

CAT-UA 



In-depth Expert Interviews

DONETSK REGIONAL NARRATIVE

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PRELIMINARY RESEARCH: NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN UKRAINE

AS OF 2024, THREE NATIONAL NARRATIVES COEXISTED IN UKRAINE, THAT IS, THREE DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF HOW WE SEE THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF UKRAINE. IT IS WITH THESE NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND REGIONAL NARRATIVES THAT DONETSK REGION COEXISTS IN THE MINDS OF EVERY CITIZEN

- **The narrative of the struggle for Ukrainian culture** tells the story of Ukraine's tragic history as a victim of empires, which has been in this role for most of its history. According to this narrative, the main internal contradiction between true patriots and those who still "profess" Russian culture and speak Russian.
- **The narrative of civic unity** tells the story of the revival of Ukraine during its years of independence and an active civil society that overcomes the consequences of the Soviet-imperial heritage. Those who carry this narrative do not see internal contradictions in Ukraine; the main enemy is Russia and traitors who work directly for the enemy. This narrative emphasizes supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine.
- **The multicultural narrative** tells the story of the "golden times" of Cossack democracy, which was built on the principles of multiculturalism. It also recounts other bright epochs of Ukrainian history that were not monocultural. They clearly identify Putin as their main enemy, but they also have an internal enemy: "nationalists" who divide Ukrainian citizens and prohibit communication in other languages.

You can read more about these three narratives [on the CAT-UA website](#).

THE MAIN ACHIEVEMENT OF THE CURRENT STUDY

THREE MAIN PRO-UKRAINIAN REGIONAL NARRATIVES WERE RECORDED ON THE TERRITORY OF DONETSK REGION, AS WELL AS TWO PERIPHERAL NARRATIVES

- **The "Ukraine-centric" narrative** is a story about struggle. The story of the Donetsk region as a Ukrainian region that has experienced and is experiencing the greatest pressure from the USSR and today's Russia. The myth of two "Golden Ages" is noticeable: the first one being "European", at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the second one being Ukrainian, that is, after the Soviet decline. At this time, the region began to recall its rich Ukrainian culture, especially in the unoccupied territories. It is important that the residents of the Donetsk region differ from the residents of other regions of Ukraine no more than they differ from each other.
- **"Deconstruction of the Soviet narrative of Donbas"** – This is a story about a great epiphany. The Donetsk region is a land that was once both Cossack and European, but the reconstruction after the Second World War restarted its history from scratch. The Donetsk region is unique; its inhabitants are carriers of special skills and ethics. In Soviet times, they often did not notice the Ukrainian life of their region. But when in the 1990s they were "expelled" from the Soviet "paradise", they realized that they were Ukrainians, and that "paradise" was fake. Leaders emerged who were able to bring prosperity to the area, culminating in 2012. But the occupation of the Donetsk region destroyed its future.
- **The "Mariupol" narrative** is a story about the tragedy and paving the road towards it. Mariupol and its surroundings are different from the rest of the Donetsk region, combining the sea and industry. The Greek influence is very noticeable here. The city was founded by the labor of simple Ukrainian and Greek workers, whom the Soviet authorities Russified and repressed. When Russia started the war, most conscious Mariupol residents became pro-Ukrainian. When the Azov battalion liberated the city in 2014, a new life began in it. But Russia finally destroyed the city along with the lives of its inhabitants.

In addition to the three main narratives, there are two less common peripheral narratives that still have a tangible impact on them: the narrative of the Azov Greeks and the narrative of the autochthons of the Northern Donetsk region.

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE REGION'S NARRATIVE

THE REGION'S NARRATIVE CONSISTS OF FOUR CATEGORIES THAT SHAPE THE IDENTITY OF ITS INHABITANTS AND DIASPORA, MOTIVATE THEM TO ACT AND DEVELOP, AND DESCRIBE THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATION

1. IDENTITY

The method of determining which residents belong to the region, and the criterion by which its representatives are separated from others.

2. CONFLICT

The main line of division between the region's residents determines its fate and creates problems when it comes to building the future.

3. MYTHICAL PART

It is a story about the region's historical periods, the trials they underwent, and other periods.

4. RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE

These are conclusions about the relationship between the region and the country, the desired interaction, and other future circumstances.

The recruiting strategy focused on engaging respondents with diverse professional and expert backgrounds that influence public discourse. The sample includes 50 heads of civil society organizations, public figures, artists, teachers, scientists, government officials, lawmakers, business representatives, and military personnel from the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as journalists. A targeted sampling method with elements of the "snowball" method was used to select the initial respondents, followed by the inclusion of those recommended by the initial respondents. The selection process began with an initial group of respondents who referred the researcher to other potential respondents within the target group. This approach yielded at least seven independent input points. We

selected representatives with the most polarized views, which we assessed based on their public statements. To avoid distortion and ensure the impartiality and representativeness of the research results, the following **criteria were used to differentiate respondents** when selecting new ones:

- *Age distribution:* During the study, we focused on the 36-54 age category because most active and influential figures are in this age group. Eleven respondents aged 18-35 and eight respondents aged 55+ were also included.
- *Gender distribution:* 17 women were included in the sample.
- *Field of activity:* Each of the areas of activity was represented by quotas of 5 to 10 respondents. These areas

included NGO leaders and public figures, artists, teachers and scientists, officials and deputies, business representatives, military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and journalists.;

- *Regional distribution:* A minimum of 9 respondents are represented by each subregion (Donetsk, Mariupol and its suburbs, the Northern Donetsk subregion, and other Donetsk cities).
- *Departure time from the Donetsk region:* Each group (those who lived in the Donetsk region at the time of the interview; those who left before 2014; those who left from 2014 to 2021; and those who left after 2022) is represented by a minimum of 9 respondents.

Conducting interviews. According to the guide.

Processing of interview results. In the transcripts, fragments that correspond to the components of the national narrative are singled out: identity, conflict, the mythical element, and relations with Ukraine. In other words, the texts revealed differences among the inhabitants of the Donetsk region and other regions, divisions within the local community, perceptions of historical

events, and considerations regarding the inhabitants' relations with the rest of Ukraine.

To better understand the views of the Donetsk region residents, we expanded the scope of the study by adding **related categories** that were described for all narratives with an emphasis on differences in vision:

- *The image of the Donetsk region:* visual and other symbolic representations of the respondents' experience in their homeland.

- *The experience of 2014-2025:* The Donetsk region residents' experiences of war are based on their personal or collective stories and understanding of the events.
- *The image of the Donetsk region's future:* imaginary pictures, either pessimistic or optimistic, of future events in the region.

General rules

- The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, and the respondents were free to answer in Russian.
- Respondents were informed that the interview would be recorded, both audio and video..

The In-Depth Interview Script

Introduction: Hello! I represent the analytical NGO CAT-UA. We advise public authorities, particularly those responsible for humanitarian policy. We are conducting a series of expert interviews with scientists, experts, university professors, civil society organization (CSO) leaders, journalists, and Defense Forces fighters who are active in the political sphere in the Donetsk region. Our study focuses on the regional narrative of the Donetsk region, and the results will help develop effective strategies for de-occupying and reintegrating the region. The collected data will be an important resource for advocating the region's liberation and uniting efforts to return it to Ukrainian control.

List of questions

1. Please tell us about your identity. Who are you?
2. What does Donetsk, the Donetsk region, mean to you personally? What associations and symbols come to mind when you think of it?
3. What does it mean to be a Donetsk resident? How would you describe the characteristics that distinguish people from the Donetsk region from those of other regions of Ukraine?
4. Does the Donetsk resident remain the same when he/she move to other regions?
5. What events in the region's history do you consider the most significant?
6. How has the community of emigrants from the Donetsk region changed, and how does their behavior differ between 2014 and 2022? Did the 2014 invasion and the full-scale war unite the natives of the Donetsk region?
7. What are the main achievements and problems of Donetsk residents at the moment?
8. What questions and views do Donetsk residents share now? How would you overcome these differences?
9. In general, what is your vision of the Donetsk region's future, and what should be done to improve it?
10. Who or what stands in the way of a better future for the region and its residents?
11. In your opinion, what values or traditions unite the Donetsk region with the rest of Ukraine, and which perhaps distinguish it?
12. Why does Ukraine need the Donetsk region as part of it?
13. Why does the Donetsk region need to reintegrate into Ukraine?
14. Why do you think Russian propaganda has become so successful among the residents of the Donetsk region? What should the Ukrainian authorities do now to counter these narratives?

Comparative characteristics of
the narratives:

**THE UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC
NARRATIVE**

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: **IDENTITY**

THEY ARE RESILIENT, HARDWORKING, STRAIGHTFORWARD, AND READY TO TAKE RISKS. THEY ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE DESCENDANTS OF THE RESIDENTS OF THE FRONTIER. IN GENERAL, THE CONCEPT OF "HARD WORK" SIGNIFICANTLY DISTINGUISHES THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE AND THE "DECONSTRUCTION" NARRATIVE FROM THE MARIUPOL NARRATIVE — POSSIBLY DUE TO THE OLDER AGE OF SETTLEMENTS (THERE ARE MORE OF THOSE IN THE AZOV SEA AREA)

- **HARDWORKING.**

"The Donetsk people" are known for working hard and/or a lot. *"In the east, it's normal to call at 9 p.m. and ask about work. You can't do that in Lviv".* People in the Donetsk region are expected to work hard, which is explained by the predominant employment in heavy industry and mining. *"If a person neither studies nor works, he or she is considered lazy and treated differently. The emphasis in the Donetsk region has always been on working hard".* However, they partially acknowledge the mythical nature of this identity: *"The myth of uniqueness of workers, miners, and metallurgists—*

people of hard work—who believed in this myth and were proud of their heroism".

- **HARDENED.**

Associative rows: adventurers, first settlers, first adapters: *"Apparently, these are adventurers and risky people who were the first to settle in the steppe. There were nomads there in the beginning, but when people began to settle, these people were not afraid of risks or something new".*

- **RELIABLE.**

Donetsk residents can be trusted. They honor agreements, attend meetings, and are honest about money. *"If someone from Donbass says 'I will do*

it,' you don't need a written agreement; they will do it". They also compare themselves to residents of other regions: *"We say that Donetsk residents are more reliable and straightforward, and they keep their word. Unlike people from Kyiv, who are so relaxed".*

- **STRAIGHTFORWARD.**

They demonstrate both affection and distrust directly: *"If someone does not like you, they might not show it, but you will sense it. But if there is affection, it is immediately demonstrated".* **However, they also discuss the negative consequences of this trait:** *"If it is ignorance, a person who does not understand will be rude".*

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: IDENTITY

THE BORDER WITH RUSSIA SHAPES TIES WITH THE RUSSIANS. THEY TALK ABOUT RIGIDITY, TRUST IN PROPAGANDA, AND A LACK OF CRITICAL THINKING. THIS LOOKS LIKE THE DOWNSIDE OF STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS — PEOPLE DON'T SUSPECT ATTEMPTS TO MANIPULATE THEM. BUT THEY ALSO MENTION THE LACK OF INITIATIVE BROUGHT OUT IN THEM. AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR AND THE CLOSURE OF FACTORIES, MANY PEOPLE BECAME DRUNKS DUE TO THE LACK OF EXTERNAL CONTROL

- VICTIMS OF PROPAGANDA.

The first reason for this is cited as a lack of education or erudition. *"The Donetsk people were not educated. They were not very aware of this. Why did they choose that view? Because that propaganda was everywhere. It was the only one. They had no doubts".* This lack of critical thinking is often associated with age and rigidity of perception. *"The people who stayed, especially the elderly, are just under the pressure of this propaganda. They don't know anything and don't want to know because otherwise they would feel even worse".* They even mention the alternative memory instilled by propaganda: *"For example, I read on TikTok that 'There was no water supply under Ukraine.' I'm thinking... I lived*

there for 15 years. The electricity might have been off a couple of times, and the water supply might have been off only a couple of times due to repairs".

- RUSSIAN (LINGUISTIC) IDENTITY.

There has been much discussion about the Russian-speaking environment, the region's proximity to the Russian border, and the relevant influences. There has also been discussion about the region's unfamiliarity with Ukrainian culture. *"No one mentions Ukrainian writers in the Donetsk region".* However, it is noted that, in this respect, there is no fundamental difference between small towns in the region and Kyiv: *"If you come to Slovyansk now, you will hear a lot of Russian. But it's no more than in Kyiv".*

- DIALECT.

Many refer to surzhyk as a "compromise" language when communicating with Russian-speaking relatives. *"I have to communicate with my relatives, so I mix languages. It's actually surzhyk. My relatives mainly speak Russian, especially since one of my cousins, the youngest, ended up living in Russia".* However, they also note a fundamental difference between surzhyk and Russian: *"Our language is mixed with surzhyk; it's peculiar. Sometimes, if we speak Surzhyk, Russians won't understand us".* Many also mention specific words: *"tormozok" and "trempe".*

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: IDENTITY

A SIGNIFICANT FEATURE OF THE DONETSK PEOPLE, WHICH DETERMINES MANY OF THEIR OTHER FEATURES, IS THE LACK OF ROOTS. THE REGION WAS POPULATED BY WORKERS FROM DIFFERENT REGIONS, AND MANY NATIONALITIES COEXISTED

- **LOW MOBILITY.**

Residents of the region did not travel much outside of it, so they largely missed the Maidan events. *"The distance to Kyiv is 800 kilometers".* Western Ukraine is far away, and foreign countries are even farther. Family ties were often limited to neighboring regions, some of which were in Russia. *"Ukraine and Russia were very mixed. For example, people were brought from the Rostov region because it's not so far away. They communicated more with relatives than neighbors".*

- **SOME INFLUENCE OF OTHER CULTURES.**

Prison culture: *"They were the first to be sent out to all the terrible places. When they arrived, they experienced freedom".*
Soviet culture: *"We celebrated the New*

Year's Eve at Moscow time, and then at Kiev time". There was also a sense of inferiority compared to "white people", that is, Russians. They talk about the culture of workers' settlements and nicknames instead of surnames.

- **OR THE ABSENCE OF ANY BACKGROUND ALTOGETHER.**

The Soviet authorities transformed the region's residents into Soviet citizens. They stripped them of their traditions, religion, and memory of the past. Often, they destroyed nuclear families and respect for family. *"In the Donbas, there is total amnesia about the past. They only know the indoctrinated, Soviet-style history that was told to them. Of course, educated people have already managed to overcome this. The younger*

generation is probably thinking differently, but the older generation was well indoctrinated". They also call this a modern way of life, as the population has transitioned from a traditional lifestyle. Some believe this is the cause of the region's problems: *"The people supported pro-Russian movements due to their ignorance of history".*

- **TOLERANCE BECAME A "BONUS" OF THAT MIXTURE OF CULTURES.**

There were mentions of a normal attitude toward "others", cosmopolitanism, and a more loyal attitude toward neighbors due to a lack of connection to their roots. *"Donetsk had not only synagogues, but also many mosques".*

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: CONFLICT

THE BEARERS OF THIS NARRATIVE PRIMARILY OPPOSE THE OCCUPIERS OR SUPPORTERS OF RUSSIA. WHAT IS UNUSUAL COMPARED TO OTHER NARRATIVES IS THAT THIS ONE OPPOSES THOSE WHO ARE INDIFFERENT TO THE WAR, MILITARY CONSCRIPTION, AND SUPPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

- SUPPORTERS OF UKRAINE VS. SUPPORTERS OF RUSSIA.

There are typical, sharp conflicts due to the manifestation of their position, which is obvious to those who carry this narrative but not to others. Such conflicts are mostly evident in the occupation: *"I was taken to the basement because I clearly expressed my pro-Ukrainian stance on social media"; "Some teenagers have parents who support Russian policy and the occupation".* Ukrainian-centric people complain about those who deny Ukraine's right to exist and want to be with Russia. *"They believe that the Ukrainian language does not exist. They believe that the Ukrainian nation does not exist".*

- PATRIOTS VS. RUSSIA WELCOMERS / COLLABORATORS.

A similar emphasis is placed on the conflict between patriots and those who exhibit different behaviors under occupation. *"Some support Ukraine and expect it to succeed, but their fate is to stay. And, obviously, there are people who collaborate with the enemy".* This is also evident during key historical events, such as in 2014. *"Some took up arms and joined the DPR troops, while others joined the voluntary battalions or became volunteers".* Some people did not quickly adopt the Ukrainian-centric narrative: *"My position began to change in 2015-2017, when I realized that those narratives were wrong and that the Revolution of Dignity had brought many positive changes".*

- PATRIOTS VS. INDIFFERENT PEOPLE.

In the unoccupied territories, the level of civic engagement is higher, and it even divides people who share a similar worldview. *"Either you serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine or you support them in some way. Those who are indifferent or say, 'Not in my backyard,' 'Let the MPs go to war'... This country gives you some benefits, and some do not understand this and say: 'What have these authorities given me?'".* This applies to military conscription, among other things: *"Someone's mother wrote, 'I did not give birth to my son so he would go to war. But did I give birth to mine so he would go to war? Was my son born in a bulletproof vest?'".* Other narratives do not use images of passive compatriots, let alone in relation to conscription.

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: CONFLICT

ANOTHER UNIQUE FEATURE OF THE NARRATIVE IS THE EMPHASIS ON THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE, WHICH ALLEGEDLY DIVIDES THE DONETSK REGION. THERE IS A NOTICEABLE OUTRAGE THAT OTHER REGIONS ACCUSE DONETSK PEOPLE OF INVINTING THE WAR – AFTER ALL, THEY ARE ALSO UKRAINIANS

- UKRAINIAN-SPEAKERS VS. RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS

Notably, there is a strong adherence to the Ukrainian language, which is less prominent in other narratives. *"Young people are now very focused on the language. Perhaps these conversations can encourage the elderly to speak it more"*.

- THOSE WHO LEFT VS. THOSE WHO STAYED.

They have a large gap in their worldview, which depends on their place of residence. Over time, this gap only widens: *"Each new year of war widens the gap between those who stayed and those who are here. I'm not saying they're perceived as enemies. But some doubts arise"*. **The income gap exacerbates this dividing line:** *"...divided on the basis of comfort and*

opportunities in life". Sometimes, there are hypotheses that someone could use the war as an opportunity to reach their desired location: *"...you went there, and lived your best life in Kyiv, Lviv, or Munich"*.

- IDPS VS. THE REST OF UKRAINE

They experience strong despair due to societal rejection, offensive stereotypes, and accusations of causing the war: *"IDPs face stereotypes about newcomers, such as "it is unclear what they are doing here" and "we are tired of all the IDPs..."*; *"it is unfair when Easterners are accused of supposedly being the cause of the war..."* **However, IDPs also face the opposite opinion:** *"it became clear that it was not Donbas that invited the war; it's just that we are unlucky with our neighbors"*.

- THE EAST VS. WEST OF UKRAINE.

The prejudice against the inhabitants of western Ukraine (*"Banderites"*) is deepened by differences in traditions: *"Unlike many regions of Galicia or Volyn, where people... repeatedly read the Bible... in the Donbas, even if you go to church, it's mostly a very superficial ritual"*.

- CITIZENS VS. RELOCATED AUTHORITIES.

There have been accusations against officials because they have the opportunity to leave while ordinary residents are left behind: *"Well, now I see that the authorities have left for Dnipro. They live here in Dnipro and watch what's happening in Kramatorsk. People have to go to work because they don't have the means or money to travel elsewhere"*.

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: MYTHICAL PART

NARRATIVE BEARERS ASSOCIATE THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF DONETSK REGION WITH THE ARRIVAL OF WESTERN CAPITAL UNDER THE EMPIRE. THE SOVIET PERIOD IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE "SOCIAL ENGINEERING PROJECT", WHICH NOT ONLY SHAPED HARDWORKING PEOPLE, BUT WAS ALSO ACCOMPANIED BY THE GENOCIDE OF UKRAINIANS, THEIR REPLACEMENT BY RUSSIANS, THE CONSEQUENCES OF WHICH WE ARE STILL EXPERIENCING

- EUROPEAN FOUNDATION.

Representatives of this narrative note the decisive role of European business, in particular J. Hughes, in the development of the region, and sometimes characterize that era as "golden times". They see Russia's role as destructive: *"This region was founded in the 19th century with the arrival of John Hughes. Then Russia came and destroyed it all"*. They note the rapid industrialization and, at the same time, the penetration of European culture into the region: *"Donetsk became an absolute Europe, because Hughes and others came there. Belgian, French, English, German capitals, engineers who bring their wives there, who begin*

to build infrastructure and enterprises, and the wives bring their culture, their fashion with them".

- SOVIET DECLINE AND OPPRESSION.

An important role in understanding this period is given to the Holodomor as a tool for replacing the Ukrainian indigenous population by Russians: *"It was Holodomor, where the population was exterminated and they brought Russians instead. The repressions of the 1930s, of 1937, also brought Russians, that is, after each wave of the extermination of Ukrainians, Russians were brought. On top of that, the policy of the Russian language and culture was imposed as a whole"*. An iconic figure of the Ukrainian resistance to ethnocide is

V.Stus: *"Undoubtedly, I am attracted and fascinated by the Donetsk of Stus, and not, for example, the Donetsk of some Dehtiarov, who was the head of the regional communist party"*.

- SOVIET RECONSTRUCTION.

It is characterized as the result of the labor efforts of the people, denying the decisive role of Soviet Russia: *"Maybe there were memories of the Soviet Union, industrialization, etc., when the Donbas was rising, but it was associated with Russia at all", and also denying "Lenin's, and then Stalin's project of social engineering"*.

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: MYTHICAL PART

THE PERIOD AFTER THE EARLY 2000S IS ALSO CONSIDERED THE "GOLDEN AGE", THE SECOND SUCH PERIOD AFTER THE FOUNDING OF CITIES AND FACTORIES BY EUROPEANS. ADDITIONALLY, THERE IS A LOT OF EVIDENCE THAT DONETSK HAS ALWAYS BEEN UKRAINIAN

- RUSSIAN PRESSURE DURING THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD.

According to those who carry the narrative, this pressure never stopped, particularly in the information space.

"Even 'correct' Ukrainian TV channels showed mostly Russian content".

Against this background, attempts at Ukrainization did not find support from a significant part of the population: *"You see, they want to impose Ukrainian on us. People forget that their parents or grandparents spoke Ukrainian".*

- RENAISSANCE UNDER THE INDEPENDENCE.

From the early 2000s to 2014, the Donetsk region experienced its second "golden age". Integration into the Western world was often mentioned in the context of the 2012 Euro

Championship and the success of FC Shakhtar. *"The most significant moment in Donetsk's history before 2014 was probably Euro 2012. It showed Donetsk as a city that could claim to be part of the European community and space".* The revival in the unoccupied areas after 2014 was significant as well.

- UKRAINIAN ROOTS.

Those who carry this narrative mostly mention the Cossack past of their cities and villages and how the Cossacks opposed the imperial encroachments of Russia. *"For example, in Toretsk, the village of Shcherbynivka is the first settlement in the latest history — the 18th century — which was founded by a Cossack".* They are proud of the region's participation in the struggle for independence. *"The first volunteer*

battalion of the UPR army was created in Bakhmut during the 1917 Revolution, and it fought for the independence of the Ukrainian state!". In the more recent past, the Ukrainization of the 1920s is considered a significant contribution to the "Ukrainian Donbas". *"In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Soviet Ukraine saw the rise of Ukrainian-speaking leaders in the Stalino region. The Ukrainian-language newspaper Socialist Donbass appeared. Later, in the 1960s, Vasyl Stus worked for it. This was a very important moment".*

THE “UKRAINE-CENTRIC” NARRATIVE: RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE

THE DONETSK REGION HAS A COMMON HISTORY WITH THE REST OF UKRAINE, BUT DUE TO THE FAILED INFORMATION POLICY AND PREJUDICE AGAINST THE "DONETSK PEOPLE", RUSSIA WAS ABLE TO CONVINCE SOME OF THE OPPOSITE

- THE DONETSK REGION IS PART OF UKRAINE.

It is impossible to separate the Donetsk region from Ukraine, because it's the same people who live there, and Ukrainians care about the Donetsk region: *"there is no water supply in Donetsk... if this area were integrated into the Ukrainian space, this problem would not arise"*.

- THE DONETSK PEOPLE ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM OTHER UKRAINIANS.

The people of Donetsk have always known that they are Ukrainians, albeit a little different, but not Russians: *"We are different no more than Transcarpathia, Bukovina, Polissya people are different... All these regions are Ukraine"*. The Donetsk people, like other Ukrainians, lived in the same culture: *"it's a common history, a common culture, common memories, either good or bad... a*

common collective trauma from USSR". This became even more noticeable when some people left: *"everyone who left, they understand that they are at home, everywhere, well, in their country"*.

- UKRAINIANS CONSIDER THE DONETSK PEOPLE TO BE TRAITORS.

Unlike other large narratives, the main problem is not in the language and customs, but in the stereotype that the war began because of the Donetsk people: *"people from other regions accuse the Donetsk people 'the war began because of you', but this is not true"*. In fact, *"only Putin is to blame for the war, he went to invade Kyiv and Bucha"*.

- THE LANGUAGE ISSUE HAS A SOLUTION.

On the one hand, as in all narratives, respondents remind that Donbas is used to communicating in Russian, and this is poorly perceived by the rest of

Ukrainians: *"what worries local residents is not that they communicate in Russian, but that people have lost their homes"*.

On the other hand, they recognize that it is desirable to learn Ukrainian, although not by imposing it: *"people are now under stress... let's do gentle Ukrainization. Speak Ukrainian with us"*.

- FAILED INFORMATION POLICY.

Ukraine failed information policy, as did not pay attention to this region for a long time, although: *"in the beginning of the 1990s... perhaps Luhansk and Donetsk were more pro-Ukrainian, more identified as part of Ukraine, and would not look at Russia"*. But Ukraine did not have a directed policy in the region. Instead, Russia was active, and this bore results: *"In 2013-2014, they listened only to Russian radio, watched only Russian programs... films and music"*.

THE “UKRAINE-CENTRIC” NARRATIVE: RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE

THE ECONOMY OF DONBAS IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE REST OF UKRAINE, BUT UKRAINE HAD NOT USED THESE BENEFITS FOR A LONG TIME

- IDPS WERE LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES.

As in other narratives, there are complaints that the state does not sufficiently support Ukrainians in the Donetsk region. The government provides UAH 2,000–3,000, which is not even enough to rent an apartment. Unlike other narratives, new sub-themes have emerged, such as the situation of children in occupied areas. They are not supported and are not invited to study in Ukraine. *"A child must be very motivated to apply to a university, risking his or her life"*.

- UKRAINE'S ECONOMY DEPENDS ON DONBASS.

Of course, the idea that Donbass feeds all of Ukraine is a myth. Still, Donbas minerals are important: *"A whole part of our economy is built on some subsoil*

minerals". Russia will not be able to take full advantage of what Donbas provides. As part of Russia, it will always be inefficient because its development began and continued in Ukraine. *"Over the years that the Donetsk region was part of Ukraine, a single economic complex has developed"*.

- DONBAS NEEDS UKRAINE FOR ITS PROSPERITY.

Russia does not take care of Donbass. It is becoming a gray zone — another Abkhazia — with no water supply. Under Ukraine, however, it was different: *"Donetsk began to develop and became a super cool European city"*.

- AT THE BEGINNING OF INDEPENDENCE, THE DONBAS ECONOMY WAS IN DECLINE.

Older respondents who lived in the USSR for a long time say that Donbass began

to decline under Ukraine: *"Four out of nine mines in Horlivka closed in the 1990s"*. Complaints about the economic situation and people's distress are more noticeable: *"The 1990s were a big crisis, and the 2000s were an even bigger crisis"*. Complaints about the information policy in independent Ukraine are less common than in other narratives.

- "BACKSTAGE DEALS" OF THE UKRAINIAN AUTHORITIES AND THE DONETSK ELITE.

The problems of the Donetsk region and the poor economic and cultural situation are associated with the distribution of spheres of influence between the elites: *"There was a certain pact concluded between Kyiv and the Donetsk elites in the 1990s. So that Kyiv would not interfere in local life"*.

THE "UKRAINIAN-CENTRIC" NARRATIVE: SUMMARY

This is the story of the Donetsk region, a Ukrainian region that has experienced and continues to experience tremendous pressure from the USSR and modern-day Russia. This pressure has made the region stronger in some ways but has also destroyed it to a large extent.

This Cossack and Turkic region's "golden age" occurred at the turn of the 20th century when Europeans invested in local industries. However, this period of growth, similar to the development of the "Wild West," was replaced by Soviet repression. This repression included the Holodomor, which exterminated Ukrainians, and

the resettlement of controversial people from all over the empire.

After the decline of the 1990s and increased Russian influence, a second "golden age" came to the region, lasting until 2014 in much of the region and manifesting more strongly in unoccupied territories until 2022, when Ukraine was in control. The influence of Soviet power changed some of the region's residents' habits, but not their nature. Generally, they are similar to Ukrainians in other regions and have positive traits, such as being hard workers.

The worst consequence of this influence was the emergence of pro-Russian collaborators and indifferent citizens among the Donetsk residents. Opposition to this is characteristic of this narrative as well as the national narrative of "Civil Unity."

The Ukrainian language and culture have always existed in the Donetsk region, even if they were oppressed. The younger generation is embracing Ukrainian culture. Because of this, the narrative shows a great deal of resentment toward Ukrainians from other regions who treat IDPs badly.

Comparative characteristics of
the narratives:

**THE "DECONSTRUCTION OF THE
SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE"**

"DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE": IDENTITY

THIS NARRATIVE ALSO MENTIONS THE GREAT INDUSTRIAL PAST, THE HONOR OF LABOR, DRAWING PARALLELS WITH THE *AMERICAN DREAM* (EVEN IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW YORK IN THE DONETSK REGION). THE DONETSK PEOPLE DIFFER IN THAT THEY CAN BE NEGOTIATED WITH, AND TRUST DOES NOT EVEN NEED WRITTEN REINFORCEMENT

- **HARDWORKING.**

In the "Deconstruction" narrative, the emphasis on industry, dynasties, assembly lines, powerful work, and mutual assistance is most pronounced. Here, it is presented as an advantage: "We are, have been, and will be industrialists. From the point of view of current Ukraine, this is an invaluable treasure. The Donetsk culture is built on constructing large structures and rebuilding. This is not due to innovations, in which Donetsk is weaker, but rather, large systems and mass production on the assembly line. This is important to preserve". **At the same time, they mention SMART work (Work Smart, Not Hard). Again, associations with the frontier are noticeable: "All our stories are about a person who came**

with nothing or was born into a very poor family. It resembles the 'American Dream,' but it was never called a dream. It was the norm to work in one place your whole life. It's a normalized history of dynasties. In other words, it's okay to grow up there and do what your father and grandfather did".

- **RELIABLE.**

Promises are important; they are kept, and businesses are built on them. "In Donbas, giving one's word is important. Business relationships can be established with a handshake and a few words, without contracts". **Responsibility for 'your own people' is just as important.**

- **TRAUMATIZED.**

The experience of war and migration

distinguishes residents of the Donetsk region from others, and this was true even before 2022. They recognize "their own people" by their reaction to loud sounds. They also mention the black humor inherent in people with that experience: "What separated me from other Ukrainians, but not in a bad sense, rather in the usual sense, is the issue of war".

- **SOVIET IDENTITY.**

It is discussed with a sense of sadness and condemnation: "A full Soviet scoop in their heads". Often, this term refers to marginalization. "These are people of rather low intelligence who simply came to work in factories or mines. There may be widespread drunkenness, and they have a very low civic position".

" DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE": IDENTITY

THE CONTRAST WITH WESTERN UKRAINE IS EMPHASIZED, BUT NOT IN WORLDVIEW, RATHER IN CUSTOMS. EASTERNERS ARE MORE PRAGMATIC AND BELIEVE IN HARD WORK MORE THAN GOD. THEY ARE CALLED "SIMPLE PEOPLE" BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE A DOUBLE BOTTOM. LANGUAGE ISSUES ARE MENTIONED WITH UNDERSTANDING OF TRIGGERS FOR RESIDENTS OF OTHER REGIONS

- OTHER HOUSEHOLD CULTURE AND TRADITIONS.

The traditions in the Donetsk region are different, and this narrative actively emphasizes that difference. This becomes especially noticeable when moving away from the region. *"When I started talking to people from western Ukraine, I couldn't understand why we were so different. If we talk about the West, it's the religious factor".* They also mention other differences, such as in movements *("You can immediately tell if someone is our fellow countrymen by the way they move")* or in construction. *"Room planning. In the west, everything is built around a stove, unlike in our homes. We have good quality, but here, if a brick falls out, they have to make it themselves".*

- RUSSIAN-SPEAKING IDENTITY.

The culture of Donbas has been significantly influenced by Russian culture. The region's Ukrainian speakers also use words with Russian roots. *"People are often Russian-speaking, and even if they speak Ukrainian, they may use some Russian phrases. This shows me that a person was Russian-speaking in the past and must be from the east or Donbas".*

- DIALECT.

A peculiar dialect with words such as "tormozok" or "trempeľ" is mentioned, but it is recognized that it is not specifically Donetsk; it is also common in neighboring regions. *"If you put a Kharkiv resident, a Donetsk resident, and a Dnipro resident side by side, you won't immediately notice a difference".*

- VICTIMS OF PROPAGANDA.

Faith in TV is explained by the flip side of being a hard worker. *"They're not lazy; they're hard workers. They never have time to analyze, so they accept everything the TV tells them. We were told on TV that Western Ukrainians eat children. When I traveled with my children to the Dnipropetrovsk region, the 'Right Sector' supposedly met me there".*

- ADAPTABILITY.

When people move to other regions, they quickly begin to feel at home there. *"I was born in the Donetsk region, but I'm a resident of Kyiv or Lviv now".* However, they remain recognizable to their fellow countrymen. *"Behavior patterns surely persist. If the person moved in adulthood, then..."*

"DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE": CONFLICT

THE NARRATIVE PREACHES DISPUTES RELATED TO IDENTITY OR EVEN THE DESIRE TO FIND IT. HOWEVER, IT BLAMES RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA, NOT THE DONBAS RESIDENTS, FOR THE SEPARATION

- PRO-UKRAINIAN VS. PRO-RUSSIAN VS. THOSE WHO DON'T SEEK UNDERSTANDING.

Unlike the Ukrainian-centric narrative, there is a noticeably calmer attitude toward those who once supported Russia: *"I clearly remember conversations in my large company where I knew at least half of the people. There was always a question when drinking beer: 'Are you pro-Ukraine or pro-Russia?'"* as well as those who failed to realize what was happening: *"Donetsk residents perceived the events of 2022 in various ways. Some tried to switch to Ukrainian and change their views and beliefs, understanding cause and effect. Others still do not realize it even now"*. Unlike the pro-Ukrainian narrative, the disputes are not about

national consciousness but rather social standards and quality of life: *"I have always jealously defended that Ukraine is better and given examples of how we are better off here"*. At the same time, intransigence is prompted rather by personal losses: *"It's hard to be kind when your son or child was killed... Or when your life is stolen from you and your city is destroyed"*.

- THOSE WHO HAVE SUCCUMBED TO PROPAGANDA VS. THOSE WHO HAVE NOT.

Rather than people's choice, propaganda is often mentioned as the reason for the emergence of the previous line of separation: *"In Kramatorsk, we are being shelled by Russia, and in Horlivka they believe that they are being shelled by Ukraine"*.

- PATRIOTS VS. COLLABORATORS.

Some express disappointment with former acquaintances who chose the other side of the war: *"I had some grudges, but not against the region. Rather, I had them against my acquaintances there. Almost all of my close friends supported the 'DPR' and Russia"*.

- THOSE WHO LEFT VS. THOSE WHO REMAINED.

Depending on their place of residence, people have different agendas and needs, but there is no discussion about the impact on public or national consciousness: *"The average resident of Torez today has been under occupation for 10 years and no longer remembers what it was like under Ukraine..."*

"DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE": CONFLICT

IN TERMS OF LANGUAGE, THE SPEAKERS OF THIS NARRATIVE ARE NOT UNAMBIGUOUS SUPPORTERS OF UKRAINIAN. THEY ALSO HAVE COMPLAINTS ABOUT PEOPLE WHO FORGET THEIR REGION

- THOSE WHO REMEMBER THEIR DONETSK REGION VS. THOSE WHO PREFER TO FORGET.

Regional identity is often tested, and this is not a complaint that is noticeable in other narratives: *"Many people, after leaving the region, prefer to completely cut off communication and erase any memories. Then there are people like me who identify with their native region".*

- UKRAINIAN-SPEAKERS VS. RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS.

While the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative includes stories about quarrels over language, this narrative presents it as exotic for Donbas. *"And then I heard*

them communicating in surzhyk for the first time. I thought, 'What is it?' We only speak Russian. I did not know that people in Donbas spoke Ukrainian". At the same time, the "foreign" language does not mean "hostile" to many Donetsk residents: "I've never met people in Donetsk who have a bad attitude toward the Ukrainian language or say, 'I really don't want to hear this language.' But it's still a foreign language".

- EUROPE – "USSR 2.0".

The presence of a civilizational abyss between the region's inhabitants is also articulated: *"The year 2014 drew a line between people who understand*

the civilized world and European values, and those who don't. And those who miss the USSR, the 'Russian world,' and Russian greatness"".

- PATRIOTS VS. PROFITEERS.

There is also resentment toward those who maneuver between the war's different sides and enrich themselves on this: *"The guys from the 14th Brigade once said that you can't serve two masters. You can't be good with us and them".*

“DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE”: THE MYTHICAL PART

THOSE WHO CARRY THIS NARRATIVE MAINTAIN THE MYTH OF THE SOVIET "GOLDEN AGE," WHICH, HOWEVER, IS RETHOUGHT BASED ON THE EVENTS THAT OCCURRED AFTER THE "EXPULSION FROM PARADISE"

- SOVIET RECONSTRUCTION.

The Soviet myth of industrialization from the 1920s to the 1930s, as well as the great reconstruction of the 1940s, remained most notable in this narrative: *"Under Soviet authorities, the industrial Donbas region developed strongly. It developed under capitalism and then under Soviet rule".*

Sometimes, the Soviet myth is repeated verbatim: *"This happened after the Great Patriotic War, when factories opened and they started extracting minerals. That's how Donbas came to be. The Great Patriotic War made it that way".* **They emphasize the development of various sectors during the Soviet era, including education.** *"The strong mathematical component was dominant in Donetsk".*

- EUROPEAN FOUNDATION.

Even the more educated proponents of this narrative acknowledge the role of European capital in the region's industrialization but still mention it less often. Unlike the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative, they see the key role of Europeans in Donbas's industrialization rather than in their cultural influence.

"Donetsk identity is the child of industrialization... the industrial base of Donetsk was established by European industrialists". **Sometimes, however, the continuity of its traditions is denied:** *"The history of the current Donbas was destroyed in World War II, and then it was created from scratch".*

- SOVIET DECLINE AND OPPRESSION.

Despite mentioning the role of the USSR in industrial development, that period is perceived negatively. *"As far as I can remember, my childhood was bad, poor, and gray. Lenin monuments were everywhere, and we were required to say that he was good".* **The Holodomor is a symbol of Soviet oppression. It is acknowledged that the famine had a significant impact on the region. However, unlike the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative, there is no emphasis on replacing Ukrainians with imported Russians.** *"The Holodomor greatly impacted the lives of people in Eastern Ukraine".*

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE: THE MYTHICAL PART

THE SPEAKERS OF THE "DECONSTRUCTION" NARRATIVE ARE GENERALLY UNAWARE OF THE UKRAINIAN ROOTS OF THE REGION; THEY ONLY MENTION THE COSSACK ERA. AS FOR THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD, LOCAL LEADERS ARE MOSTLY MENTIONED

- RUSSIAN PRESSURE DURING THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD.

According to those who carry this narrative, the amount of information pressure increased significantly in the 2000s. *"This was when Russian narratives were more actively imposed with the development of commercial television, etc."* Consequently, many young people, including the respondents' children, did not learn Ukrainian. *"We go to the movies to watch a cartoon, and I can tell he is watching it, but he doesn't understand half of it because it's in Ukrainian"*.

- REVIVAL IN THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD.

Unlike the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative, this narrative positively evaluates the development of Ukrainian identity in the 1990s: *"The beginning of independent Ukraine. If I take my childhood in the 1990s as an example, the national identity was actively spreading"*. They also positively assess the contribution of big business to economic development. *"If we talk about my native Donetsk, it's Mr. Renat Akhmetov and his enterprises, DTEK. They were the backbone of the economy there. He also acquired a football club in the 1990s, developed it, and built the Donbass Arena"*.

- UKRAINIAN ROOTS.

Like others, proponents of this narrative see the region's national roots in the Cossack era. *"Of course, we must not forget about the Cossack era. The north of the region is especially strongly associated with the Cossack era"*. The influence of medieval nomads on the region is also mentioned but not as a determining factor in the formation of a modern regional identity. *"We have a story with Polovtsian statues that is very popular in the Donetsk region. However, it did not significantly impact the current Donbas identity"*.

“DECONSTRUCTION... NARRATIVE”: RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE

PEOPLE OF THE DONETSK REGION HAVE PROBLEMS WITH INTEGRATION INTO UKRAINE, BUT DONETSK IS STILL UKRAINIAN

- **DONETSK RESIDENTS ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM OTHER UKRAINIANS.**
Donetsk residents are no different from other Ukrainians. As a rule, narrative speakers cannot say for sure what unites them with the rest of Ukraine (other narratives mention history and holidays. This narrative only states that Ukrainians are "our people".) *"Because Ukrainians live there, they are our people. They may have a different regional identity, but they are still Ukrainians".*
- **UKRAINIANS ARE BIASED AGAINST IMMIGRANTS FROM DONBAS.**
Ukrainians are captive to stereotypes that did not arise from nowhere. *"When I said that I was from Donbas, people would treat me badly. I sometimes heard them say that the war began because of us".*
- **UKRAINE'S ECONOMY DEPENDS ON DONBAS.**

As with other narratives, the need for Donbas is rooted in the Soviet legacy that integrated the region's economies. *"The Dnipropetrovsk region has metalworks, and everything is tied together by one big rope".* They emphasize the uniqueness of the Donetsk subsoil: *"The only coking coal mine in Ukraine is located in the Donetsk region".*

- **FAILED INFORMATION POLICY.**
Ukraine did not take any actions that would help people understand what the government was doing. At the same time, the government did not fulfill its promises. *"Yanukovych was the first to launch a Ukrainian-language radio station there. Before that, there had been none at all".*
- **DONETSK RESIDENTS ARE CONSIDERED TRAITORS.**
Unlike other narratives, they acknowledge

that the Donetsk people are slightly different. However, this does not justify calling them traitors: *"They spoke Russian and did not consider Russia an enemy, yet they believed that they were Ukrainians and lived in Ukraine".* They also consider the Ukrainian language problematic: *"That's a challenge even among my friends who came to Kyiv. They can't force themselves to switch to Ukrainian".*

- **UKRAINE NEEDS DONBAS FOR ITS OWN PROSPERITY.**
In contrast to other narratives, which claim that Russia does not need Donetsk, this narrative mentions that the Russians pay some attention to the Donbas economy. However, it is still isolated under occupation, and people understand this. *"They will want to travel abroad, have foreign companies, and experience development".*

"DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOVIET DONBAS NARRATIVE": SUMMARY

This is the story of a land that was once both Cossack and European. However, the Soviet reconstruction after World War II erased these attributes and began the region's history anew.

The mixture of different peoples and the concentration of large industries make the Donetsk region unique in Ukraine. Its residents possess special systemic skills and business ethics, and they have also been enriched by the grim experience of war in recent years.

Their hard work also explains their susceptibility to propaganda; after all, they simply did not have time to

understand the news—they had to work. Therefore, it is not the fault of the Donetsk people that some of them were drawn to the idea of a "Russian world."

Moreover, during Soviet and post-Soviet times, the inhabitants of this region did not pay much attention to Ukrainian life and were unaware of local Ukrainian cultural figures. Even the European founders of factories have only recently begun to be mentioned more actively.

In any case, there was an "expulsion" from this Soviet "paradise" in the 1990s, which, when viewed from the outside, no longer seems like a

paradise. Many things turned out to be different from how they seemed before. The whole "Soviet dream" is now perceived as gray and hopeless. Instead, the region had leaders who were able to bring prosperity during the new period. This happened because it is easier to develop in Ukraine than in Russia, which tries to control everything. Therefore, the occupation of the Donetsk region destroyed its chances for the future and led to a complete tragedy, forcing its inhabitants to move to other regions. There, they are unjustly blamed for inviting the war.

Comparative characteristics of
the narratives:
THE MARIUPOL NARRATIVE

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: IDENTITY

SPECIFIC LOCAL WORDS WITH TURK AND GREEK ROOTS ARE THE MOST FREQUENT SIGN OF IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION OF NEIGHBORS. TRADITIONS RECEIVE LESS ATTENTION: THEY EMERGE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INABILITY TO COMPLY WITH THEM IN SAD CASES, DUE TO SEPARATION FROM RELATIVES

- A SPECIFIC DIALECT.

People are recognized by their use of certain local words: "*trempe*" and "*zherdela*," which differ from "*apricot*." Mariupol is also characterized by words with Rumanian roots, and even people born outside the region begin to sound "local" after living there: "*There was a Russian-speaking old lady from the Urals who came to live in Mariupol. She used local Mariupol words. For example, she called the pike-perch 'sula.' 'Sula' is an Azov Greek word*". **It is the local dialect that brings home:** "*When they start speaking in a Donetsk accent, I immediately remember that yard of mine in Mariupol*".

- TRAUMATIZED BY THE WAR.

Many people talk about pain and sadness. They remember the relatives who died. They find it difficult to accept the impossibility of traditional rituals: "*It's obvious that the Russians won't do this. Not everyone was found, not everyone was identified, and not everyone was buried properly after the Mariupol blockade. Going to the cemetery is important for us, as it is for all Ukrainians. It's lost*". **But identity is characterized by the ability to talk about it together; it is a common situation:** "*You can calmly discuss such stressful issues because you are in the right context. You understand how it hurts, and you understand what's going on, at least*".

- SOME IDENTIFY AS "RATHER RUSSIANS".

The self-identification as Russians sometimes prevails over regional identity, which remains demonstrative: "*They take the Donetsk identity to show off. Of course, they consider themselves Russian. Well, how are they Donetsk people? Who are the Donetsk people anyway?*". **This is partly due to the common Soviet past:** "*They feel connected to the Soviet past, modern Russia, and modern Russian politics; they can't find themselves in any new conditions*".

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: IDENTITY

IN THE MARIUPOL NARRATIVE, RECOUNTING EVERYDAY MOMENTS EVOKES AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE CITY: THE SEA, FOOD. THEY ALSO TALK ABOUT THE MEDITATIVENESS AND SLOPPINESS OF BEHAVIOR. PEOPLE FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE DONETSK REGION DO NOT MENTION SUCH THINGS

- RESPONSIBILITY.

They note that economy, thoroughness, and responsibility are inherent qualities, though they may have developed under the influence of Ukrainian traditions.

- SLUGGISHNESS.

They are meditative, reasonable, and calm: *"When Mariupol residents come to the seaside, they don't immediately go into the water. They know the sea won't go anywhere. They just look at the horizon for a while and enjoy being there".*

- TRADITIONS.

Greek influences in cooking and the gradual revival of traditions and identity. *"Pumpkin pie, 'shumush'... I think it could be as popular as pizza if it were promoted as street food or in restaurants".*

- CIVIC ACTIVITY.

They discuss environmental protests in the city and oppose big businesses. They are surprised because before that, Mariupol was perceived as apathetic: *"It was very unexpected because we believed that no one would ever protest here. However, there was a huge rally. As I recall, the activists managed to shut down the most harmful enterprise in the city".*

- LESS EXPRESSIVE SYMBOLS INHERENT IN OTHER NARRATIVES.

Hard work is emphasized in the context of factory work, which can lead to fatigue. In general, though, the image is less pronounced than in the other two "big" narratives. Here, they imagine "a simple Ukrainian man who is going home from the factory by trolleybus. He is tired and dirty." They also mention marginality: *"...and he is not only tired but also drunk..."* There are also complaints about the "convict" culture, which has corrupted many of their compatriots.

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: CONFLICT

INITIALLY, MARIUPOL RESIDENTS WERE PROVING TO THE REST OF DONBAS THAT THEY WERE SEPARATE, BOTH GEOGRAPHICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY. LATER, THE MARIUPOL COMMUNITY SPLIT DUE TO DIFFERENCES IN WORLDVIEW AND (PARTIALLY) CHOICE OF PLACE OF RESIDENCE

- AZOV SEA REGION VS. DONBAS.

Although there is no conflict, there are pronounced differences in geography and economy between subregions. These differences emphasize the contrast between the "people of the sea" and the "people of the steppe/spoil tips." Other narratives do not highlight these differences: "If they say 'Donetsk people,' it refers to Donbas, i.e., the Donetsk Carboniferous Basin. However, Mariupol is in the Azov Sea region". "Industry, miners, and European capital built something in the wild steppe. This is not exactly Mariupol's history".

- SUPPORTERS OF UKRAINE VS. SUPPORTERS OF RUSSIA.

Some respondents attribute this line of division to the degree of self-realization: "Those who were unable to progress in

the 1990s and 2000s must have remained pro-Russian. Those who were able to achieve something are probably pro-Ukrainian". Others attribute it to generational differences: "Older people who had a happy youth in the Soviet Union still have a Soviet worldview. They have a stance that Russia is a great country". No one mentions a connection to the "core" choice of the people (as in the Ukrainian-centric narrative). Nevertheless, a Ukrainian vector is noticeable, in contrast to the fluctuations in the "Deconstruction".

- THOSE WHO LEFT VS. THOSE WHO RETURNED.

A forced stay in occupied Mariupol does not divide the community as much as forced emigration does. They prefer not to think about the growing divide

between them, as is seen in other narratives; the year 2022 is still fresh in their memory. However, the military is prejudiced against Ukrainian men who stay abroad without good reason. Patriots generally have prejudices against people who return to the occupied area and start collaborating: "Our mothers would walk together with us, children, sitting in strollers. Both of our mothers are teachers. My mother now works at a Mariupol school and teaches online. But the mother of an old friend returned to Mariupol. Well, she returned. Okay. But the fact that she started teaching again bothers me". "Those outside Mariupol but still in Ukraine don't concern me. They also work, but I have a negative attitude towards men abroad..."

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: CONFLICT

SPECIFIC LINES OF DIVISION INCLUDE RETROSPECTIVE QUARRELS AROUND THE ATTITUDE TO THE AZOV BATTALION AS A SYMBOL OF THE REGION'S RESISTANCE. THERE ARE ALSO CONFLICTS OVER HOUSING RENTALS AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE PAINFUL LOSS OF THEIR HOUSING

- THE AZOV BATTALION: THOSE FOR WHOM THEY ARE PATRIOTS VS. THOSE FOR WHOM THEY ARE "NAZIS".

Due to the demonization and prejudice against the Azov Battalion, there has been no unity among the region's residents regarding the defenders of Mariupol since 2014. *"The main narratives in Mariupol were against Azov. Anyone who spoke out against Azov was hired, and so on".* This was quite noticeable against the backdrop of problems countering propaganda: *"Pro-Russian individuals and those who succumbed to propaganda in our region were all in that bubble until 2014, until — thank God — Ukrainian troops from the Azov Battalion were able to push back the occupiers".*

- "HOUSING ISSUE" AS A CONFLICT FACTOR FOR IDPS.

People complain about the inadequate housing for IDPs and about profiteers who take advantage of difficult living conditions: *"There are a lot of empty apartments in the country that are offered at very speculative prices".*

- THE EAST OF UKRAINE VS. THE WEST OF UKRAINE.

The previous conflict is exacerbated by the Easterners' usual lack of patriotism. Because accusations of this, there's a grudge against the Ukrainian West as a whole: *"I don't understand the criticism from the Galicians: "Why didn't the Frankivsk People's Republic emerge?""; "There*

are many grievances against those who left the relatively safe region for social benefits in Europe. At the same time, they rent out their houses to IDPs at excessive prices".

- UKRAINIAN-SPEAKERS VS. RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS.

Unlike the speakers of the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative, Mariupol residents justify their Russian-speaking compatriots based on their victim status: *"They're criticized for speaking Russian in everyday life, and conflicts begin. They are already traumatized by the war and the Russians. They know better than those in western Ukraine who the enemy is".*

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: MYTHICAL PART

MARIUPOL RESIDENTS NOTE THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK CULTURE AND THE ANCIENT UKRAINIAN ROOTS OF THE COSSACK ERA ON THE REGION'S HISTORY. IN THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL IDENTITY, THE SUBREGION IS NOT CONSIDERED PART OF THE "INDUSTRIAL DONBAS"

- GREEK ROOTS.

The narrative mentions the Greek settlers of the Azov Sea region more often than the European industrial capital. *"There has still been Greek influence". They emphasize the Azov Sea region's different historical background compared to the rest of the Donetsk region.*

- SOVIET DECLINE AND OPPRESSION.

One of the main themes in accounts of this period is the suppression of the Greek movement. *"We had a campaign in Stalin's time, in the 1930s, against the 'nationalist Greek underground'". They note the forced Russification of Ukrainians rather than the physical replacement by imported Russians. "I have a Russified surname. It was Ukrainian originally, but my great-grandfather had already been Russified".*

- RUSSIAN PRESSURE DURING THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD.

Those who carry the narrative characterize this pressure as "soft power". *"After 1991, much money was poured into propaganda. When I was in school, I could feel it. I seriously thought that... Yushchenko is a jerk; here's our president; and so on. Well, that did indeed happen".* Like the proponents of the "Deconstruction" narrative, they regret the destruction of *"that nostalgia for the industrial past"* by the Russian invasion.

- REVIVAL IN THE INDEPENDENCE PERIOD.

Unlike the Ukrainian-centric narrative, they positively evaluate the period of independence in the 1990s in terms of identity development. They deny the separateness of the Donetsk region at

that time in this regard: *"In the 1990s, specifically in Mariupol in the Donetsk region, we had no problems with the Ukrainian language, culture, or songs because they were quite common in Ukraine".*

- UKRAINIAN ROOTS.

They acknowledge that Ukrainians, along with Greeks and other ethnic groups, have long lived in the region: *"Cities were founded or developed under the influence of foreigners, but before that, there were absolutely Ukrainian Cossack villages".* However, unlike other narratives, they do not attach any sacred significance to this fact. *"There is another point of view that it was the Ukrainians who were the first. Well, I guess it doesn't matter after all this time".*

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE

UKRAINIANS DON'T HELP MARIUPOL RESIDENTS; THEY REPROACH THEM FOR SPEAKING RUSSIAN. UKRAINIANS, UNLIKE MARIUPOL RESIDENTS, WERE NOT THERE TO SURVIVE THE HORRORS OF 2022, WHICH WERE EXPERIENCED BY THE IDPS FROM THE SUBREGION

- **MARIUPOL RESIDENTS ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF UKRAINIANS.**

Contrary to the Ukrainian-centric narrative, they do not mention a shared history, but they do mention shared holidays. Ukrainians are Ukrainians everywhere; there is nothing special about Mariupol Ukrainians: *"The same holidays were celebrated under the same flags. The same anthem was played".* People in villages are especially similar: *"In rural regions, in all these villages, there is no difference between Ukrainian narratives in the Zaporizhzhia region, or in the Dnipropetrovsk or Donetsk regions".*

- **IDPS HAVE BEEN ABANDONED.**

The brutal story of escaping Mariupol in 2022 sets this narrative apart: people left under terrible conditions, sometimes

with nothing at all. Yet, Ukraine does nothing for them. *"How are the IDPs supported here? Not at all!"* However, they organize and support each other. *"Communities create theatrical performances, publish books, reflect, and write journalism".* IDPs must pay for their own housing, look for work, and adapt. *"On top of everything, some health problems have emerged in this third year of the war".*

- **DONETSK PEOPLE ARE CONSIDERED TRAITORS.**

Ukrainians do not like the Donetsk people and are proud to speak Ukrainian: *"They point out our Russian language use in everyday life, while people are traumatized by the war and Russians. These people know better than those in western Ukraine who the enemy is".* At the same time, it is difficult for

Donetsk residents to constantly speak Ukrainian: *"Honestly, with my mother, who is 70 years old, I speak Russian".*

- **FIGHTING THE SOVIET LEGACY.**

Ukraine paid little attention to overcoming Russian propaganda. People did not feel that the country was different. Only the money bills changed: *"Were there any attempts by Ukraine to control the information space in the Donetsk region? No".*

- **UKRAINE NEEDS DONBASS FOR THE REGION'S PROSPERITY.**

Ukraine perceives Donbas as its territory and its people, but Russia sees them as distant and unimportant borderlands: *"if they redraw the borders, God forbid... then instantly both Crimea and Donbas will become unnecessary. And that will be in deep trouble!"*.

MARIUPOL NARRATIVE: SUMMARY

Mariupol and its surroundings differ greatly from the rest of the Donetsk region. Its inhabitants have ties to both the sea and heavy industry. Additionally, Greek influence is evident among them, particularly in language and culture, especially cooking.

The city was built on the labor of Ukrainian and Greek workers, whom the Soviet authorities Russified and repressed. The city lived in the heavy, yet meditative, rhythm of everyday factory life.

When Russia began the war in 2014, most self-aware Mariupol residents took a clear pro-Ukrainian stance, even though they had not been particularly interested in their homeland before. However, there were enough marginal or elderly people who supported the "Russian world." There are also many quarrels regarding the perception of the Azov Battalion as a unit closely connected with the city.

In any case, when the Azov Battalion liberated the city in 2014, a new chapter began. Festivals were

organized, and the urban space was reshaped. But this short-lived idyll was destroyed by the full-scale invasion that decimated the city and its inhabitants.

Mariupol residents experienced especially bitter war trauma, having to survive the terrible departure from the besieged city. However, other Ukrainians pay insufficient attention to this trauma. They don't care about IDPs and also demand that they communicate in Ukrainian.

Comparative characteristics of
narratives:

Peripheral narratives

THE PERIPHERAL NARRATIVE OF THE AZOV SEA GREEKS: SUMMARY

THE NARRATIVE EMPHASIZES THE AUTOCHTHONOUS STATUS OF THE URUMS AND RUMEANS IN UKRAINE, WHO SUFFER MOST FROM ASSIMILATION

- **IDENTITY: HARD-WORKING, ATTACHED TO THE COMMUNITY.**

The Azov Sea Greeks distinguish themselves from both the Slavic population of the Donbas and the Greeks from Greece. Additionally, there is an internal division between Greek-speaking Rumeans and Turkic-speaking Urums. However, these two groups share a sense of commonality: *"We always went to each other's villages for holidays, because our dances and cuisine are the same"*. Their identity is based on attachment to local communities that are often already destroyed: *"There is this idea of family. It's not just mother, father, and children; it's also relatives and cousins. They want to maintain a sense of kinship to stay in these villages. They also want to maintain the continuity of tradition"*.

Rural communities had important traditions: *"It is better to marry people from nearby villages. This is because they tried to preserve wealth in the community"*. The distinctive features are mentioned: *"They are good hosts in a village, and good workers in a city. They are not lazy"*.

- **CONFLICT: ASSIMILATION.**

Those who carry the Azov Greek narrative do not emphasize conflicts within or outside the community, but rather, they emphasize the loss of identity due to assimilation, particularly among those who left rural communities or remained in occupied territories: *"Those who remain in Russia will eventually be subjected to increasing assimilation by the Russians. Those who left for Greece will be subjected to assimilation by the Greeks"*.

- **MYTHICAL PART: A SERIES OF TRAGEDIES LEADING TO ASSIMILATION.**

The Azov Greeks have a holistic national narrative tied to the territory. Ethnogenesis is based on different peoples of the Crimea: *"It could be ethnic Greeks, Goths, Alans, and Turks of various nationalities"*. Their origin in Crimea establishes their indigenous status: *"This is the autochthonous population of Ukraine, they originated here as Urums and Rumeans"*. They are believed to be genetically similar to the Crimean Tatars, whose nation was formed from the same components: *"Those who converted to Islam simply recognized themselves as Crimean Tatars"*.

THE PERIPHERAL NARRATIVE OF THE AZOV SEA GREEKS: A SUMMARY

THE HISTORY OF THE URUMS AND RUMEANS IS A SERIES OF TRAGEDIES, FROM FORCED DISPLACEMENT TO THE CURRENT SIGNIFICANT LOSS OF IDENTITY

- MYTHICAL PART (CONTINUED).

Subsequently, in the Russian Empire times, they were resettled in the Azov Sea region: *"Previously, under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, it was believed that the Greeks had been rescued from the Tatar yoke. Now, scientists have revisited this idea, and the prevailing point of view is that it was a forced resettlement, sometimes even compared to deportation"*. Respondents mention that their ancestors settled on the sites of evicted Cossack settlements. Assimilation was Russian policy during both imperial and Soviet times, particularly through the use of Orthodoxy, which became the reason for resettlement: *"In the time of Metropolitan Ignatius, who brought us to the Azov Sea region, it was believed that we were much closer to the Russians because we were people of the same*

religion. But this was not the case. Culturally, we were no closer". During the USSR era, repressions were added: *"Collectivization and the so-called Greek operation of 1937 caused a lot of damage"*, as well as the deprivation of the rights: *"If you were recorded as Greek, you had fewer educational and career opportunities, so many people tried to Russify or Ukrainianize their names"*. However, even under such conditions, it was possible to preserve its traditions: *"Starohnativka is known for its free wrestling school, "kuresh", and many famous athletes and names, since the times of the USSR, and then Ukraine"*.

- **RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE: ONLY UKRAINE CAN PROTECT THE AZOV GREEK CULTURE FROM DESTRUCTION.** Respondents emphasize that the Urums and the Rumeans, along with their culture, are integral parts of Ukraine:

"Their heritage, language, and cuisine are part of Ukrainian culture". They note that at the time of independence, the Azov Greeks were noticeably integrated into Ukrainian politics and the economy: *"We always wanted to introduce our culture to the Ukrainians in the Donetsk region, and tell our story in Kyiv or Lviv"*. Respondents note that Russians are deliberately trying to find local people who will say on camera that they are supported. However, not all Azov Greeks are pro-Russian: *"There must be active propaganda that these are all our people in our territory so that people in the occupied territories do not feel that they have been forgotten"*. According to the respondents, it is in Ukraine, not Russia, that the culture of this people can be better preserved.

PERIPHERAL NARRATIVE OF THE NORTHERN DONETSK REGION: SUMMARY

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE ONCE-GLORIOUS COSSACK LAND, WHICH MADE MANY MISTAKES AND MUST NOW REDEEM THEM

- **IDENTITY: UKRAINIAN AUTOCHTHONOUS PEOPLE OF THE DONETSK REGION.**

According to this narrative, the ancient origins of the cities in the Northern Donetsk subregion are emphasized: *"We Bakhmutians are indigenous. We're like Native Americans, you know? I am not a Donetsk resident or a Donbas resident; I am a Bakhmutian"*. At the same time, the Ukrainian roots of the subregion's inhabitants, who underwent Russification, are emphasized: *"I believe it's not enough yet, but I'm moving in this direction. I want to be Ukrainian"*.

- **CONFLICT: DONBAS VS. NORTHERN DONETSK SUBREGION.**

According to those who tell this story, the northern Donetsk subregion suffers from being subordinate to the Donbas, which is unaware of its national identity, and its establishment: *"They sold the city... to the scoundrels of the Party of Regions... Bakhmut's population was 70,000*

residents prior to 2014. Of those, 12,000 were members of the Party of Regions".

Local citizens did not resist this:

"Education and culture workers still voted, because they were given \$100, and the rest did not matter".

- **MYTHICAL PART: RUSSIFICATION OF THE COSSACK REGION.**

500 years ago, the territory of the Northern Donetsk subregion was the intersection of Turkic tribes and Cossacks: *"This is the true grassroots Ukraine, part of Zaporizhzhya Cossack lands"*. The respondents emphasize that many Ukrainian figures come from this region: *"We did not just have Hryhori Skovoroda... He taught here. There's also Sosyura and Oleksa Tykhyi, who lived in Bakhmut. He was an associate of Stus, a famous human rights activist and colossal figure. This is Serhii Krymskyi, a philosopher. He was born here. There was a Ukrainian rebel army here; the*

OUN was in the Donbas!" At the same time, with the collapse of the USSR, Russian pressure did not disappear. Instead, it joined forces with the local criminal authorities: *"People were anti-Ukrainian in both education and culture. The main thing for them was to ensure that the Party of Regions received 120% of the vote in the elections. Who are the honorary citizens of Bakhmut? Yosif Kobzon"*.

- **RELATIONS WITH UKRAINE: GUILT FOR THE WAR.**

As an integral part of Ukraine, the Ukrainians of the Donetsk region must atone for their mistakes before their motherland: *"We, the inhabitants of this region, are all guilty for allowing blood to be shed. We need to atone. I came to western Ukraine and immediately went to the Ukrainian Armed Forces' volunteer assistance center"*.

RELATED STORIES
(common for all versions of
the national narrative)

THE IMAGE OF THE DONETSK REGION

THE INDUSTRIAL ASPECT BLENDS WITH NATURE AND IS COMPLEMENTED BY THE CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE DIFFERENT PEOPLES WHO SETTLED IN THE REGION

- NATURE.

This image appears most frequently in all narratives except "Deconstruction". However, the images mentioned are different. They depend on one's place of residence: the steppe, the sea, or the green city. Thus, Mariupol residents emphasize seaside views: *"The combination of industry, steppe, and sea"*. Residents of the Northern Donetsk subregion emphasize the diversity of landscapes: *"I live in the best part of the Donetsk region. There are forests, steppes, fields, rivers, and a lake"*. Urban landscapes are also noticeable in the north, especially in Bakhmut: *"They say we have the best city in the world. It's green"*. The central part has unexpected descriptions: *"It's a kind of urban nature, and it's extraordinary. It has such sharp lines; some may be rough"*. There is also an emphasis on the difficult

environmental situation: *"The air is dry and a little dirty. You sneeze more often than in Kyiv"*.

- MINERS' REGION.

The "Deconstruction" narrative emphasized this point, referencing spoil tips as visual images and reflecting on Miners' Day: *"Yes, I congratulate everyone on Miner's Day because we have many mines"*. However, the proponents of the Ukrainian-centric narrative also talk about this in an artistic manner: *"Spoil tips and sunflowers. This is such a very traditional Donetsk region"*, or in scientific terms: *"Industrial landscapes, large and small cities with factories and mines, and the mythologized image of a worker"*.

- INDUSTRIAL REGION.

In non-mining regions, heavy industry is more often described: *"It's cool when raw*

coal comes from Donetsk, and raw ore comes from Kryvyi Rih, and we work with both in a full cycle", *"the sun rises from the factory for almost all [Mariupol residents]"*. The myth that "Donbas fed the whole of Ukraine" is also mentioned.

- MULTICULTURALISM.

All narratives emphasize that people of different nationalities lived together in Donbas and treated each other with tolerance: *"The Donetsk region contained many cultures. It did not become poorer because of that, but on the contrary"*. For some, however, this multiculturalism means a lack of Ukrainian foundation: *"There are no deep-rooted traditions. We had a village that wasn't really a village. It was a state farm, a Soviet farm. It's like a Lego set. Everything was there: There were Georgians, Ossetians, Ukrainians, and Russians"*.

THE IMAGE OF THE DONETSK REGION

THE FLOURISHING OF DONETSK IN 2012 UNDER AKHMETOV 'S PROJECT AND THE FLOURISHING OF FREE TERRITORIES AFTER 2014 UNDER THE PRINCIPLE OF DECENTRALIZATION ARE COMBINED WITH THE FEELING OF RUIN AND POVERTY

- FOOTBALL AND THE DONBASS ARENA.

The football theme is especially noticeable in the "Deconstruction" narrative. Often, this is the first image they mention: *"This is the Shakhtar team; this is the football capital of Ukraine"*. Sometimes, R.Akhmetov is mentioned as the owner of the stadium, as well as Ukrainian musicians such as Okean Elzy, who performed there. Akhmetov and the Prokofiev Airport became **symbols of Donetsk's prosperity, which some respondents say occurred in 2012.**

- "THE GOOD SHUBIN".

This mythical character is known even outside the mining region, but he is especially known in Donetsk. *"Shubin is a mine gnome whom the miners asked for safety"*.

- FEATURES OF SMALL CITIES.

Respondents emphasized that each city had its own system of symbols. For example, Donetsk had roses and Mertsalov's palm, Makiivka had a water spring, and Svyatogorsk had the Lavra monastery: *"In the Donetsk region, they celebrate City Day. For them, it is more important than the regional holiday"*.

- ACHIEVEMENTS OF FREE TERRITORIES AFTER 2014.

Both Mariupol residents and North Donetsk subregion residents emphasize that Ukraine changed the appearance of industrial cities after the outbreak of the war in the Donbas: *"Over the past 5-6 years, especially since decentralization took place, the city has flourished, and life in Ukraine has been good"*. A new generation of youth is also mentioned.

- BUT ALSO DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND POVERTY.

Along with the urban achievements, they mention the decline of industry, especially after the war began. *"First and foremost, it's war and ruin", but also before that: "I only have bad associations because I had no prospects and was in poverty"*.

- OTHER SYMBOLS.

Other symbols of the region that are mentioned less often include corruption and cronyism, agrarian traditions, and famous cultural figures from the Donetsk region, such as V. Stus, S. Prokofiev, and V. Nekrasov, as well as cultural events held there. Chebureks are mentioned as an element of the Azov Sea subregion's image, as well as a bottle of moonshine, which was traditionally drunk after a shift.

HISTORY OF THE DONETSK REGION IN 2014-2025

THE WAR THAT BEGAN IN 2014 ACCELERATED THE DEGRADATION OF THE OCCUPIED REGIONS, BUT THE UNOCCUPIED REGIONS WERE GIVEN A CHANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND UKRAINIZATION. THIS OPPORTUNITY WAS DESTROYED AFTER 2022

- **DEGRADATION OF THE REGION.**

Residents of the long-occupied regions describe the deterioration of Donetsk and other cities: *"Russia is a step backwards. It is ruin and collapse, even disruption of the water supply. I recently heard a joke that goes, 'If you remove the soft sign from the word Donetsk, the water disappears along with it'". As for the North Donetsk subregion and Mariupol, the destruction began in 2022, and it was total. "Now my city is gone. The Russian world came there and erased it from the ground".*

- **UNITING THE DONETSK REGION RESIDENTS.**

According to most respondents, residents of parts of the Donetsk region that were unoccupied until 2022 experienced extraordinary self-

organization. *"We see how teenagers who spent 16 or 17 years in Mariupol before the invasion and then left have become socially active and begun volunteering. We immediately recognize them as being from Mariupol".*

Immigrants from the Donetsk region have united in new places: *"The year 2014 brought together those who left. This Donetsk community arose in many cities in Ukraine". At the same time, these associations were often based on patriotism. "It was a great and unexpected discovery for me, as well as the number of people who identified as Ukrainian in 2014 and 2022".*

- **UKRAINIZATION OF THE REGION.**

The sense of being Ukrainian also extends to linguistic and cultural aspects. *"The Russians came to 'liberate'*

us, supposedly to protect Russian speakers, and many of us Russian speakers switched to Ukrainian". **Donetsk residents have also gained experience living in other regions and interacting with their residents.** *"Those who return to the Donetsk region will be completely different. They are people who have already received assistance. They got the opportunity to realize who the real enemy is. For many, someone in their family died. The Donetsk region is already integrated into Ukraine at the human level". All of this has naturally resulted in support for the army. "Many residents of the region took up arms and went to fight, and volunteers began helping the military more. Compared to 2014, this assistance has changed significantly".*

HISTORY OF THE DONETSK REGION IN 2014-2025

DONETSK RESIDENTS HAS DIAMETRICALLY DIFFERENT ASSESSMENTS OF THE ATTITUDE OF UKRAINIANS TO IDPS. HOWEVER, THEIR ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IS UNAMBIGUOUSLY NEGATIVE

- THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA.

In the occupied territories, however, Russian propaganda is unrestrained. There, it is said that *"children are probably already lost because they have been in school for ten years, where they are not formed as Ukrainians, but as anti-Ukrainians"*. This impact is all the more powerful on the elderly.

- THE GOVERNMENT ABANDONED IDPS.

The government abandoned IDPs. There is a noticeable complaint in all narratives about the authorities not taking proper care of people who left their homes because of the war. *"We wait in lines for small amounts of money for our destroyed homes, and we understand that our state does not need*

us. This unites us". This affects not only the quality of life, but also its effectiveness. *"Mariupol residents do not have the opportunity to realize their potential because the assistance was inadequate"*. There are also complaints about ordinary citizens: *"Kyiv residents may not rent apartments to Donetsk residents. These people are a gift to any community. They mostly create new jobs"*.

- ON THE OTHER HAND, THE GOVERNMENT HELPED.

Those who support the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative have an opposite opinion: Ukraine helped IDPs. *"The war showed that Ukrainians are very humane. The way society came together to help IDPs is an example of that"*.

- HARASSMENT AND FEAR ON THE TOT.

Regarding the temporarily occupied territories, everyone's assessment is clear: *"I occasionally follow Telegram channels from my occupied hometown. They are afraid of conscription notices. Where the Russian military is deployed, especially if they are Chechens, it's a waste of money, fighting in the city, and rising prices. They fear that the Ukrainian army will attack the deployment points because they are in residential areas"*.

HISTORY OF THE DONETSK REGION IN 2014-2025

LIVING UNDER OCCUPATION IS BAD, BUT LIVING OUTSIDE THE REGION MEANS ASSIMILATION

- **FORCED LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION.**

Respondents do not always blame their fellow countrymen who remained under occupation: *"Those who remained... I consider them mostly hostages. We understand that millions of people cannot leave. Some people stay anyway. Some have businesses, some have parents or small children".* Under these conditions, life is returning to occupied cities such as Donetsk: *"was there in*

2019, even before the full-scale invasion. Of course, the city has revived somewhat, and many people have returned. There were even traffic jams". However, the return of life is often only a facade, as in Mariupol: *"They just live there. They get two pensions... And they say all the time that the city is being rebuilt. In fact, only the facades of houses are being rebuilt".*

- **ASSIMILATION OF DONETSK PEOPLE.**

Although some respondents describe the formation of IDP communities in Ukrainian cities, notable mentions of assimilation also exist: *"They have actually moved throughout Ukraine and are not concentrated in one area... Therefore, we will simply assimilate into the Kyiv culture".*

THE IMAGE OF THE FUTURE OF THE DONETSK REGION

ALTHOUGH THE RETURN OF THE ENTIRE DONETSK REGION TO UKRAINE IS ALMOST INDISPUTABLY EXPECTED, THE FUTURE SCENARIOS ARE ALMOST EQUALLY DIVIDED BETWEEN OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

- **THE DONETSK REGION WILL RETURN TO UKRAINE.**

This is emphasized by the majority of speakers of all narratives, as well as by the fact that we must take back what is ours. The residents of the occupied territories have no choice: *"They have no future in Russia. They will soon be convinced of this"*.

- **THERE WILL BE A DECLINE.**

This idea is somewhat more prevalent in the "Deconstruction" narrative: *"We, the people of the destroyed and ruined cities, will not return to our past lives"*. Even the current residents of the occupied lands will not be able to live there. *"People will die as a result of hostilities or an epidemic due to a lack of good food, medicine, and access to medical care. There will simply be a gradual depopulation"*. Entrepreneurs

add that it will no longer make sense to invest in this region, and environmental activists say that nature will soon reclaim everything lost to industry.

- **ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND EUROPEAN RECONSTRUCTION.**

This picture is most often presented by the authorities and CSO people. *"It will be boldly stated, but it will be a Ukrainian Silicon Valley"*. They emphasize the inefficiency of the old economic model: *"There are hopes that Donbas will never be a coal region again. All mines in the occupied territories have been closed. They've been unprofitable since at least the late 1980s"*. There is hope that Western assistance will contribute to reconstruction. *"When Ukraine enters... Europe, and the civilized world enters, they will help. I am sure of it"*. Some entrepreneurs are optimistic as well: *"I*

think many would like to rebuild because I understand that the international community will allocate funds for it. Then it will be very noisy here. There will be equipment, people, and foreigners, and the world's attention will be focused on this region".

- **RESTORATION OF JUSTICE.**

Different respondents use this phrase to mean different things: the punishment of collaborators, filtration, and the recovery of reparations from Russia. *"The restoration of the Donetsk region should be at the aggressor's expense, just as the Germans once built houses and factories in Ukraine"*. They also emphasize the ideological transformation of those who live under occupation and did not collaborate.

THE IMAGE OF THE FUTURE OF THE DONETSK REGION

MANY PREDICTIONS ARE TIED TO HOW TO RETURN PEOPLE AND FIND UNDERSTANDING WITH THEM, AND WHAT WILL OCCUR IF THIS DOES NOT HAPPEN

- **SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING.**

According to respondents, the key to peace is overcoming the lines of division. Some emphasize the opposition between those who left and those who remained in the occupied territories.

"Without establishing new pragmatic connections through shared experiences, it will be impossible to bridge the gap at the grassroots level". Others focus on the differences between the Donetsk region and the rest of Ukraine. *"We need to understand that reintegration is not a one-time event that makes everyone feel good. It's hard work that will last for many years".* At the same time, mutual understanding does not reject justice.

"We are responsible for even those 'wrong' Ukrainians among us. We have a judgment to make on them. We have to guide them, and this is a heavy burden for the state and nation".

- **WE NEED TO START WITH SOCIAL SECURITY.**

In order to return, IDPs must understand what awaits them: *"Ukraine must provide conditions that make people want to return".*

- **CONTINUE WITH CULTURAL POLICY.**

The message about working with the occupied lands is also notable: *"Our task is to maintain communication, a sense of belonging, and a sense of memory and purpose among these people, thereby bringing the de-occupation closer".*

However, this process should not only take place at the state level: *"We must kill the Ruzzists, you know? And the main thing is to kill the Ruzzists within ourselves".*

- **THE LONG OCCUPATION OR THE LOSS OF THE DONETSK REGION.**

Some speakers of the "Ukrainian-

centric" narrative express extreme pessimism: *"There are people who will not live to return to their native land".* However, even if the region is completely lost, it will not flourish: *"Russia does not need Donbas as an industrial region. It is a buffer zone... a lifelong springboard where all the useless people gather to die".*

- **DEPOPULATION.**

There is a tangible pessimistic mood about the unlikelihood of the population returning to the Donetsk region: *"People will come to say goodbye to the past and leave again".* Additionally, there are issues with population changes during the occupation, as a significant portion of the local population now hails from Russia. Some citizens will simply go to Russia.

THE IMAGE OF THE FUTURE OF THE DONETSK REGION

ALSO, IN THE FUTURE, IT SHOULD BE KEPT IN MIND THAT RUSSIA WILL NEVER DISAPPEAR

- **FRONTIER.**

Some believe that this zone will remain important for the military, even without investment or the return of the population. *"It's a heavily militarized area, considering who our neighbor is and that the empire is not dying there yet".*

- **PRESERVATION OF CULTURE AND RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.**

The peripheral narrative of the Azov Sea Greeks clearly expects their culture to be recognized and protected. At the state level, they expect to be treated not as Greeks, but as Urums and Rumeans.

However, there is no clear vision of the connection between this process and de-occupation.

- **THE PREVALENCE OF NARRATIVES DEPENDS ON GEOGRAPHY AND SPECIALTY.**

The "Mariupol Narrative" is found only among the city's residents, while the "Azov Greek Narrative" is found only in adjacent villages. The narrative of the "Autochthonous people of the Northern Donetsk subregion" was localized in Bakhmut. Two other narratives, "Ukrainian-centric" and "Deconstruction," are more universal and occur throughout the Donetsk region. However, "Deconstruction" is more prevalent in the mining part of the region, especially in Donetsk. Additionally, certain professions incline toward the "Ukrainian-centric" narrative, including journalists, public figures, artists, and government officials, who often lack knowledge of the region's Ukrainian past.

- **THE DONETSK NARRATIVE OF THE RESPONDENTS TENDS NOT TO DEPEND ON THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE.**

We did not define the national narratives that each respondent shares (see slide 3), but this can be determined by their extended answers. Based on this, we see that proponents of any Donetsk regional narrative can also be proponents of any national narrative. The exception is the national narrative "Struggle for Ukrainian Culture," found only among speakers of the "Ukrainian-centric" Donetsk narrative.

- **DESPITE THE INTEGRITY OF THE NARRATIVES WITHIN THE MAIN QUESTIONS, THERE ARE NO PATTERNS IN THE ANSWERS TO THE SECONDARY QUESTIONS.**

The narratives of all speakers of any Donetsk regional narrative regarding identity, conflict, historical myths, and relationships with Ukrainians are quite

similar. However, the stories about the image of the Donetsk region, the events of 2014–2025, and especially the region's future differ greatly within each narrative. Perhaps these differences are explained by the national narrative to which the respondents belong. The image of the Donetsk region also depends on the subregion..

- **ALL NARRATIVES OF THE DONETSK REGION ARE ABOUT THE PAST.**

Among Ukraine's national narratives, two are devoted to the past, and one ("Civil Unity") is devoted to the present. However, all narratives about the Donetsk region turn to the past. Presumably, this is due to the war-related decline, which does not offer clear hope for the region's future or present..

- **ONE OF THE MAIN NARRATIVES OF THE DONETSK REGION IS BASED ON THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE. THE OTHER TWO HAVE A MORE COMPLEX ORIGIN.**

The "Ukrainian-centric narrative" adapts the basic mythology of Ukrainian national narratives to local realities. The "Deconstruction" narrative is based on denying the Soviet myth about the Donbas and only partially borrows theses from the national narrative. The "Mariupol" narrative is eclectic, combining the Soviet and national narratives of the Azov Sea Greeks, as well as features of the Ukrainian national narrative.

- **TWO DONETSK NARRATIVES CONTAIN TWO MYTHS ABOUT THE "GOLDEN AGE", BUT THEY ARE ALL DIFFERENT.**

The "Ukrainian-centric narrative" refers to the "golden age" of European capital and the period after 2014, when Ukraine paid attention to this region. In "Deconstruction", this refers to the period

of Soviet prosperity, which, for those who hold this narrative, is a fake "golden age," as well as the period from 2000 to 2013 when the region had special status in Ukraine.

- **THE MAIN ENEMY IN ALL NARRATIVES IS THE RUSSIANS.**

Different narratives have different attitudes toward fellows who have become victims of propaganda. But the attitude toward the Russian imperial influence is consistently negative.

- **PERIPHERAL NARRATIVES HAVE A TANGIBLE IMPACT ON THE MAIN NARRATIVES.**

Elements of the "Northern Donetsk Subregion Narrative," such as references to the region's Cossack history and statements about its differences from the "mining region," can be seen in the responses of many Bakhmut, Chasovy Yar, Kramatorsk, and Sloviansk residents. Elements of the "Azov Greek Narrative"

appear in the responses of Mariupol residents, who often mention the Greek roots, language, and culture, as well as the repression of Greeks.

- **NARRATIVES DIFFER ACCORDING TO THE LEVEL OF UNIQUENESS OF THE DONETSK REGION.**

The "Ukrainian-centric" and "Mariupol" narratives do not consider the people of their region to be very different from those in other regions of Ukraine, especially in the east. In "Deconstruction," however, they are attributed certain unique properties.

- **THERE ARE DIFFERENT CULPRITS OF CONFLICTS.**

Two of the three main narratives accuse the region's residents of collaborating with the Russians. Only the "Deconstruction" narrative blames Russian propaganda and passive Ukrainian authorities rather than the region's residents.

10 POSSIBLE NARRATIVE MERGING POINTS

1. Russia is widely regarded as the primary adversary of the residents of the Donetsk region and the root of their troubles.
2. Hard work and taking responsibility for one's words are the basis for uniting the region's residents.
3. The Ukrainian language should be popularized, preferably gently.
4. The state and Ukrainians should pay more attention to IDPs.
5. The Donetsk region is historically Ukrainian.
6. The Donetsk region has no future outside Ukraine.
7. The trauma of the war has united the region's residents the most and has given them a sense of understanding.
8. The Donetsk region is European, both in terms of the past and future.
9. You cannot return to the old Donetsk region.
10. Volunteering, particularly assisting the Armed Forces of Ukraine and IDPs, exemplifies the best of the region's residents.