

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

EUROPEAN DONBAS:

how to talk about European integration
in Donetsk and Luhansk regions

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October 2020



Given that unemployment is the biggest concern for the vast majority of residents in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, creating new jobs with EU assistance (and declaring this assistance) would be the best promotion of European integration.



New non-governmental organizations and movements that are engaged in civic education and promotion of good governance in the East could be the best promoters of European integration in the Donbas – also because people in Donbas have a higher trust in political information if they receive it from local residents.



When communicating European integration, it is worth emphasizing the reforms and changes it means rather than formal membership.

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1.

INTRODUCTION

Donetsk and Luhansk regions are difficult target audiences as far as European integration is concerned. Some of the reasons include low public support for European integration; consistent support for predominantly anti-European political forces throughout almost the entire period of independence¹; as well as Russian aggression which since 2014 has essentially split Donbas² in two parts, with the western one controlled by the Ukrainian government and the eastern one being under occupation.

How should one talk about European integration in Ukraine's east for this topic to be unifying rather than controversial? What does "being a European" mean for local residents and how have attitudes towards the EU changed since 2014? This study seeks to answer these questions.

The note is based on three sets of data:

- six focus groups held by the Centre for Applied Research in four cities of Donetsk Region (Kostyantynivka, Pokrovsk, Bakhmut, Mariupol) and two cities in Luhansk Region (Severodonetsk, Starobilsk) in June 2020³;

- findings of a survey by SCORE Ukraine (2019)⁴;
- and a series of research interviews with activists, entrepreneurs and opinion leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in August-September 2020.

The study is structured in such a manner that qualitative data of focus groups and interviews are supplemented (and sometimes contrasted) with quantitative survey data to identify both mainstream trends and microtrends.

The study is a follow-up to regional research on European integration by New Europe Center⁵. In 2017, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine and Gorshenin Institute conducted a study "Ukrainian Society and European Values".⁶

¹ The Opposition Platform-For Life party won all multi-seat constituencies in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (and exclusively in these regions) in the parliamentary elections.

² The author of the paper is aware of the criticism of the term "Donbas" as a Soviet mythologeme which accentuates only one, industrial feature of the region (see. O. Mikhed "Not Donbas, but Donetsk and Luhansk regions", The Village, 18 August 2020). However, since this term is present in the Ukrainian scientific and expert discourse (for example, the UP.Zhyttya project "Living Library of Donbas", "Donbas Studies", etc), including among natives of the region, it is also used in the note in a purely and exclusively territorial meaning to denote Donetsk and Luhansk regions

³ Thus the cities encompass three urban clusters: industrial (Severodonetsk, Kostyantynivka, Mariupol), mining (Pokrovsk, Bakhmut), agrarian (Starobilsk) and two security ones: closer (Bakhmut, Mariupol, Kostyantynivka) and farther (Severodonetsk, Pokrovsk, Starobilsk) from the line of contact.

⁴ The polling in the government-controlled areas the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts was implemented by the Kantar Ukraine polling company from 16 September to 10 November 2019 based on the 2018 population data. The data is representative by age, gender and type of settlement for each oblast. To collect the sample of 3,325 respondents (70 % in Donetsk oblast and 30 % in Luhansk oblast) in 311 settlements, the company applied the computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) method.

⁵ Previous studies of European integration in the regions by New Europe Center — "The European Map of Ukraine. Rating of European Integration of Regions", "Talking Business: How to Keep Southern Ukraine Engaged in European Integration?", "Silence of Kharkiv", "The Last Donbas Outpost".

⁶ http://fes.kiev.ua/n/cms/fileadmin/upload2/JEvropeiski_cinnosti_tables_and_diagrams_MR_.pdf

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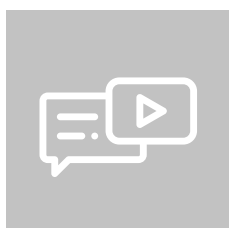
MAIN FINDINGS



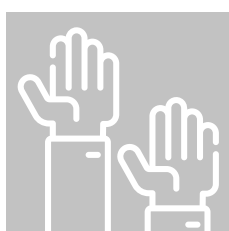
Despite the low level of support for European integration in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk regions are not anti-European. «Europe» and the EU associated with it possess considerable soft power and appeal to the region thanks to their standards and values which are inaccessible and/or desirable for local residents (even if they oppose EU membership).



Support for EU accession and integration with Russia are not mutually exclusive for Donbas residents as some of them do not see a contradiction between the two integration projects.



Although most Donbas residents are not in favour of European integration, this topic alone cannot provoke public confrontation or protests in the region.



After 2014, there was a «boom» of civic engagement in the region, involving increasingly more civic movements and organizations. Although their agenda is usually not directly related to European integration, they essentially promote European practices of interaction between citizens and the state.

3.

DONBAS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: GENERAL TRENDS

Earlier, researchers have already noted that to perceive Donetsk and Luhansk regions as a monolithic region means to ignore their particularities, to generalize about them. Instead, these regions differ in a number of ways, including with regard to the implementation of European integration.⁷

The Euromap study by New Europe Center, based on indicators for 2020⁸, revealed significant discrepancies between Donetsk and Luhansk regions on how they view different dimensions of European integration.

As shown in Table 1, Luhansk Region is not only behind Donetsk Region by most indicators, it is the last in the general rating of all Ukrainian regions in terms of education, science and culture, health care, energy and environmental policy. However, the heterogeneity of progress on “European integration” is remarkable too: Donetsk and Luhansk regions are far ahead of other regions of Ukraine when it comes to economic integration and gender equality.

In their perception of European integration, Donetsk and Luhansk regions stood out not so much by the degree of “closeness” (to what extent the two regions support Ukraine’s European integration) as by the degree of their “farness” from the EU (to what extent they support integration into the Union with Russia, but more on that below). However, there are different views on this within their administrative boundaries too. Whereas there is an influx of foreign missions and donor funds to cities such as Kramatorsk, Mariupol and Severodonetsk, cities like Kostyantynivka, which have been heavier affected by business closures and job cuts, feel more depressed, which also affects local attitude towards European integration.

3.1. PERCEPTION OF THE EU

European integration only exists as an “antithesis” in the political discourse in Donbas. None of political forces in Donbas has actively used the pro-European agenda in its

Table 1.
The Euromap of Ukraine 2020. Rating of Donetsk and Luhansk regions
(out of 25 ranked oblasts, where 1 is the highest rank and 25 – the lowest)

	Donetsk Region	Luhansk Region
Total	19	25
Economic integration	4	1
Infrastructure	14	23
Local democracy and accountability	11	21
Educational, academic and cultural integration	18	25
Health care	24	25
Energy and environmental policy	15	25
Gender equality	3	4
Communication of European integration	19	23

⁷ There is fragmentation even within Donetsk and Luhansk regions: agrarian Pryazovya (Sea of Azov region) is different from mining Donbas, chemical and metallurgical agglomerations which, for their part, are different from recreation areas in northern Donetsk Region. The northern part of Luhansk Region is part of Slobozhanshchyna.

⁸ “The Euromap. Profile of the regions”. New Europe Center. Kyiv, 2020.
<http://neweurope.org.ua/en/project/yevromapa-profil-regioniv/>

Figure. 1

Perception of Europe/the EU in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (according to the results of focus groups)



election campaign since there is no demand for such rhetoric among voters in the east.⁹

However, focus groups have shown that the low support for EU membership does not mean that Donbas is “anti-European”.

Methodological note: in general, the results of focus groups in all cities showed slightly higher “pro-European” sentiments than we expected. We suggest that this may be due to two reasons: 1) the recruitment phase, when those who had a positive attitude towards Europe were more likely to agree to participate in a focus group; 2) a certain distrust on the part of residents towards the interviewers and each other, as a result of which some of them could say what they considered to be politically correct. Despite this bias, the results obtained are still valuable in terms of identifying the range of sentiments in the region and make no claim to exhaustiveness.

First of all, it should be noted that the vast majority of associations with the EU¹⁰ were positive even in such cities as Kostyantynivka and Pokrovsk which, according to SCORE, have the lowest support for Ukraine’s membership of the EU in the region (3.2 and 2.9 compared to the average score of 4.2 (on a scale from 0 to 10) in Donetsk Region).

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently mentioned associations with the EU/Europe included “quality of life”, “rule of law” (alternative association: “equality in the application of law”) and “other mentality”.

The results of focus groups allow us to single out several conditional **models of the EU for Ukraine** that exist in the minds of residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Certainly, they are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, rather they form a list of certain ideas about the EU that exist in the region.

3.1.1 EU as NOT Ukraine (positive perception)

It is noteworthy that associations with Ukraine among focus group participants are mostly positive or neutral. However, when it came to the perception of the EU, respondents in all six focus groups, who were asked to name their associations with the EU, compared the EU with Ukraine and not in favour of the latter.

“In Europe, if people go on strike, the leadership reacts. They respect human rights. And in our country, no-one will react no matter if you strike or not. We are not considered human. They make money off us. And there they let people earn money. And about medicine. People in Europe have insurance and are treated there, they don’t come to us for that. And we collect money to be treated in Europe.”¹¹

(Olena, 38 years old, Kostyantynivka)

“Europe is about equality of all before the law, regardless of one’s material status or position (unlike in Ukraine); obedience to the law; respect for human rights.”

(Olha, 67 years, Starobilsk)

⁹ It should be noted that politicians with an openly pro-European agenda did not necessarily lose support because of it. For example, pro-European voters in Donbas did not support Petro Poroshenko in the 2019 elections because, according to some residents, he did not ensure a proper investigation into the activities of local officials who supported separatism.

¹⁰ Focus group participants used the terms “Europe” and the “European Union” as synonyms.

¹¹ Respondents’ original quotes were in Russian.

Thus, we can assume that not all residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions can agree with the slogan of the Revolution of Dignity — “Ukraine is Europe” — even if they have pro-Ukrainian views.

3.1.2. EU as an example/teacher (positive perception)

Some focus group participants spoke of the EU as an example to follow, a desirable model for Ukraine that the country could draw on. This view is popular with those who support Ukraine’s European integration and those who belong to the “neutral” camp.

“It is easier to do business in Europe. They have fair courts. Europe is an example of what we want in Ukraine.”

(Serhiy, 31 years, Pokrovsk)

“We should be taking cue from living standards in the EU rather than join it.”

(Nataliya, 23 years, Kostyantynivka)

3.1.3. EU as a threat (negative perception)

Another model that can be traced in focus group participants’ responses has to do with threats the EU may pose to Ukraine. As in the case of the previous model, both supporters and opponents of Ukraine’s European choice expressed assumptions about the danger of the EU. In part, they are related to myths and fakes which focus group participants cited to justify their views.

“Attitude to the EU is cautious (information about plans to create a repository of radioactive waste from all over the EU in Prypyat when Ukraine joins the EU is frightening)”

(Danylo, 22 years, Starobilsk)

“There is a risk that Europe may try to settle its issues with Russia at our expense.”

(Mykhaylo, senior man, Mariupol)

“Europe may squash our agriculture. However, some of our enterprises may find a niche in the joint market.”

(Olha, Mariupol)

EU as assistance (neutral-positive attitude)

Remarks about the EU as a donor, sponsor, source of assistance to Ukraine were made in various focus groups.

“Europe helped Ukraine’s IDPs who were fleeing the war (with food, money, clothes, attention and medical care).”

(Oleksandr, Mariupol)

“Europe means assistance to our region from European associations. Ukraine is one of the largest countries on the continent but it needs help now. And Europe is helping.”

(Darya, 34 years, Pokrovsk)

3.2. EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Surveys by SCORE register low values of European identity among the residents of Donbas.

Predictably, most focus group participants do not consider themselves Europeans. In few exceptions, they said that they consider themselves European but that the region/country cannot be considered European, or noted that the region/country was part of Europe in a purely geographic sense.

“I consider myself a European, a person who wants to contribute to society. To be a European means to abide by laws and rules, moral principles; adhere to equality and respect other people.”

(Lilia, Severodonetsk)

“I share European values. I feel in comfort in all countries I have visited. But we do not really know the inner side of living in these countries, they have their own nuances and problems. I think I am European, not an ideal one. Donbas, for its part, does not feel European.”

(Maria, 22 years, Pokrovsk)

“Geographically, we are in Europe, but mentally we are far from Europe. But we need to strive to get there. Where else? We would not go to Asia or Chinese, would we? We need to break the mentality in our heads and go to Europe.”

(Mykola, 64 years, Pokrovsk)

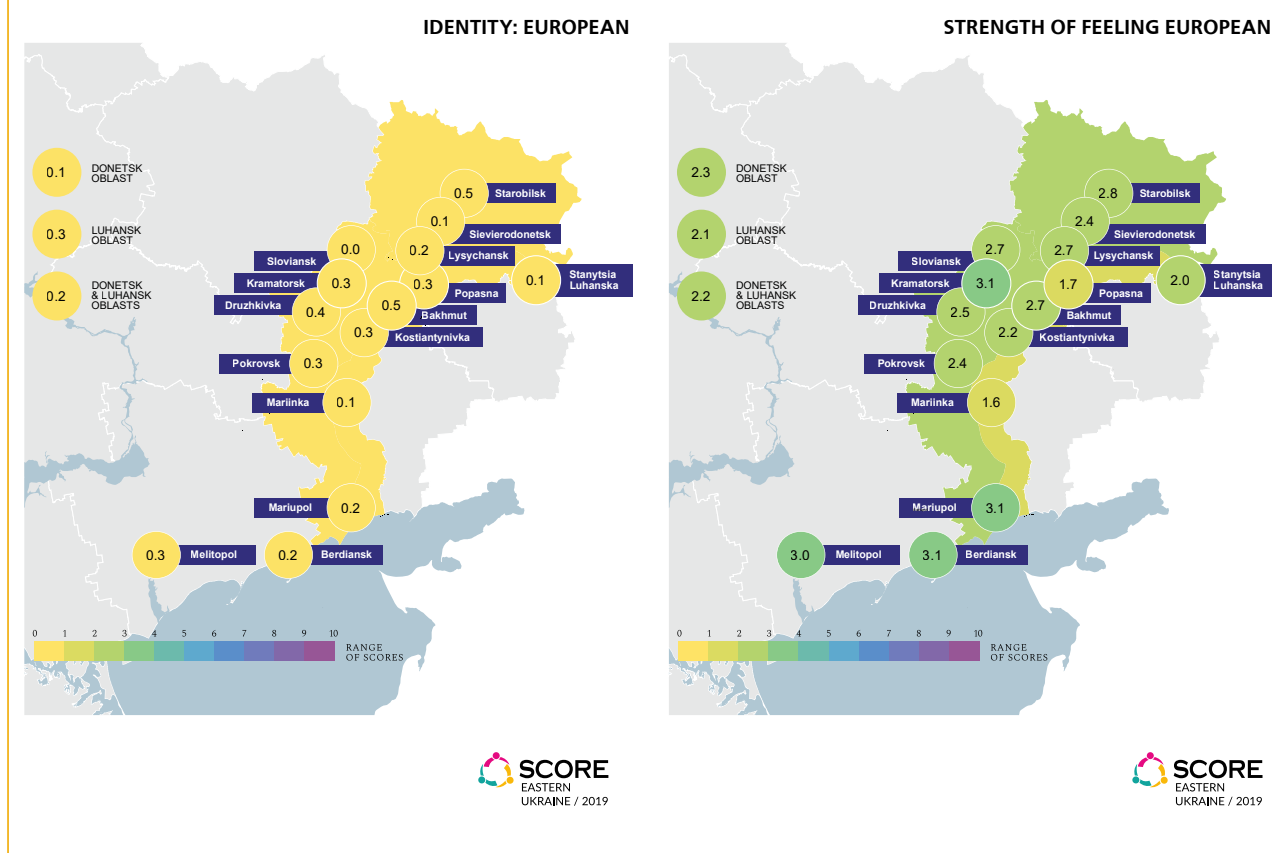
It is noteworthy that the reasons why residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions do not identify themselves as European are both socio-state and personal. While social and state reasons concerned the lack of “Europeanness” on the part of the country or its citizens, personal ones were rather guided by the sense of being “not ideal” (like in the quote above) or “imperfect” European.

“I do not consider myself a European, I am far from a European. To be a European means, first and foremost, to appreciate what you are given; to help develop something in your country. Help your country rather than sit idly by.”

(Danylo, 22 years, Kostyantynivka)

“I do not consider myself completely European because of the environment that does not allow self-realization.”

(Pavlo, 23 years, Severodonetsk)

Figure 2. Score of European identity in Donbas¹²

“I do not consider myself a European because pensioners in Europe do not live like we do in Ukraine.”
(Tamara, 68 years, Kostyantynivka)

“I do not consider myself a European. There are significant differences in mentality, in the level of well-being.”
(Alyona, 44 years, Bakhmut)

One of the focus group participants noted that participation in European projects helped him to feel European (“I felt European for the first time when I volunteered for Euro 2012.”)

Some focus groups participants openly contrasted their Ukrainian identity with the European one: “I don’t consider myself European, I’m Ukrainian.”

It is notable that while speaking about (non-) European Donbas, none of the focus group participants mentioned the European chapter of the region’s history, when British entrepreneurs developed the industrial fabric of Donbas.

3.3. EUROPEAN VALUES

As noted above, asked by the moderator to name associations with the EU, focus group participants mentioned a number of concepts that are often referred to as “European values” (“rule of law”, “freedom of speech”, “human rights”). When the moderator later asked them separately how they understand and interpret European values, the list grew longer: they mentioned such values as “good governance”, “an individual as a value”, “security”, “individual freedom”, “tolerance” (including tolerance to LGBT, etc.). It is noteworthy that one of the most frequently mentioned values was freedom (of speech, religion, self-expression, etc.), which, according to some respondents, Ukraine is lacking.

“We have problems with the freedom of speech. For example, a person can be detained for saying that he loves Donetsk. They will say that he is a separatist. This is wrong, just like it is wrong when a person is beaten over his opinion (for example, when a person speaks out against the shelling of his city).”
(Darya, 30 years, Kostyantynivka)

¹² According to the SCORE methodology, the value of an indicator is measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents complete absence of the measured phenomenon and 10 represents its strong and prevalent presence. The heatmap «European identity» reflects the answers to the question «Speaking of your identity, you would rather call yourself 1. Ukrainian 2. Russian 3. Citizen of Ukraine 4. European 5. Other» The heatmap «Feeling European» reflects the answers to the question «On a scale of 0 to 10, how European do you consider yourself 0 — I do not feel European at all. 10 — I feel strongly European».

We can assume that such views have to do with the phenomenon of forced “silence” to which New Europe Center has already drawn attention in previous studies, that is when people are afraid of openly expressing their views on political issues. Focus group participants also mention this point.

”It is possible, of course, that people are afraid to express their opinions because of the Security Service actions. By the way, Russian propaganda played its part in this in a certain sense with its stories that the Ukrainian government nearly kills all those who say something wrong. Here are the people who continue to adhere to pro-Russian views and are afraid to express them.”

(Serhiy, 31 years, Pokrovsk)

On the other hand, a number of focus group respondents, as well as interviewees, noted that tolerance to manifestations of Ukrainian identity has increased in recent years.

”I created the Patriotic Movement of Donbas organization in 2014. When we held the first march, passers-by reacted negatively, they thought we came from somewhere, we received text messages with threats. Now there is nothing like this.”

(Serhiy, 31 years, Pokrovsk)

”As for tolerance, in 2014 my class boycotted me when I put on an embroidered shirt. It subsided in a while, but I was still shocked by these actions. There is visibly more tolerance now.”

(Maria, 20 years, Pokrovsk)

One way or another, these statements indicate that there is a feeling of unfreedom in the region, which until 2014 affected some and after 2014 other segments of the local population.

It is worth noting the discussions around such a value as democracy. While the overwhelming majority of focus group participants said that they support democracy as a way of governing the state, some participants spoke in favour of a “strong hand”, an authoritarian but fair leader (“manager”) who can “fix things” and then step down in favour of a more democratic leader.

”Authoritarianism is the most effective for the production process (system efficiency), if the leader is a decent and honest person (but there is a high risk that he may turn out to be different).”

(Serhiy, 54 years, Severodonetsk)

”Oleksandr: Maybe, Ukraine needs a strong, authoritarian government to make changes. However, Belarus should not be taken as a model, not everything there is as smooth and good for people’s lives as Lukashenko wants it to look. We need a temporary person who would be ready to put things right — and then leave.

”Olha: But Lukashenko has the authority, after all...”¹³
(Mariupol)

It is interesting that in several cases (in Starobilsk, Pokrovsk and Kostyantynivka) the respondents cited China as an example of the fight against corruption, in particular describing the death penalty as an effective way to punish corrupt officials.

¹³ Focus groups were held before civil protests broke out in Belarus in response to the 9 August 2020 presidential election.

4.

REASONS FOR LOW SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Two of the reasons for the low support for Ukraine's European integration in the region, which were most often mentioned by focus group respondents, are a "different mentality" (Ukrainians as opposed to EU citizens) and "Ukraine is not ready".

The issue of mentality generally permeates through all focus groups: whether it concerns the differences between the EU and Ukraine, one's own identity or obstacles to European integration. One of the prevalent associations with the EU among the residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions is "consciousness". The respondents mean a number of characteristics when they mention this category: active life position, mutual assistance, awareness of their rights, initiative, responsibility for their actions. On the other hand, "different mentality" is a collective term for all the opposite features and, according to the respondents, it is both the reason for low support for European integration in the region and is an obstacle as such.

”Ukraine is not ready to be in Europe. This would require taking efforts both on the part of people and the government. And our people have a different mentality, they do not think about their environment (nature including).”

(Natalia, 23 years, Kostyantynivka)

”Unless the culture of living, behaving and thinking of our population changes, we will not reach their standards. Listing the differences would take a while. They are in everyone's head. Here not everyone loves their country, hometown, they do not care about the environment.”

(Roman, 32 years, Pokrovsk)

”Reasons for the low support for European integration in Donbas include shifting the responsibility to others, waiting for a 'better future'; reluctance to work and make an effort.”

(Lilia, Severodonetsk)

”Our authorities' approach lacks consistence. In our condition, we are not up to EU membership, their standards. If we open the market, 'they will devour us'. Our economy is not adapted to European competition. [...] In Donbas, people find it more convenient to keep what they have now (even if it's not very good).”

(Nika, 21 years, Mariupol)

Remarks that "the EU does not expect Ukraine [to become a member]" or "nobody needs us there" and the like were made in isolated cases.

Another point often made by focus group participants is that Ukraine does not meet the criteria and standards required for EU membership. Accordingly, the membership is impossible without achieving them.

5.

UKRAINE'S FOREIGN POLICY

Nearly as many focus group participants spoke in favour of Ukraine's European integration and accession to the EU as for development "on our own", with or without EU assistance, while a minority of respondents favoured integration with Russia. However, when it comes to focus group results, we are looking not for statistical breakdown (it is not valid with this method) but the reasons the participants cited for or against a certain integration option.

Thus, it is noteworthy that those who spoke in favour of European integration (which the participants mostly understood as joining the EU) could cite the same reason as their opponents, that is that Ukraine is too weak. While the former argued that Ukraine needs support and EU membership because it cannot "cope" on its own, the latter were convinced that due to its weakness, Ukraine is not ready to join the EU.

“We need to head for the EU. We cannot deal with problems on our own, we do not have the financial strength to solve the problems.”

(Darya, 34 years, Pokrovsk)

“Ukraine on its own is incapable of reaching a high level of development, it needs EU support, primarily investments.”

(Lyudmyla, 22 years, Bakhmut)

“The development course is for Europe. Before we join the EU, we need to put things right within the country, that is to defeat corruption and nepotism.”

(Anna, 24 years, Bakhmut)

“We should be shifting for ourselves. By no means do we need to join the EU, many countries are leaving it now. To join it, one must meet the criteria. It is a long run before we reach them. We need to develop on our own and revive the industry.”

(Olena, 38 years, Kostyantynivka)

There was a dispute between the supporters of European integration and those who favour integration with Russia during a focus group discussion in Mariupol.

“Darya: We need to return to friendship with Russia and the CIS, our historical relationship.”

“Olha: And what did Russia give us? Only decline.”

“Oleksandr: There can be no talk of any friendship with Russia in the conditions of war.”

“Olha: Even before the war, relations were not so friendly — Ukrainian goods were simply shipped to Russia, and that's it.”

(Mariupol)

In fact, as focus group participants said, it was the conflict in the east that made many residents of the region to at last think about Ukraine's foreign policy choices and repulse the idea of integration with Russia. According to some interviewees, the latter is especially true for residents of liberated cities who have seen how their region could have developed otherwise. Similarly, the focus group in Mariupol noted that the occupied part of Donbas is a constant demonstration of another — worse — option of the region's development.

“Now the situation in Donetsk is much worse than in the unoccupied territories. You must always remember this when you complain about our situation, that things could have been much worse.”

(Mykhaylo, senior age group, Mariupol)

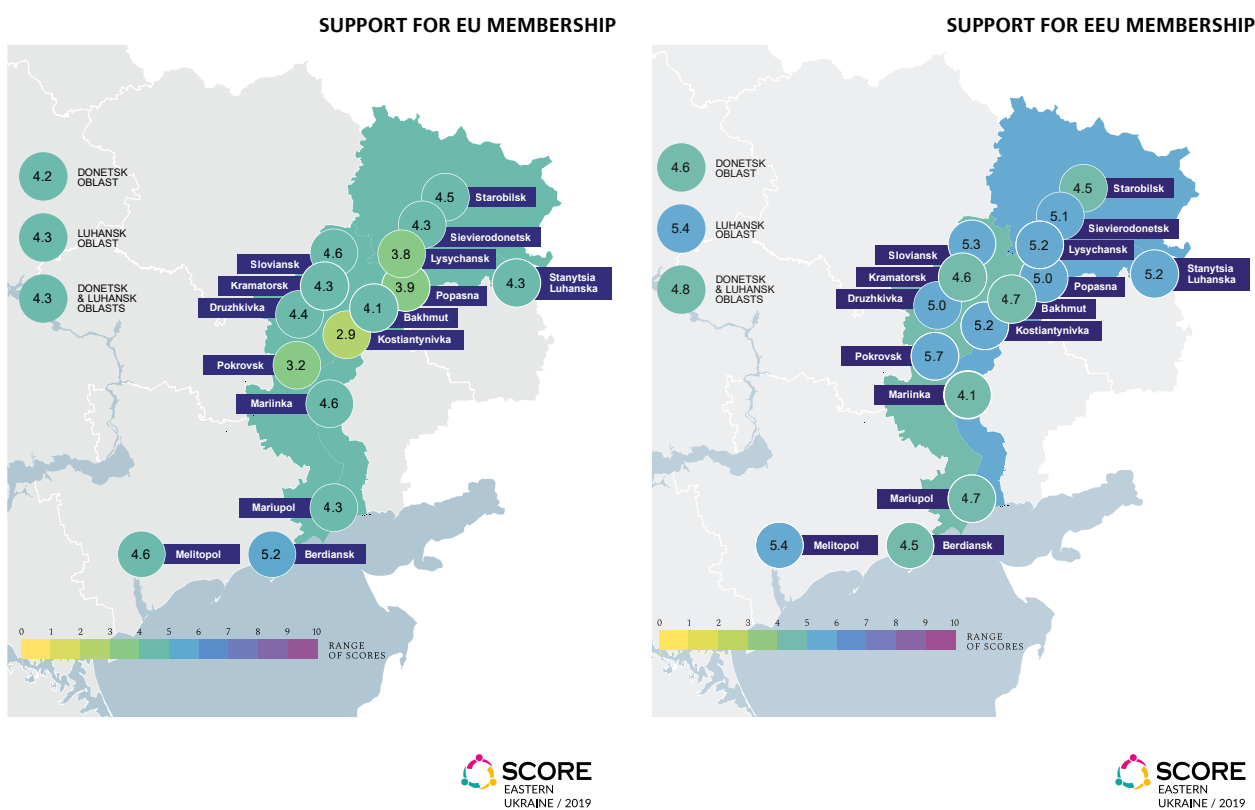
It is noteworthy that none of the focus groups expressed the opinion that the conflict in Donbass and/or Russia hinders Ukraine's European integration. (Instead, a participant of the focus group in Kostyantynivka suggested that rapprochement with the EU hindered the settlement of the conflict because “the West sponsors our army” and thus allegedly contributes to the escalation of the conflict.”) Obviously, in the imagination of the region's residents, the conflict and European integration have little to do with each other, what is more, some focus group participants understood European integration so broadly that they even fantasized about an opportunity for Russia to become part of it.

“Uniting with a common goal looks promising. Ukraine should integrate into Europe. And let Russia join too.”

(Serhiy, 54 years, Severodonetsk)

Figure 4.
Foreign policy orientations of the Donetsk and Luhansk region population

(source: SCORE Ukraine)



According to SCORE, Donetsk and Luhansk regions have a nearly identical opinion about the prospect of Ukraine's membership of the EU (4.2 points in Donetsk Region and 4.3 points in Luhansk Region). What sets them apart is not how (un-) supportive they are of European integration (as can be seen from the maps below, the average value for both regions is almost the same), but rather how these areas tend to support integration into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). By the latter criterion, Luhansk Region is slightly ahead, which correlates with the "lag" in European integration compared to Donetsk Region, according to the Euromap. It is also worth noting that for some residents of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, support for accession to the EU and the EEU is not mutually exclusive: they can simultaneously support integration into both unions (more on this below).

At the same time, according to the interviewees, the supporters of integration with Russia are not the "protest electorate" that can, for example, rally against European integration or resort to other forms of protest. In other words, even if they do not like European integration, this category of citizens will "disagree silently" rather than actively oppose it.

6.

CHANGE OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE EU

Focus groups and interviews showed that attitudes towards the EU in the region have changed for the better since 2014. This happened for several reasons: on the one hand, because of Russian aggression, which, as explained above, has undermined Russia's soft power in the region and increased the appeal of the European integration project. On the other hand, because of the large number of Western projects in general, and European projects in particular, that appeared in the region after the beginning of the conflict. We can say that if Donbas did not go to the EU, the EU — in the form of projects and funds — came to Donbas. Third, a new generation has emerged who, if we paraphrase Yaroslav Hrytsak, has tasted European values through study exchanges, visa-free travel to the EU, and so on. Some of our interlocutors noted that a certain shift in perception started taking place in 2016-2017 when the front line stabilised and Donbas became the object of attention of Western donors.

”People have changed their attitude towards the EU since 2014 because there is more information.”
(Nataliya, 48 years, Pokrovsk)

Perhaps, it is more difficult to register these changes in Ukrainian surveys where the key question and indicator of Ukraine's attitude to the EU is the question on support for membership. Let us note that its results would differ significantly depending on the wording of the question: if it is about EU membership as one of the mutually exclusive integration options (as in Table 2), or if it is about membership only. According to SCORE's 2019 data, 36.5% of the population in Donetsk and Luhansk regions (a sum total of all answers “absolutely agree” and “somewhat agree”) support EU membership.

Table 2.

What path of integration should Ukraine take?

(Donetsk and Luhansk regions, government-controlled territories)

	May 2014 ¹⁴	April 2020 ¹⁵
Accession to the EU	13,1	19,5
Accession to the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia	67,8	24,0
Non-accession either to the EU or the Customs Union	8,1	40,2
Hard to say	10,9	16,3

These wordings do not reflect two trends: first, that a positive attitude towards the EU does not necessarily mean support for its membership and, conversely, a negative attitude towards membership does not necessarily mean a negative attitude towards the EU; second, the fact that support for the EU and Russia in Donbas is not a “zero-sum game.” Therefore, the “pro-Europeanness” of Donbas should not be idealized; we can assume that for a significant proportion of local residents it is a pragmatic choice which is not based on clear values or political beliefs. Because of this, we can expect that this choice may change depending on circumstances, as shown in Figure 4 below.¹⁶

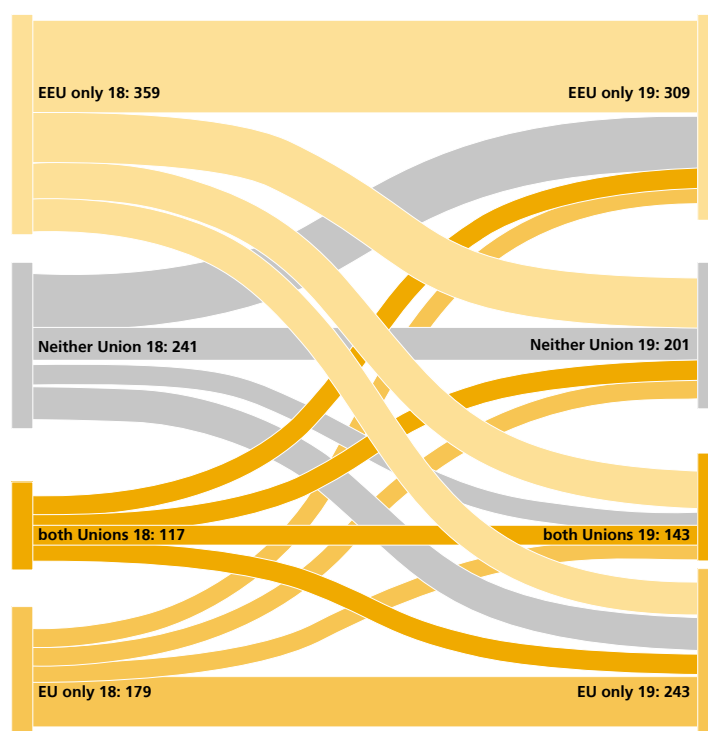
¹⁴ “Foreign policy preferences of the Ukrainian population: regional, age, electoral breakdown and dynamics.” Democratic Initiatives Foundation. May 2014. <https://dif.org.ua/article/zovnishnopolitich-ni-orientatsii-naselennya-ukraini-regionalniy-vikoviy-elektoralniy-roz-podil-ta-dinamika>

¹⁵ “Socio-political preferences of the Ukrainian population.” Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. April 2020. https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20200406_pressconf/politics_april%202020.pdf

¹⁶ Forthcoming SeeD publication.

Figure 4.
Support for membership of the EU and the EEU in Donbas:
dynamics in 2018 (left) and 2019 (rights).

Source: SCORE Ukraine.



SCORE
 EASTERN
 UKRAINE / 2019

The authors of the study divide the residents of Donbas into four groups: those who do not support integration into either the EU or the EEU (low EU, low EEU on the chart); those who only support integration into the EEU (EEU only); those who only support integration into the EU (EU only); those who support membership of both the EU and the EEU (both Unions).¹⁷ Moreover, the SCORE study demonstrates the “migration” of foreign policy preferences between all groups. Therefore, support for Ukraine’s European course in Donbas has a potential to grow that will depend on both the state policy in the region and the change of generations as even now the younger generation is more inclined to support European integration.

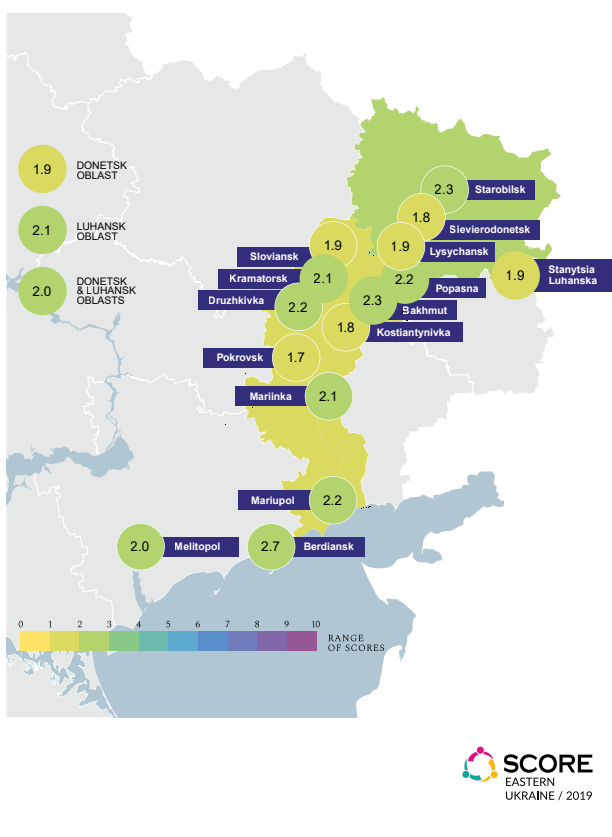
¹⁷ The numbers after the category before the colon indicate the year of the survey (18 and 19 stand for 2018 and 2019, respectively), after the colon - the number of respondents who belong to a particular category (359, 241, etc.).

7.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Figure 5. Civic engagement in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions¹⁸

(source: SCORE Ukraine)



Some focus group participants noted an increase in civic engagement in the region. Additional interviews confirmed this. In fact, after 2014, there was an upsurge of civic engagement in the region, which could be the subject of a

separate study. This is not a general trend but rather an “active minority” which, however, plays an important role in the region. In almost every city you can find from several to several dozen non-governmental organizations, movements and initiatives aimed at promoting the development of local settlements and communities. These include, for example, Ukraine of Opportunities (Ukrayina mozhlyvostey), Our Druzhkivka (Nasha Druzhkivka), Access Point (Tochka dostupu, Druzhkivka), Strong Communities (Sylni hromady), Strength of Law (Syla prava), Bridgehead (Platsdarm), Slovyansk Together (Hurtom Slovyansk, Slovyansk), Prostir Foundation, Severodonetsk Youth Council (Severodonetsk), From the Country to Ukraine (Z krayiny do Ukrayiny), Avdiyivka FM, (Avdiyivka), Free Space DRUZI (Vilnyy prostir DRUZI, Kostyantynivka), Active Community (Diyeva hromada, Starobilsk), etc. Thematically, these organizations focus on a wide range of areas: from patriotic education (pro-Ukrainian upbringing), sustainable development, protection of women’s rights, local democracy to control of local government and even involvement in political activities (support for opposition politicians). What all these movements and organizations, regardless of their thematic focus, have in common is their desire for change. Just like for a number of activists polled by other civil society studies in the east, some people we talked to during our study believe that activism is not a job but a way of life, others call it “alternative army service”, “my little war”.

These movements, which largely, though not exclusively, emerged after 2014 and are represented by IDPs from the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, indicate an important shift in the identity and self-awareness of the region’s residents. And if, as the focus group participants pointed out, European integration is to be measured by “mentality” and “consciousness”, these organizations and movements are true promoters of European values such as self-sufficiency, democracy, accountability, initiative, protection of their rights — even if European integration is not on their agenda. SCORE data also show a correlation between active citizenship and a pro-European position in eastern Ukraine.

According to both the activists and the focus group participants, civil society in the east is currently an active minority, whom a passive majority considers to be a service agent, a

¹⁸ For measuring the SCORE the result data from the following questions was used: “How often do you: 1) attend an event organized by the local authorities; 2) vote in elections; 3) sign a petition on an issue that is important to you; 4) participate in the events organized by NGOs; 5) volunteer or/and donate money/clothes/other items for good causes; 6) participate in public demonstrations supporting causes you believe in; 7) participate in activities aimed at improving your apartment; 8) post and debate social issues via online groups and networks?”

service provider.¹⁹ Changing this attitude, raising the awareness of their own agent capacity among residents of the east are among the tasks set by a number of non-governmental organizations.

UNDP, the EU and USAID's Democratic Governance East (DG East) project facilitate the development of civil society in the east, its representatives say.

¹⁹ SCORE consultation, 3 June 2020.

8.

PERCEPTION OF EUROPEAN PROJECTS

In almost every focus group, there were participants who could name, sometimes very specifically, projects implemented in the region by the European Union or its members. The only exception was Kostyantynivka where participants could not name any projects funded or implemented by the EU. Participants could recall both general areas of assistance, such as “IDP assistance” or “assistance to entrepreneurs”, and very specific projects, such as street lighting, clinic renovation, and so on. One focus group mentioned European Investment Bank projects.²⁰ For the most part, participants also named the EU among Western donors of assistance such as UNICEF and UNDP, sometimes doubting which organization is the donor of a project. In other cases, we noted that people sometimes cannot distinguish state-funded projects from European ones and vice versa:

” When people see repairs and do not know that they have been done at the European expense, they say “see, they are carving up the budget”.
(Serhiy, 31 years, Pokrovsk)

It is noteworthy that some focus group participants could name not only the projects carried out in their city but elsewhere too - for example, people in Mariupol mentioned projects that are being implemented in Sloviansk, while in Pokrovsk people talked about Myrnohrad. A certain “project competition” between the cities was even noticeable sometimes: in particular, in Pokrovsk there were complaints that the authorities of Myrnohrad were more active in attracting investments and therefore reaped more from opportunities available to Donbas.

²⁰ According to the Euromap 2019, Donetsk and Luhansk regions are ahead of all other Ukrainian regions by the number of planned EBRD and EIB projects.

9.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study provides grounds for cautious optimism about pro-European sentiments in Donbas. While they are not dominant today, the dynamics of public sentiments in the years after the start of Russian aggression, the positive perception of the EU as a whole and the emergence of active civil society suggest that the perception of European integration in Donbas is transforming while the range of its supporters have the potential to increase. To use this potential, the following steps should be considered:

1. As New Europe Center noted earlier, Ukrainian citizens see the greatest manifestations of European integration as a whole in improved service quality of social and transport infrastructure, and the creation of new jobs.²¹ Given that unemployment is the biggest concern²² for the vast majority of residents in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, creating new jobs with EU assistance (and declaring this assistance) would be the best promotion of European integration. An example of such assistance is the FinancEast programme, developed as part of a joint project of Ukraine and the European Commission to finance micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in Donbas by means of loans and refunds.²³ It is noteworthy that rising unemployment due to, among other factors, the closure of mines, on the one hand, is a problem for the local population, and on the other hand, essentially means the end of political and industrial dominance in the region and the opening of opportunities for a new structure of labour and political preferences.
2. EU assistance, especially to entrepreneurship and manufacture, should be communicated emphatically as one of the main fears the local population associates with the EU, and which is being actively fuelled by Russia, is the fear of deindustrialization.
3. Currently, the best potential (or actual) proponents of European integration are new non-governmental organizations and movements that are engaged in civic education and promotion of good governance. They should also be involved in the communication of European integration because people in Donbas have a higher trust in political information if they receive it from local residents.
4. In addition to young people and entrepreneurs, who are an obvious audience open to the promotion of European integration, older people should also be involved in the communication of European integration. Despite the fact that this age category in Donetsk and Luhansk regions is traditionally considered pro-Russian, the focus groups included at least three people aged over 55 who can be considered "pro-European". Thus, it is possible to reach audiences that are not covered by the communication channels used by younger people and Western partners.
5. When communicating European integration, it is worth emphasizing the reforms and changes they mean rather than formal membership. While the issue of membership may be a matter of caution and concern, even for pro-European citizens, changes in the standards and quality of life related to European integration will have wider support among Donbas residents holding any foreign policy views.

²¹ "New Europe: what do Ukrainians think?". New Europe Center. 10 July 2018. <http://neweurope.org.ua/analytics/nova-yevropa-yak-yiyi-bachat-ukrayintsi/>

²² Results of regional public opinion poll in Donetsk and Luhansk regions." Democratic Initiatives Foundation. 9 April 2020. <https://dif.org.ua/article/results-of-regional-public-opinion-poll-in-donetsk-and-luhansk-regions>

²³ "FinancEast programme develops business in Donbas." EU in UKRAINE. Cooperation News. 20 May 2020, <https://cutt.ly/rgpVFXv>

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IMPRINT

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The author is grateful to the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) for providing previously unpublished data for use in this study. The content of the study is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or SeeD.

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EUROPEAN DONBAS:

how to talk about European integration in Donetsk and Luhansk regions



Given that unemployment is the biggest concern for the vast majority of residents in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, creating new jobs with EU assistance (and declaring this assistance) would be the best promotion of European integration.



New non-governmental organizations and movements that are engaged in civic education and promotion of good governance in the East could be the best promoters of European integration in the Donbas – also because people in Donbas have a higher trust in political information if they receive it from local residents.



When communicating European integration, it is worth emphasizing the reforms and changes it means rather than formal membership.