger in the South of Ukraine and in the Donbas in comparison with other regions of the country. 53% of the residents of the South and 52% of residents of the Donbas feel this way.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the Donbas is demonstrating extremely important changes. First of all, there is no longer a domination of orientation towards "peace at all costs".

Secondly, none of the political measures within the framework of the Minsk package will be supported by Ukrainian society if this happens without a stable security regime. An illustrious example of this is the requirements of Ukrainian society of organizing the electoral process in the territories controlled by Ukraine, which include Ukrainian legislation as the basis for holding elections there and full-fledged international control over the border with Russia and demilitarization of the occupied territory.

Thirdly, this is the formula of the political future of these territories. There cannot be any "special status" or expanded powers for territories not controlled by Ukraine.

From a strategic vantage point, this implies the internal strengthening of ties in society precisely in those spots that can be considered sensitive or even painful.

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17 See, <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-pro-nato-noviy-poglyad>; <http://dif.org.ua/article/gromadska-dumka-naselennya-donbasu-lipen2017>

18 Nationwide research of public opinion of the population of Ukraine was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation jointly with the Razumkov Center on May 11-16, 2016, <http://dif.org.ua/article/donbas-poglyad-naselennya-na-konflikt>