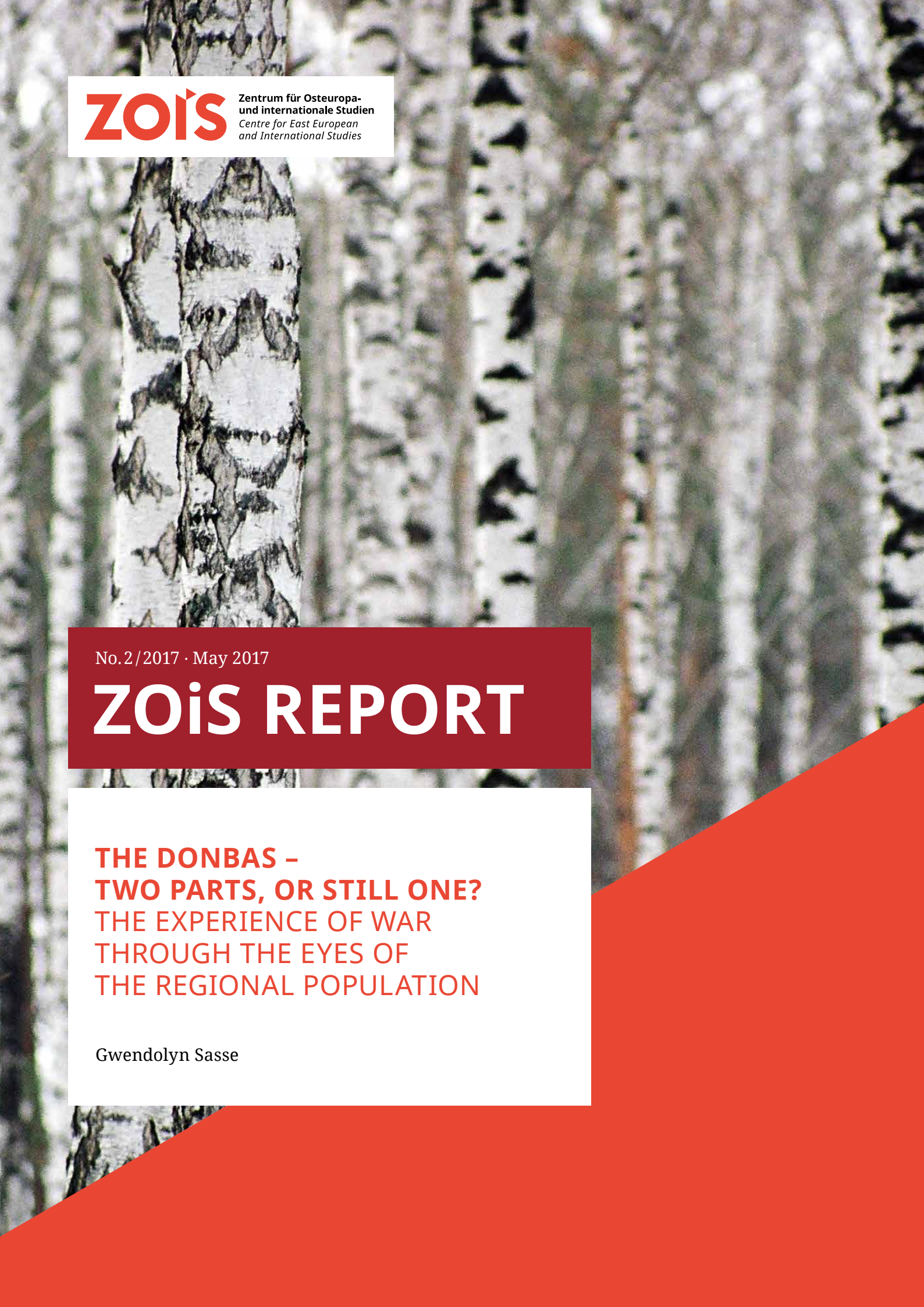

ZOiS
Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien
Centre for East European and International Studies

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ZOiS REPORT

THE DONBAS – TWO PARTS, OR STILL ONE?
THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR THROUGH THE EYES OF THE REGIONAL POPULATION

Gwendolyn Sasse

Content

Executive summary

A ZOiS survey conducted in the Donbas in December 2016 provides insights into life and attitudes across the frontline between the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and the occupied territories, the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). The two-part survey reveals the differentiated public opinion in the DNR/LNR and similarities in views shared across the frontline. The main results of the two-part survey are:

– The regional population maintains close contacts across the frontline.

– In both parts of the Donbas mixed Ukrainian-Russian identities are significant and counterbalance ethnification and polarization induced by the war.

– The attitudes of the population of the DNR/LNR are more differentiated than might be expected, thereby defying the notion of a region set in its views and 'lost' by Kyiv.

– The population of the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and the DNR/LNR are furthest apart in their views about the future status of the occupied territories. The views in the DNR/LNR indicate aspirations for the recognition of the region's special status, either within Ukraine or within Russia. In the Kyiv-conrolled Donbas opposition to a special status is the majority view.

– Trust in Ukrainian political institutions is similarly low in both parts of the Donbas.

– Foreign policy orientations are shared across the frontline: while widespread opposition to NATO membership in both parts of the Donbas is not surprising, respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas are nearly as sceptical of EU membership for Ukraine (72 percent) as in the occupied territories (82 percent).

Introduction[1]

The war in eastern Ukraine that started in the aftermath of the Euromaidan and Russia's annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 has claimed about 10,000 lives to date and made about 2.8 million people living in the region leave their homes (according to estimates there are about 1.8 million internally displaced and about one million who left for Russia)[2]. The frontline has cut the historical region of Donbas, used as a shorthand to describe Donetsk oblast and Luhansk oblast, into two parts. The self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR/LNR), supported by Russia, include the regional capital cities Donetsk and Luhansk. The war appears to be now in an unstable stalemate that is pulling the two parts of the Donbas

1 The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance by Alice Lackner who contributed to the data analysis and prepared the charts.

2 For an analysis of the attitudes of the displaced in Ukraine and Russia, based on ZOiS survey data, see Gwendolyn Sasse, The Displaced Ukrainians: Who are they, and what do they think?, ZOiS Report No. 1, March 2017.

increasingly apart. On the one hand, the integration of the DNR/LNR into Russian structures is progressing, for example through the distribution of Russian passports, the introduction of the ruble as the local currency and the renationalization of enterprises. On the other hand, the Ukrainian government has stopped social security payments to the population in the occupied territories, and representatives of Ukrainian political parties have enforced a blockade of coal transports from the occupied territories, which Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko was forced to endorse as government policy.

The central questions, which this report addresses on the basis of the new ZOIS survey data, are whether the increasing physical and political distance between the two parts of the Donbas is reflected in the local population's lives, identities and attitudes. Moreover, the survey provides insights into the effects of the war on identitities, as reported by the respondents. By covering the whole Donbas region rather than just the part controlled by Kyiv, the survey provides a rare glimpse of the perceptions of people in the occupied territory and thereby allows for a comparison of the attitudes across the frontline.

Opinion polls in Ukraine are currently not 'nationally representative' in a strict sense, as they exclude the occupied territories. The two-part ZOiS-suvey, conducted in December 2016, aims to rectify this as much as possible in a situation of war. In Kyiv-controlled Donbas face-to-face interviews were conducted based on a multi-stage quota sample (n = 1,200 split evently between Donetsk and Luhansk oblast) based on age, gender and educational attainment quotas of the urban and rural populations according to the official state statistics of 2016. In the occupied territories the same quotas were applied, as there is no official data on the current residents of this region. Due to the difficulties of access and potential security concerns on the part of the respondents, the interviews (n = 1,200) were conducted by telephone rather than in face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire therefore had to be shortened and simplified but the key questions remained the same in both surveys.

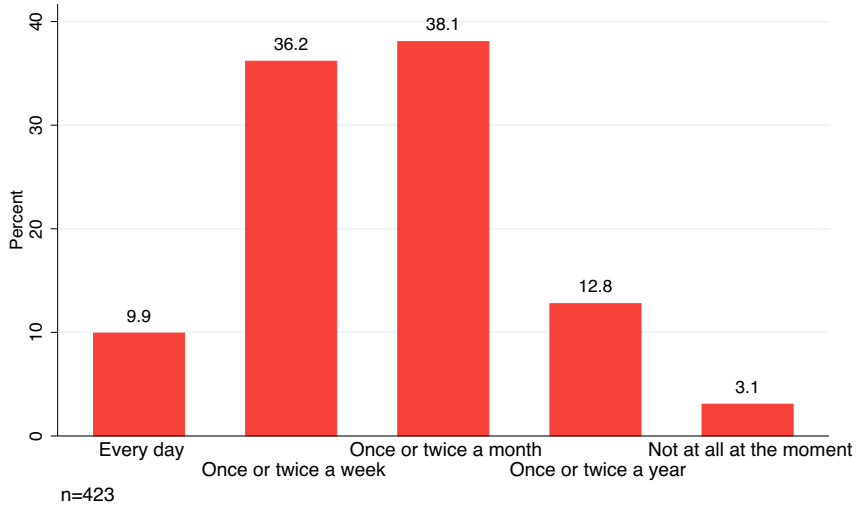
Life and attitudes across the frontline

Personal contacts across the frontline

Border crossings between the two parts of the Donbas is part of the daily routine of many people living close to the frontline. The intensity of contact between family members and friends across the frontline is a powerful counterpoint to the actions of the parties to this war. Of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas 38 percent said they have family members or friends in the DNR/LNR. On the other side of the separation line, the personal linkages are even greater: 57 percent of the respondents in the occupied territories have family members or friends living in the government-controlled part of the Donbas.

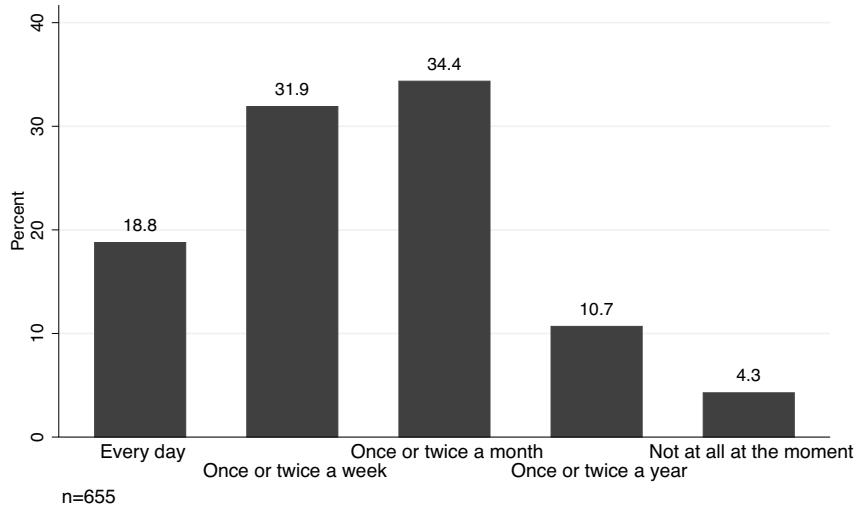
Close to 50 percent of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas are in touch with family members and friends in DNR/LNR on a daily basis

FIGURE 1
Donbas:
How often are you in touch with your relatives / friends in the DNR / LNR?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 2
DNR / LNR:
How often are you in touch with your relatives / friends in the Donbas?



Source: ZOiS

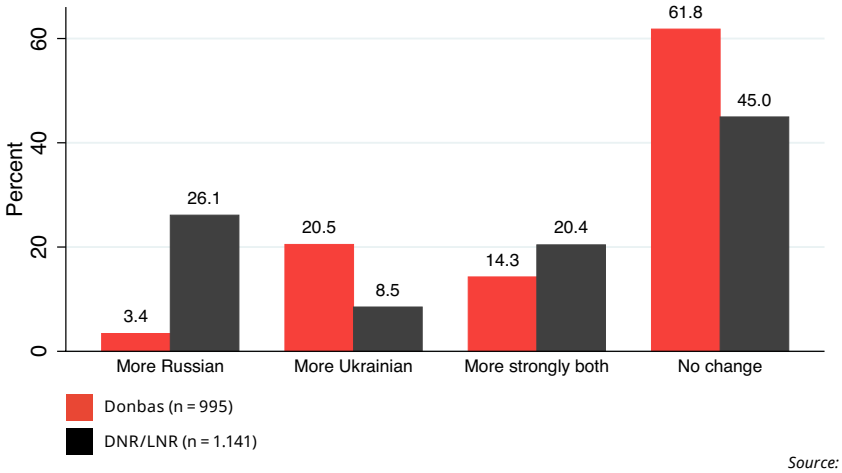
or once/twice per week. Only about 3 percent report not being in touch at the moment. Similarly, just under 50 percent of the respondents in the DNR/LNR are in touch with family members or friends based in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas on a daily basis or once/twice a week. Within this reference group, the share of those in daily contact is twice as high as that of the respondents in the Donbas in contact with people in the DNR/LNR, namely close to 20 percent. Again only about 4 percent has lost touch for the moment. ▶ FIGURES 1 + 2

Political identities

The only way in which a one-off survey can speak to the question of personal identity change is to tap into self-reported changes. The ZOiS survey included a deliberately open question which avoided narrowing it to either ethnic or civic identity categories, followed by more detailed questions about a range of different identity options. As for the first more general question about a change in personal identity as a result of the events of 2013-16, a quarter of the respondents in the occupied territories said that they felt 'more Russian'

FIGURE 3

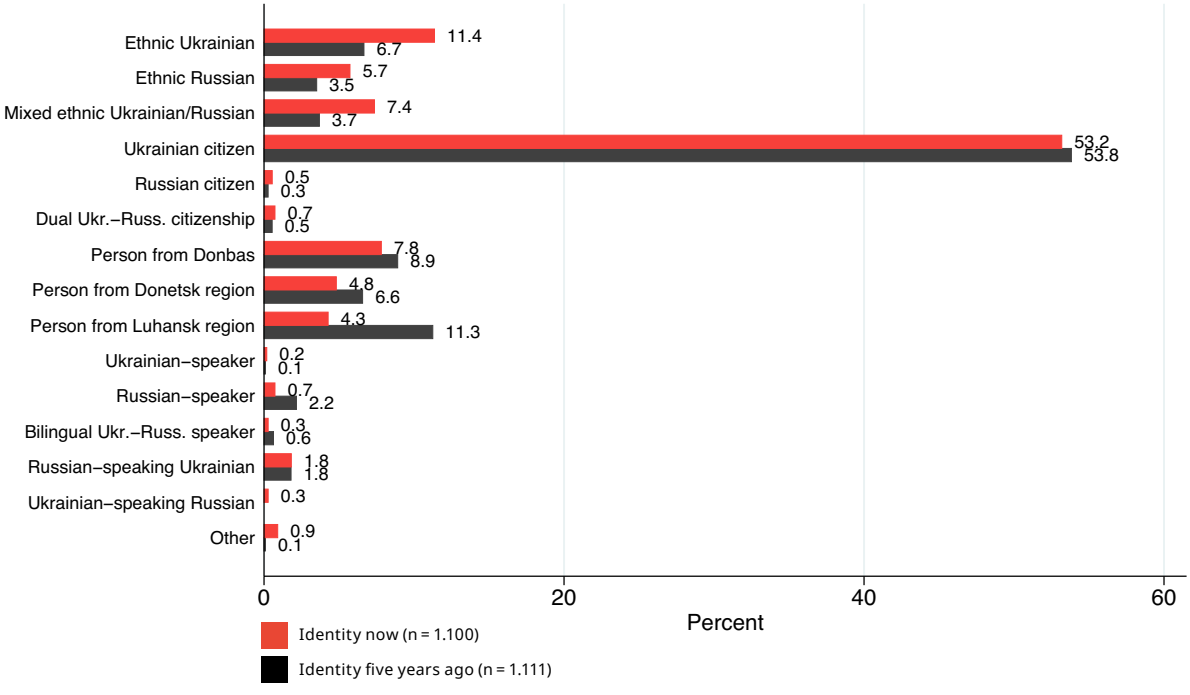
As a result of the events 2013 – 16, do you feel…



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 4

Donbas: What identity is most important to you today? What identity was most important to you five years ago?



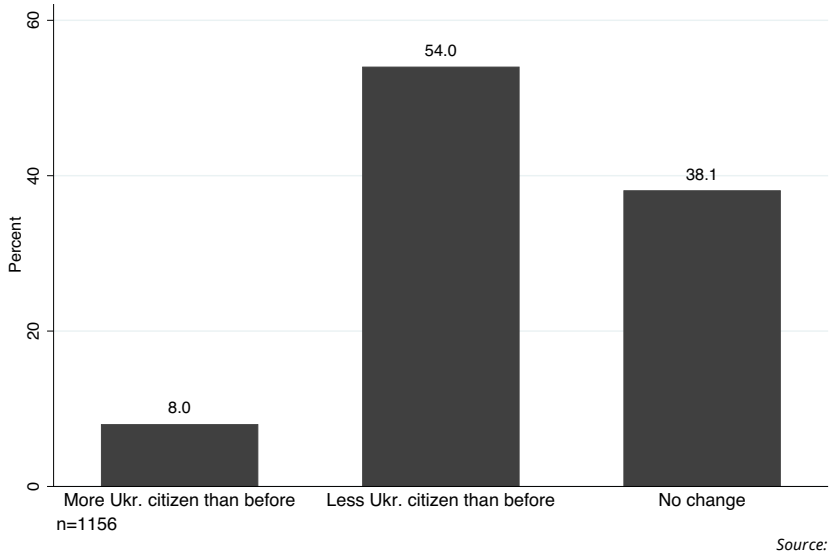
Source: ZOiS

now – and a fifth of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas reported that they felt 'more Ukrainian' now. Interestingly, however, 14 percent and 20 percent in the Kyiv-controlled and occupied Donbas respectively said that they felt more strongly now that they are 'both Ukrainian and Russian'. The majority in both parts of the Donbas reported no change in identity: 62 percent in the government-controlled Donbas and 45 percent in the self-declared republics. Thus, while there has been a greater shift in identities in the occupied territories, a significant number of respondents reported not only a stable identity but also an increase in a mixed identification. ▶ FIGURE 3

In the Ukrainian controlled Donbas, face-to-face interviews allowed for a more detailed question about identity. 53 and 54 percent of the respondents picked Ukrainian citizenship as their primary self-reported identity now and five years ago, demonstrating that a civic identity already prevailed over ethnic or regional identities before the war and has remained intact throughout the war experience. Only 7 percent and 4 percent chose 'ethnic Ukrainian' and 'ethnic Russian' as their main identity five years ago. These figures have risen now to 11 percent and 6 percent respectively. Similarly, self-identification as 'mixed ethnic Russian and Ukrainian' has risen from 4 to 7 percent over the last five years. Regional identity has grown somewhat in significance, as reflected in the salience of a Donbas identity (up from 8 to 9 percent) and a small drop in identification with the regional sub-units Donetsk and Luhansk oblast (from 7 to 5 percent and from 11 to 4 percent respectively). ▶ FIGURE 4

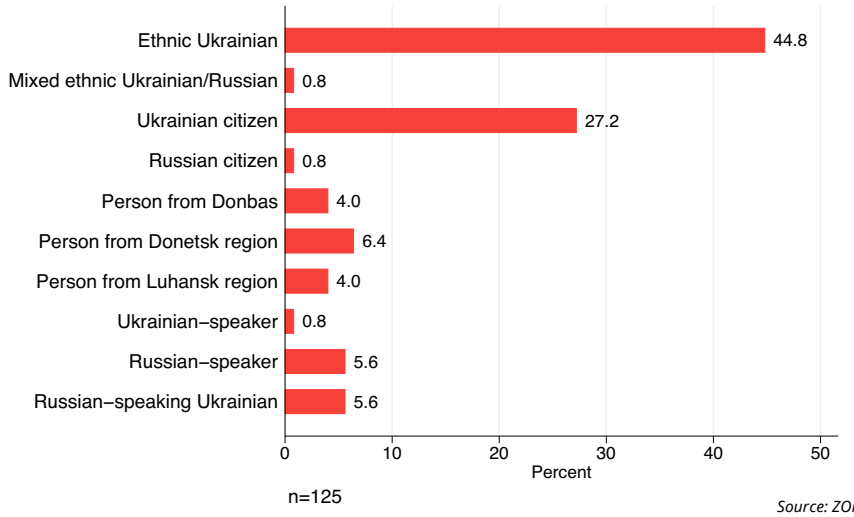
Self-identification as a Ukrainian citizen marks an important difference between the Kyiv-controlled and the occupied territories. In the DNR/LNR, 54 percent reported that they felt less like Ukrainian citizens now compared to before 2013, while only 8 percent stated that they felt more like Ukrainian citizens now. 38 percent reported no change. The previously strong sense of being a Ukrainian citizen in this region has tended to be seriously underestimated in the West. This identity is part of the price paid for the war in the occupied territories. This previously strong identity, however, has not been replaced by a clear-cut ethnification or polarization. ▶ FIGURE 5

FIGURE 5
DNR / LNR (Citizenship): As a result of the events 2013 – 16, do you feel...



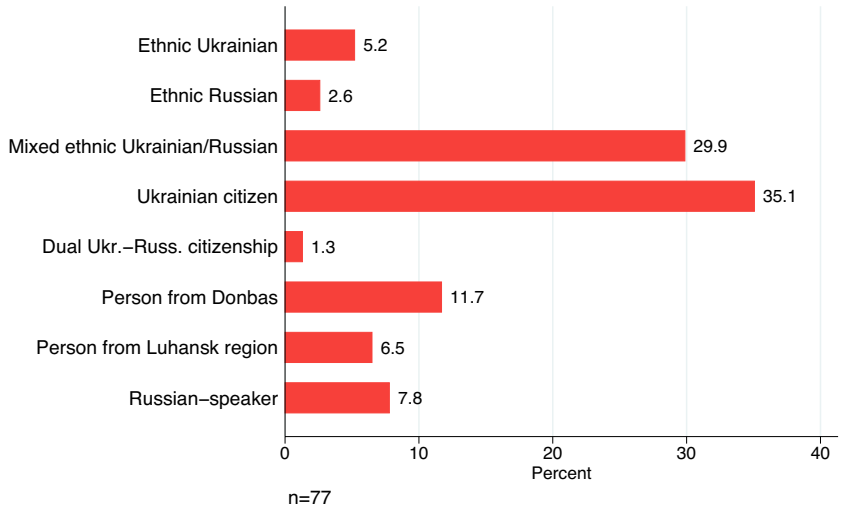
Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 6
Donbas (Identity now: ethnic Ukrainian):
Which identity would you have chosen five years ago?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 7
Donbas (Identity now: mixed ethnic Ukrainian and Russian):
Which identity would you have chosen five years ago?

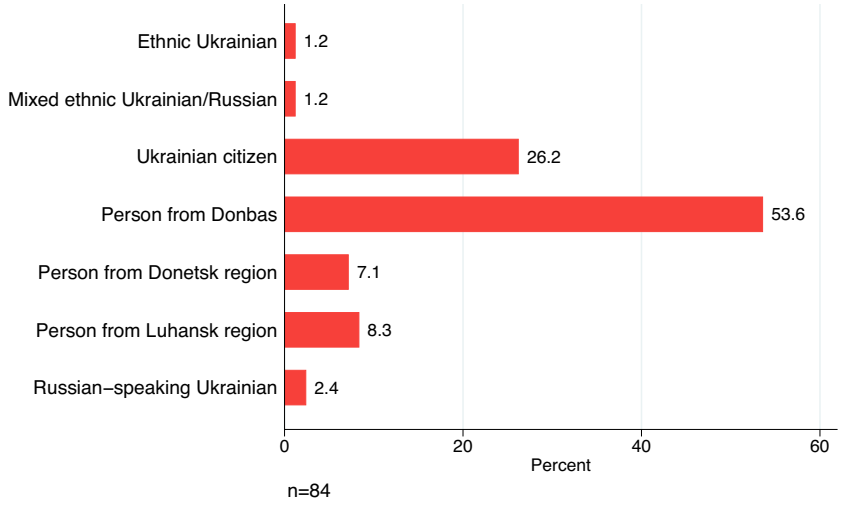


Source: ZOiS

When we trace in more detail the shifts between self-reported identity categories in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas area, we find that while self-identification as a Ukrainian citizen remains as the most important identity category from five years ago, it is now an identity in flux, with respondents also shifting from Ukrainian citizenship to Ukrainian ethnicity or a regional Donbas identity. ▸
FIGURES 6 – 8

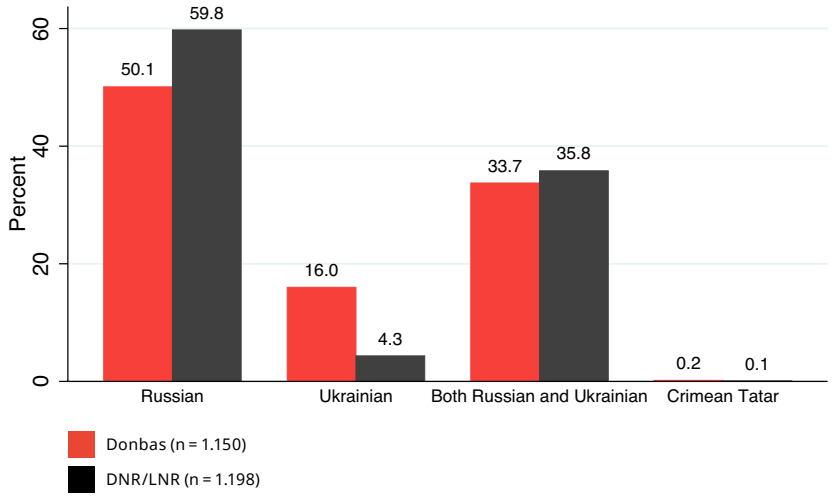
Survey questions about ‚native language' tend to tap into sentiments about language as an identity marker rather than actual day to day language practice. The majority of respondents in both the Kyiv-controlled Donbas (about 50 percent) and the DNR/LNR (about 60 percent) identify Russian as their native language. The range of answers to this question did not only list mutually exclusive options, as is commonly the case in the national census

FIGURE 8
Donbas (Identity now: person from Donbas):
Which identity would you have chosen five years ago?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 9
What language do you consider your native language?



Source: ZOiS

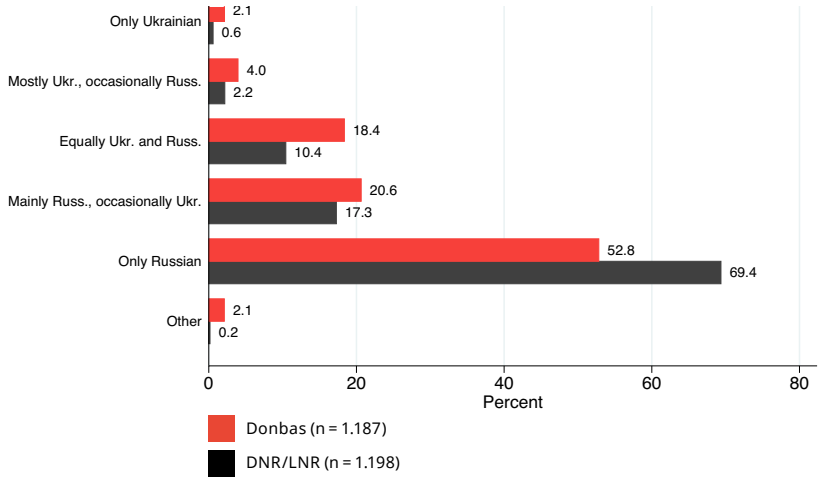
and many standard opinion polls, but included the option 'both Russian and Ukrainian' which, in turn, was chosen by 34 percent and 36 percent in the government-controlled Donbas and in the DNR/LNR respectively. The self-reported relevance of a bilingual identity is compatible with the expressions of a mixed Russian-Ukrainian identity, whether defined in ethnic or more civic terms, in both the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and the DNR/LNR, and the salience of Ukrainian citizenship as the primary identity in the government-controlled Donbas.

There is anecdotal evidence of people adjusting their language identity and/or practice in light of their war experience. However, no significant change was reported by the respondents themselves about a readjustment of their native language. ▶ FIGURE 9

When asked about actual language practice, the picture changes somewhat, highlighting that survey respondents interpret a question about 'native language' differently. A majority – 53 percent of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and 70 percent in the DNR/LNR – listed Russian as the dominant language spoken at home. Furthermore, 18 and 10 percent in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and the DNR/LNR respectively reported an equal language mix of Ukrainian and Russian at home. A further 21 and 17 percent respectively said that their main language at home is Russian but that they occasionally speak Ukrainian at home. ▶ FIGURE 10

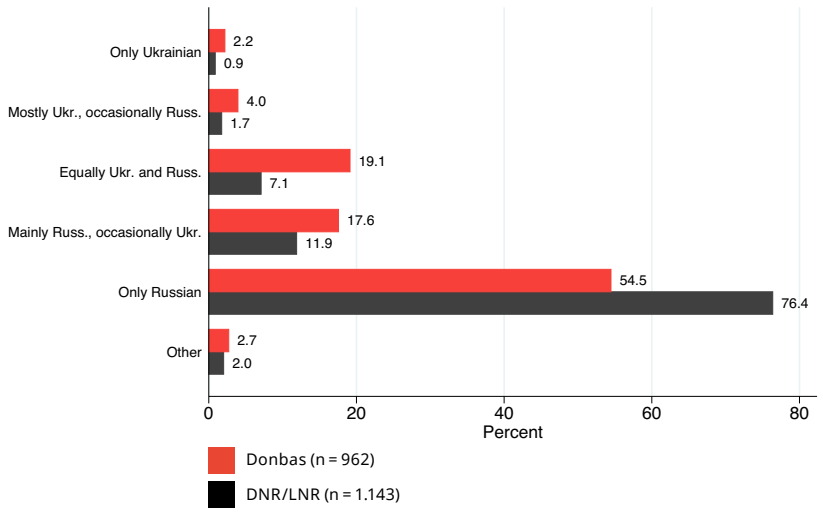
Asked about the primary language spoken at work, the picture is similar, thereby demonstrating that there is congruence between the occupied

FIGURE 10
Which language do you typically speak at home?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 11
Which language do you typically speak at work?



Source: ZOiS

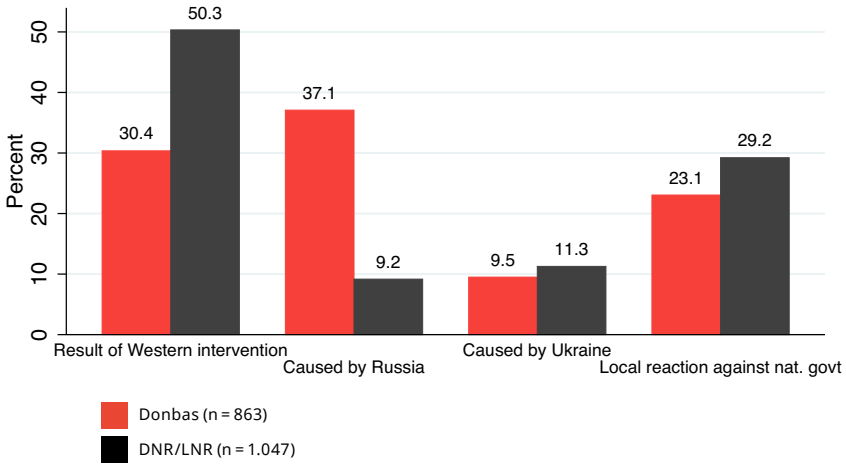
territories and the rest of the Donbas: 76 percent list Russian as the main language of communication at work in DNR/LNR, compared to 55 percent in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas. 19 and 7 percent respectively report an equal use of Russian and Ukrainian at work. An additional 18 and 12 percent respectively said that they speak, above all, Russian and occasionally Ukrainian. Both at home and at work the use of Ukrainian alone is negligible (max. 2 percent). ▶ FIGURE 11

Views on the war and the status of the region

Views on the origins of the war are more similar across the two parts of the Donbas than one might expect. The respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas are split in their assessment: 37 percent blame the outbreak of war on Russia and 10 percent on Ukraine; a surprising 30 percent think it was the result of Western intervention, and 23 percent see it as a local reaction against the Kyiv government. With the exception of the perceived role of Russia, the views in the occupied territories are rather similar: 50 percent think the war resulted from Western intervention, 30 percent see it as a local reaction against the national government, 11 percent blame it on Ukraine and 9 percent on Russia. ▶ FIGURE 12

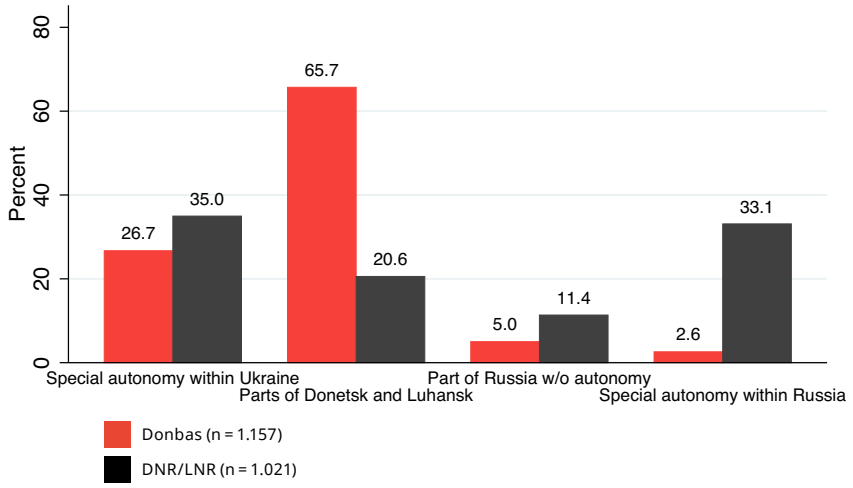
However, the preferences regarding the future status of the occupied territories diverge significantly. While in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas a clear majority (65 percent) wants them to be part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast without a special status, 26 percent deem a special status within Ukraine necessary and about 9 percent see the future of these territories in Russia. The views of the population in the self-declared republics are more diverse than one might have expected: 21 percent want this area to be part of Ukraine without a special status, and 35 percent prefer a special status for these territories inside Ukraine. Conversely, 11 percent want to see the territories as part of Russia without a special status, and 33 percent would

FIGURE 12
Which statement is closest to your opinion about the conflict in Donbas?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 13
In your opinion, what should the status of DNR / LNR be?



Source: ZOiS

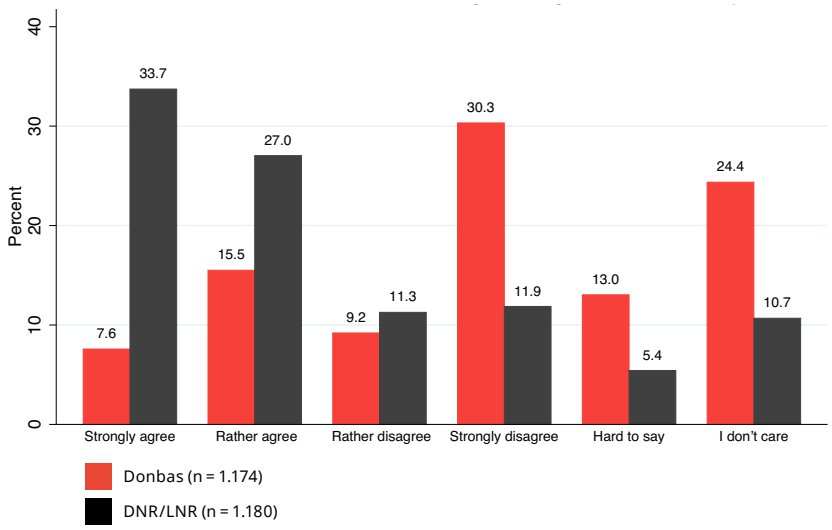
prefer a special status inside Russia. Thus, the main emphasis among the respondents in the DNR/LNR is on the recognition of the special status of the territories, while there is an even split between those who see this area as part of Ukraine or Russia. ▶ FIGURE 13

The survey results also indicate that the current experience shapes attitudes about autonomy in the rest of the country. Generally, the experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, all organized as federations at least on paper, has made East Europeans politicians and societies sceptical of federalism. The fact that Russia, the only socialist-era federation that survived the breakup of the USSR thanks to formal and informal institutional adjustments, has advocated federalism for Ukraine during the war in eastern Ukraine has discredited the principle further in the Ukrainian political discourse.

While some are willing to contemplate an exception for the DNR/LNR, especially in neighbouring regions like the Kyiv-controlled Donbas, the principle of autonomy remains contested. In the Kyiv-controlled Donbas about 24 percent agree ('strongly' or 'rather') that other regions of Ukraine should have the right to a degree of autonomy, 39 percent disagree (among them 30 percent disagree strongly), and 37 percent are undecided or indifferent.

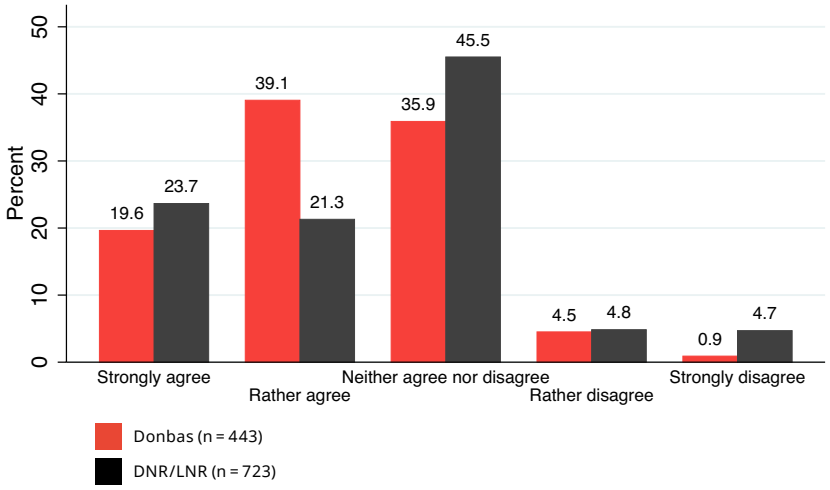
By comparison, the respondents based in the DNR/LNR are consistent in their views about autonomy, claiming the right to a special status not only for themselves but also for other regions of Ukraine. This discrepancy suggests a mobilizing effect through the region's experience over the last three years of war. A majority of 61 percent of the survey respondents in the DNR/LNR strongly or rather agree with the principle of giving other regions in Ukraine a degree of autonomy, while 23 percent are opposed (of which 12 percent strongly disagree), and only 16 percent are undecided or indifferent. The latter figures in particular indicate that the issue of autonomy is most salient among those who live in the occupied territories the status of which is disputed. ▶ FIGURE 14

FIGURE 14
Would you agree that other regions in Ukraine should be allowed to obtain a higher degree of autonomy?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 15
Do you agree with the Minsk agreement?



Source: ZOiS

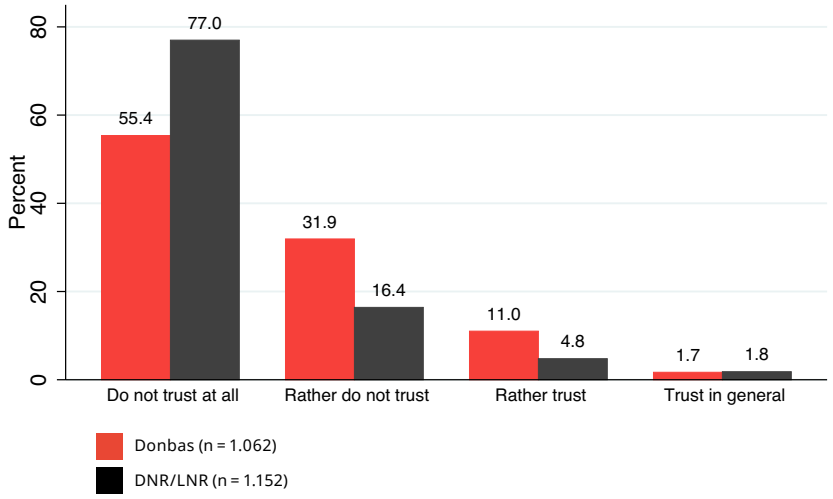
The Normandy format that has facilitated several ceasefires but has not yet delivered on the political and institutional content of the Minsk II Agreement has become a focal point for the frustration of all the involved parties. Nevertheless, all sides keep reiterating that there is no alternative to the process. Despite the lack of tangible political results, this general feeling is shared by the population in both parts of the Donbas. 59 percent of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and 45 percent of the respondents in the DNR/LNR 'strongly' or 'rather' agree with the principles of the Minsk Agreement. Just over a third in each case exhibits a neutral attitude, and only a very small share of the respondents disagrees with the principles of the Minsk Agreement. The survey question does not disentangle the different interpretations of the agreement and the steps it lays out, but it illustrates an overall endorsement of a continuing process. ▶ FIGURE 15

Trust in political institutions and the media

The level of trust in political leaders and institutions is a broad indicator of political stability and regime legitimacy. In a situation of war trust is eroded and in flux, depending on the respondents' location and personal experience. Given that the Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko is generally unpopular across Ukraine where he is held responsible for a too slow reform process, it does not come as a surprise that a vast majority of over 87 percent does not trust the Ukrainian president in Kyiv-controlled Donbas (of which 55 percent do not trust him at all). The distrust in the DNR/LNR is even higher, with 77 percent not trusting him at all. ▶ FIGURE 16

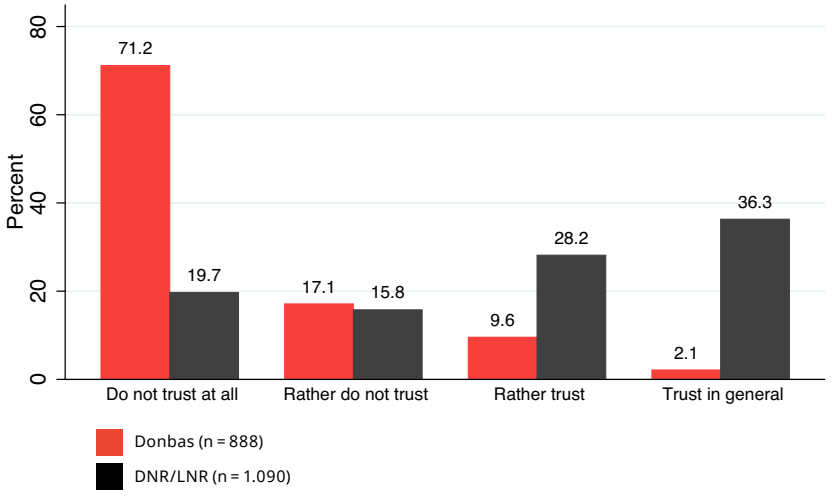
The picture is the reverse when it comes to trust in the Russian president Vladimir Putin. In the Kyiv-controlled Donbas, 88 percent do not trust the Russian president. This does not come as a surprise, but the variation in

FIGURE 16
How much trust do you have in the Ukrainian president?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 17
How much trust do you have in the Russian president?

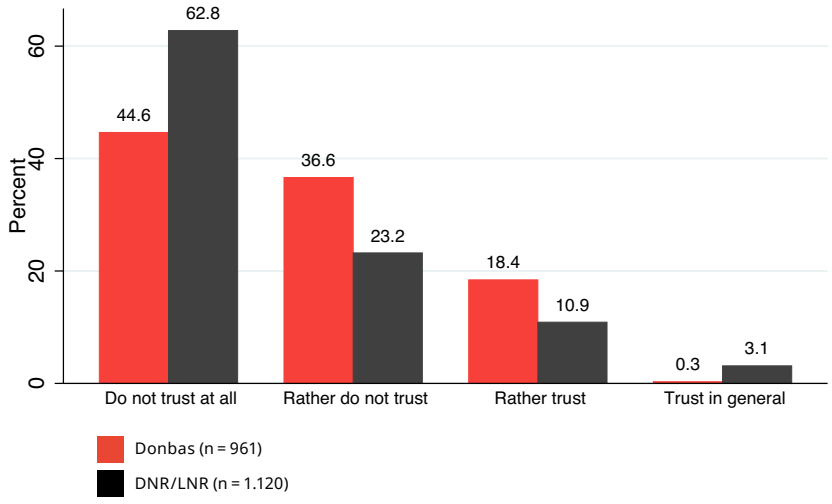


Source: ZOiS

expressions of trust in the DNR/LNR is noteworthy: while about 64 percent of the respondents rather or generally trust the Russian president, about 36 percent do not. ▶ FIGURE 17

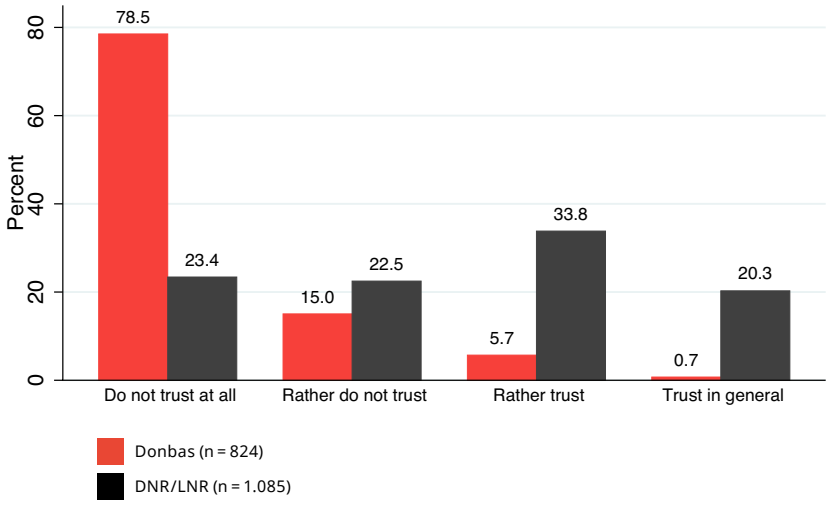
When asked about the Ukrainian mass media, a clear majority of about 82 percent of the respondents in the government-controlled Donbas and 86 percent in the DNR/LNR expressed their distrust in the main traditional media outlets. Oligarchic ownership structures and the reporting (or absence of reporting) about the war are likely explanations for the overwhelming distrust. ▶ FIGURE 18 Unsurprisingly, the population of the Kyiv-controlled Donbas similarly distrusts the Russian mass media (94 percent), but in the occupied territories the trust and distrust in the Russian mass media is relatively evenly split, with about 46 percent of the respondents trusting and 54 percent not trusting the Russian mass media. ▶ FIGURE 19

FIGURE 18
How much trust do you have in the Ukrainian mass media?



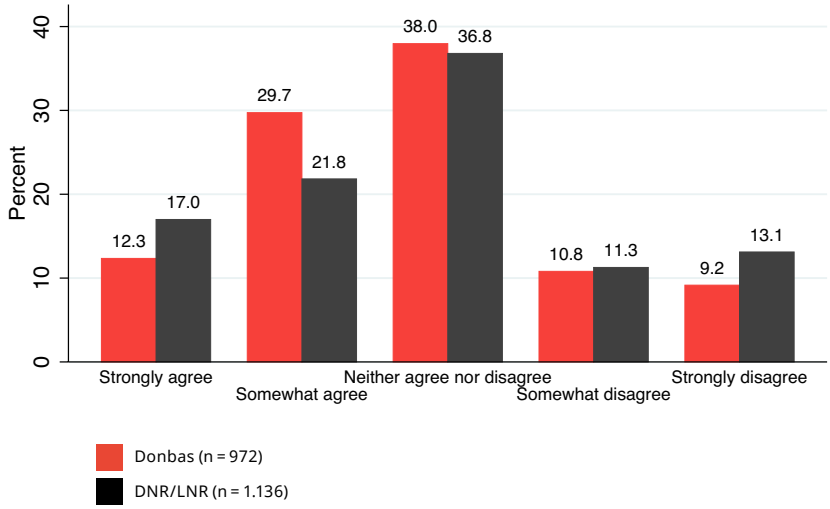
Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 19
How much trust do you have in the Russian mass media?



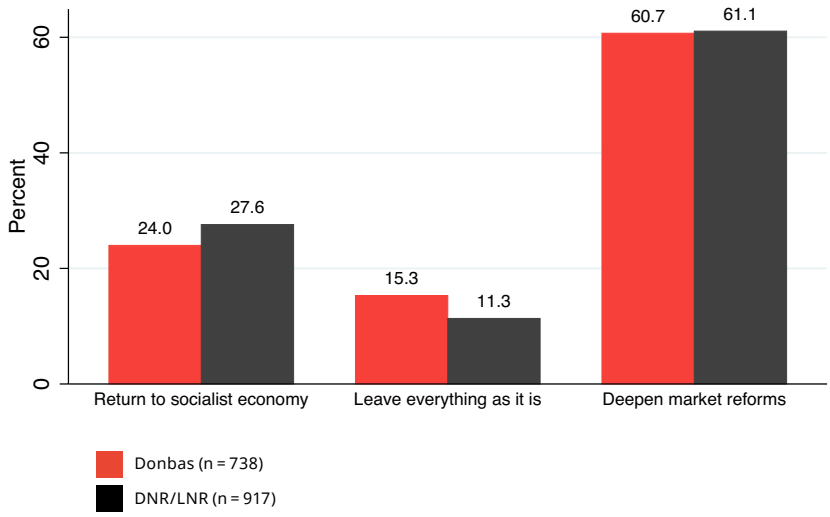
Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 20
Democracy is still the best form of government.



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 21
What type of economy should exist in Ukraine?

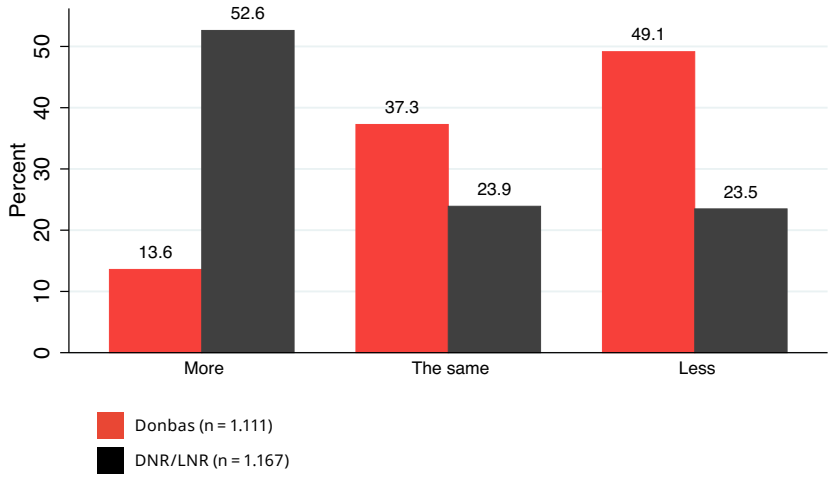


Source: ZOiS

General attitudes about democracy and the economy are shared across both parts of the Donbas. Support for democracy is best described as lukewarm: 42 percent of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and 39 percent in the occupied territories 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agree with the statement that democracy is still the best possible form of government, while 38 and 37 percent respectively are non-committal and neither agree nor disagree.

▶ FIGURE 20

FIGURE 22
Are you now more or less interested in politics than three years ago?



Source: ZOiS

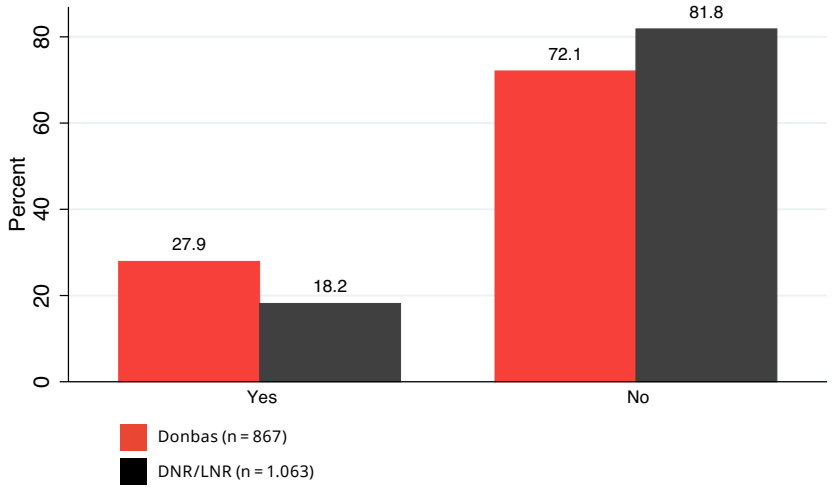
As for their economic views, 61 percent of the respondents in both the Kyiv-controlled and the occupied Donbas voiced their preference for deepening economic reforms, thereby expressing a general pro-reform attitude. Maintaining the status quo was only the declared preference of 15 percent of respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas and 11 percent in the DNR/LNR. The 'return to a socialist economy' was the preferred choice of 24 percent in the government-controlled Donbas and 28 percent in the occupied territories. This response is likely to capture not just a specific ideological view about the socialist economic system but rather a general dissatisfaction with Ukraine's transition path. ▶ FIGURE 21

The combination of a lukewarm position on democracy and a general endorsement of further economic reforms in both parts of the Donbas should be seen in connection with a further result, namely the self-reported change in the level of political interest as a result of the events over the last three years. The trends point in opposite directions across the frontline: while respondents in the DNR/LNR expressed a noteworthy increase in interest in politics (53 percent compared to only 14 percent in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas), 49 percent of the respondents in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas reported that they were now less interested in politics (compared to 24 percent in the DNR/LNR). Thus, the experience of war has politicized the population of the DNR/LNR much more than their counterpart in the Kyiv-controlled Donbas. While Kyiv is confronted with a population that seems to be turning away from national politics, the population of the occupied territories has become highly politicized, though not in one particular direction. ▶ FIGURE 22

Foreign policy orientation

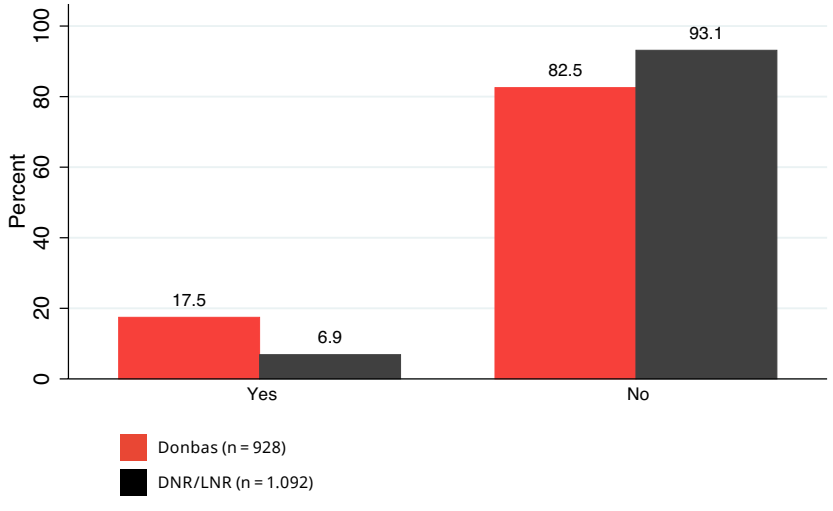
In terms of foreign policy orientation, the two parts of the divided Donbas are more similar than one might think: while NATO membership was rejected outright, as could be expected, by the vast majority in both parts, the widespread negative views of the EU in the Donbas might come as a surprise: 72 percent of respondents in the government-controlled Donbas and 82 percent in the self-declared republics are against Ukraine joining the EU. ▶ FIGURES 23 + 24 While support for the EU in view of a slow reform process and the inability of Western actors to end the war, has cooled off again across Ukraine according to recent polls, there has generally been support above 50 percent for EU membership in recent years. Thus, with regard to the Ukrainian government's declared objective of aligning its reform process with the EU, the Donbas is being left behind.

FIGURE 23
Should Ukraine join the EU?



Source: ZOiS

FIGURE 24
Should Ukraine join the NATO?



Source: ZOiS

Conclusion

The ZOiS survey illustrates that the gap in attitudes between the two parts of the Donbas is not as clear-cut as one might have expected as a result of the increasing de facto separation of the DNR/LNR and the Kyiv-controlled Donbas. Mixed Russian-Ukrainian identities, whether rooted in ethnicity, native language, language use, or a combination of ethnic and civic criteria, remain prevalent across the whole Donbas region and, in some cases, this identity has emerged strengthened from the war experience.

On foreign policy issues, both parts of the Donbas are also more similar than might be expected: the EU is seen almost equally sceptically on both sides of the frontline. On the issue of EU membership, the Kyiv-controlled Donbas seems to have drifted away from the centre's main foreign policy goal faster than other Ukrainian regions. Similarly, support for democracy is only lukewarm and political apathy is greater than in the DNR/LNR.

Not only are the views on critical issues aligned in both parts of the Donbas, the attitudes in the occupied territories are also much more differentiated than the war-related political divisions suggest. The mixed identities across the Donbas and the wide range of preferences regarding the status of the occupied territories are something Ukrainian, Western and Russian policy-makers should take note of. For Kyiv it would be premature to effectively give up on the occupied territories; while Moscow could not count on the unwavering loyalty of the population of the DNR/LNR. In line with the local sentiments, international attempts at conflict-management should refocus on facilitating some form of special status for the DNR/LNR.

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