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Breaking from "the Conflict Trap": Donbas War Exposure and Support for Conflict Resolution in Ukraine

Summary

1. Research question. How does the persistence of militarised conflict in and over Ukraine's Donbas region — that broke out in mid-2014 and by early 2018 claimed more than 10,300 people dead — affect public support within Ukraine for its resolution? Namely, why do some residents of Ukraine advocate continuing military operations to recapture breakaway territories known as unacknowledged "DNR" (Donetsk People's Republic) and "LNR" (Lugansk People's Republic), while others approve of economic blockade, or political autonomy negotiations, or complete abandonment of those territories? Furthermore, why do some residents express willingness to take up arms, whereas others do not?

2. Data. The study primarily relies on nationwide multistage probability sample surveys carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in July 2015 (*N* = 1,800 respondents), 2016 (*N* = 1,802), and 2017 (*N* = 1,800 plus an oversample in government-controlled Donbas areas with *N* = 399). In 2017, additional qualitative analysis was conducted using four focus groups in Donbas (Druzhkivka and Mariupol). Each of them was commissioned by the Institute and had eight participants broadly representing local adult demographics.

3. Descriptive Findings: Support for Policies and Behaviour to Resolve Conflict

3.1. On average, across Ukraine, policy preferences for resolving the Donbas armed conflict remained stable from 2015 through 2017, with approximately 20–25% of respondents[1] supporting fighting till victory, 25–30% — blockade, another 25–30% — autonomy negotiations, and about 20% — abandonment.

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[1]   Other than those choosing the "don't know" option.

3.2. Regional differences have diminished significantly on all four policy options. Support for the continuation of military operation decreased in the West and the Centre, but increased in the South, East, and Donbas. Conversely, support for autonomy negotiations rose in the West and the Centre, but fell — noticeably from 2016 to 2017 — in the South, East, and Donbas. The range of differences across regions narrowed from about 35% to 20% on warfighting, 15% to just 3% on blockade, and 70% to 55% on autonomy talks — while remaining about the same (16–17%) on abandonment (see Fig.).
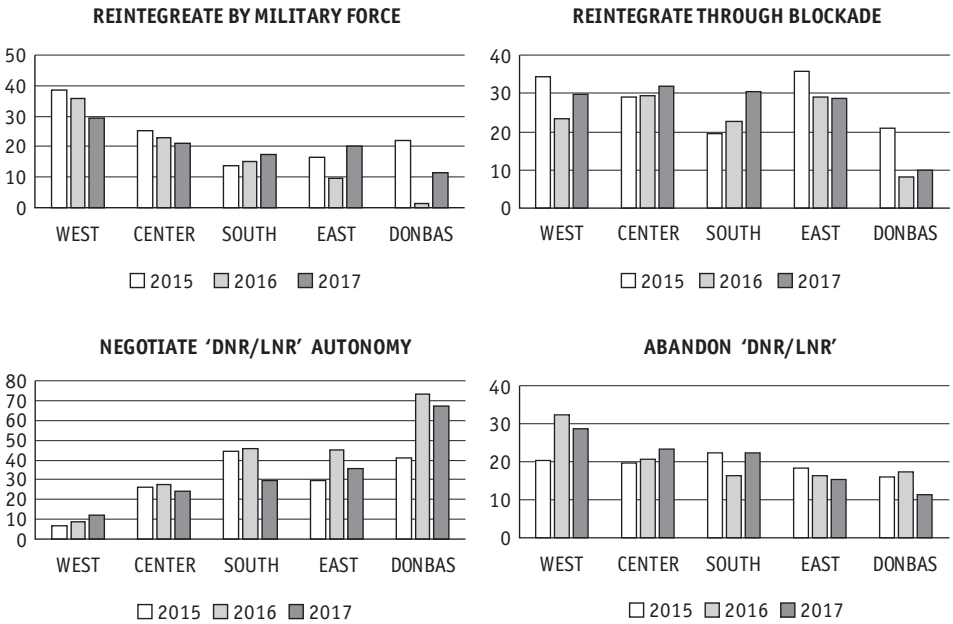

Fig. The narrowing of regional differences over Donbas conflict resolution policies from 2015 to 2017 (% of respondents surveyed by the Institute of Sociology, missing values excluded).

3.3. The number of respondents saying that they or their family members and friends were willing to take up arms and fight in Donbas went down in all regions from 2015 to 2016 (the question was not asked in 2017), most markedly in the West (from 54% to 39%), and the South (from 35% to 20%). On average across Ukraine, this figure dropped from 40% to 30%

4. Analytical Findings: Conflict Foundations are Geo-Emotional

4.1. Multinomial and binary logistic regression tests of the survey data from 2016 and 2017 show that societal responses to war in Ukraine challenge the conventional wisdom on armed conflict recurrence. Across multiple measures and specification of policy support and behaviour preferences, the tests have found that direct personal participation in (or witnessing) military combat, economic concerns, social polarisation, and democracy support are not among the most consistent statistically significant predictors of conflict resolution preferences among residents of Ukraine.

4.2. Instead, exposure to war through sharing the stories and feelings of other people one knows personally, perceptions of external threat to one's nation (logically conducive to behavioural motivations that discount the risk of violence), and the appreciation of symbolic causes of the armed conflict one seeks to resolve are paramount. The choices appear to run predominantly along the track of shared feelings, threat perceptions, and symbolic political values that cut across regional and socio-demographic factors. The robustness of these cross-cutting indicators in statistical analysis could also explain the growing convergence of conflict resolution preferences across the regional divides in Ukraine documented in the introductory part of this study.

4.3. The findings also show how strongly, if not pervasively, war engenders uncertainty and indecision. Many respondents said they were undecided rather than favouring any specific conflict resolution option. And the undecided individuals did not seem to lean towards any specific options more than others based on the distribution of covariates.

Hence, here is the term "geo-emotional". The key individual-level predictors of conflict resolution preferences in this study represent a combination of geopolitical orientations and emotions intrinsic to interpersonal relations and political symbolism.

5. *Implications.* It could well be that wars would recur precisely because the society opposes the use of military force. It could also be that wars would no longer fester if the public supported a decisive military victory. A systematic analysis of whether there is a relationship between public support for conflict resolution options and specific conflict outcomes has not yet been done. The present study suggests that it is worth a try. And so, to the extent that surveys reflect "the wisdom of crowds" one major takeaway for policymakers is that resolving the Donbas conflict requires all four strategies used in balanced combinations and one would do well to keep their eyes open for synergies between them — as Ukraine is facing a formidable long-term military and political threat from the Kremlin.