

Rethinking of identity under war: Pryazovia renaissance and regional centre ambitions in Mariupol before 2022

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Abstract

The article addresses identity transformation in geopolitical fault-line city under a semi-frozen military conflict. Until 2014, the Donbas, a region in the eastern Ukraine, had a strong identity cultivated by the local industrial and financial groups. The Russian-backed military conflict induced rethinking of Donbas identity, giving a chance for revival of silenced regional identities. Our case study is Mariupol, the second most populous city in Donetsk oblast and the informal capital of Pryazovia that stepped out from the shadow of Donetsk. The research is based on the survey data (n = 1,251) collected in 2020 through personal interviews, analysed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression. The hypothesis that emerging Pryazovia identity should qualitatively differ from presumably stigmatized Donbas identity was confirmed only partially. The identity rethinking seems to be neither rapid nor straightforward. Donbas identity appears quite persistent, while Pryazovia identity functions mainly as a complementary one. Instead of escape from the stigmatized Donbas identity, we observe rather its redefinition, including on local-centric (“Mariupolocentrism”) and Ukraine-centric bases.

Keywords: identity, geopolitical fault-line city, military conflict, Pryazovia, Mariupol

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Introduction

Military events in Ukraine, taking place since 2014 as a result of geopolitical clash between the Putin’s Russia and Ukraine supported by the West, have a strong social and political dimension for the Ukrainian society. Until 2014, the Donbas had a strong regional identity, successfully transformed into political dividends by local industrial and financial groups (KORZHOV, G. 2006; KOTYHORENKO, V. *et al.* 2014; KUZIO, T. 2015; PAKHOMENKO, S. 2015). Donetsk, the administrative centre of the eponymous oblast, was a powerful industrial, educational and cultural centre and closed the list of the 5 largest Ukrainian metropolises. However, the Russian-backed occupation of the predominantly industrial

and highly urbanized parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, constituting the core of the Donbas, provided for the residents of government-controlled part a chance to revive and rethink other forgotten regional identities (SEMYVOLOS, I. 2016). Furthermore, large cities in the Ukrainian government-controlled part of the region received new opportunities for their development. In particular, Mariupol, the second most populous city in Donetsk oblast and the informal capital of Pryazovia, stepped out from the shadow of Donetsk and started searching for its own distinctiveness and identity, which included a civic movement for the administrative separation of Pryazovia from Donetsk oblast (RUSCHENKO, I. *et al.* 2015).

Nowadays, the peaceful smooth development of Mariupol and of its identity may be

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discussed only in the past tense, as Russian troops have largely destroyed the city, and the city together with the surrounding region lost the majority of their residents due to emigration, flight, and deportations. Even so, there are important lessons from the development of urban identity in Mariupol in the relatively peaceful period of 2014–2021 to be learned. First, the story told by Mariupol illustrates how geopolitical tensions and military actions have induced the contestation of old imagined communities and identities. Second, it shows how self-identification processes and search for new identities may unfold in geopolitical fault-line city, of which Mariupol is a sparkling example (GENTILE, M. 2017, 2020). In view of this, the study aims to investigate the identity transformation in geopolitical fault-line city under the influence of a semi-frozen military conflict, focusing on the rethinking of the existing (probably) stigmatized identity: is it disappearing, giving way to new identities, or rather redefines itself on a new basis? The research is primarily process- and theory-oriented – the particular case of Mariupol serves here as a model for the processes that may occur in the other cities in similar conditions. At the same time, despite the fact that empirical data used in the research are not relevant anymore due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, the results have some practical relevance as giving insights how opposing geopolitical actors may employ or reconfigure the urban identity of Mariupol in medium and long-term perspective.

Donbas identity: consolidated and contested

As it often happens with informal regions, there is no consensus on what the Donbas is. The word “Donbas” is actually a portmanteau formed from “Donets Basin”, an abbreviation of “Donets Coal Basin”. The name of the coal basin, in turn, is a reference to the Donets Ridge and the river Donets. Being equated to the Donets Coal Basin, Donbas should include Donetsk oblast except for its northern and southern parts, the southern part of Luhansk oblast, the eastern part of

Dnipropetrovsk oblast, as well as the western part of Rostov oblast in Russia. From this point of view, certain parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are not covered by the Donbas but rather should be included into other historical regions, such as Slobozhanshchyna and Pryazovia (Figure 1).

However, the most common definition of Donbas today refers to the whole Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine – a transformation once again giving evidence that regions are historically contingent dynamic processes (PRED, A. 1984) and social constructs (CRESSWELL, T. 2013) involving an enormous influence of the cultural, historical and geographical context which plays a cardinal role in the formation of regions (GRAHAM, B. 2000; KASALA, K. and ŠIFTA, M. 2017). In particular, perceptual borders of regions are changing under the influence of the modern administrative division (cf. ŠERÝ, M. and ŠIMÁČEK, P. 2012; VAISHAR, A. and ZAPLETALOVÁ, J. 2016; MELNYCHUK, A. and GNATIUK, O. 2018; NOWAK, K. 2018; GNATIUK, O. and MELNYCHUK, A. 2019, 2021; MAREK, P. 2020). For instance, a whole modern administrative unit may be perceptually equated to a particular historical informal region under favourable circumstances (cf. GNATIUK, O. and MELNYCHUK, A. 2019). Moreover, prior to the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Donbas identity seemed attractive to neighbouring regions due to the huge financial and symbolic capital of Donetsk, which made it a powerful attractor for the residents of Donetsk oblast and beyond (SEMYVOLOS, I. 2016). The image of Donbas consisting of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in their integrity may be enhanced also by the school handbooks presenting the Donetsk economic/geographic region exactly in this way (PISTUN, M. et al. 2004; ZASTAVNYI, F. 2010).

Industrialization and urbanization that started in the second half of the 19th century and continued during the most of the 20th century led to the influx of workers from Russia resulting in a highly industrialized region, a kind of a melting pot for Russians and Ukrainians with Russian-speaking cities surrounded by a Ukrainian-speaking countryside (SHULMAN, S. 1998; KORZHOV,



Fig. 1. Donbas, Pryazovia, and Slobzhanshyna on the map of Ukraine. DPR = Donetsk People's Republic; LPR = Luhansk People's Republic.

G. 2006; KUZIO, T. 2017; HARAN, O. *et al.* 2019). Soviet politics paid special attention to the Donbas as an industrial base of the country and significantly contributed in this way to the formation of a specific regional identity (KUROMIYA, H. 1998; OSIPIAN, A. 2015; YAKUBOVA, L. 2015a, b; KUZIO, T. 2017; STEBELSKY, I. 2018). From the very beginning of the Ukraine's independence, the Donbas was a deeply Russified area (STEBELSKY, I. 2018) with a strong prevalence of Donbas regional identity over the national and local identity, as well as strong pro-Soviet sentiments (FLYNN, M. 1996; SHULMAN, S. 1998; SEREDA, V. 2007). After the deep economic crisis connected with the demise of the USSR, the industrial parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts transformed into the economic and electoral fiefdoms of new local elites consisting of a mixture of representatives of the Soviet nomenclature, "Red Directors," and

organized crime (ZIMMER, K. and HARAN, O. 2008; KUZIO, T. 2015, 2017). Gradually the Donbas became a region with an almost absolute political monopoly of the Party of Regions which was based on economic control and client-patron relations (WILSON, A. 2005; KORZHOV, G. 2006; ZIMMER, K. and HARAN, O. 2008; KUZIO, T. 2015, 2017), where the ordinary people, often faced with poor living standards, were told by the local elite that the Donbas mission is "to feed" Kyiv and "agrarian" Western and Central Ukraine (WILSON, A. 2016; HARAN, O. *et al.* 2019). In fact, the economies of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts remained among the most depressed in Ukraine, and the post-Soviet Donbas was certainly no engine of national prosperity (GENTILE, M. and MARCIŃCZAK, S. 2012; MYKHENKO, V. 2020). The key features of Donbas regional identity, stimulated by local regional elites as an argument in the

election campaigns, can be summarized as Ukrainian-Russian dual ethnicity, dominance of the Russian language, industrial culture, sincere veneration of the Soviet past, and sympathy towards Russian history and state (PAKHOMENKO, S. 2015). Industrial culture is understood here as a dynamic phenomenon in which past and present industrial production is embedded in the human physical environment, social structures, cognitive abilities, and institutions that may influence the future development choices of a community (BOLE, D. 2021).

The Russian-backed occupation of the predominantly industrial parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, including oblast administrative centres, had double consequences. On the one hand, strongly developed regional identity of Donbas, coming into collision with the Ukrainian nation-state project, served as the internal precondition enabling the success of separatist pro-Russian propaganda messages, which facilitated the formation of the puppet statelets DPR and LPR (PAKHOMENKO, S. 2015). For instance, in 2015, people in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were using pro-Russian sources of information much more actively than in the adjacent regions (DOBYSH, M. 2019). Noteworthy, cities of the two Donbas oblasts are relatively underrepresented in the Ukrainian Wikipedia and overrepresented in the Russian, compared to the other Ukrainian regions (GNATIUK, O. and GLYBOVETS, V. 2021). The Donbas regional identity was shown to be a significant factor affecting the public attitudes to the parts of the conflict (KUDELIA, S. and VAN ZYL, J. 2019), although the role of the Kremlin's military intervention was paramount for the commencement of hostilities (HEDENSKOG, J. 2014; WILSON, A. 2016; MYKHENKO, V. 2020). Moreover, further development of the Donbas identity narrative is observed within the self-proclaimed separatist "republics" (ABIBOK, YU. 2018). On the other hand, there is a chance for rethinking the own identity by the residents of Ukraine-controlled parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Despite the outlined mainstream features, the identity

of Donbas hardly may be considered as homogenous (ZOLKINA, M. 2017), in particular regarding the attitudes to the Russian and Ukrainian cultures, as well as to the Soviet legacies: "The pro-Russian nature of Donbas still remains one of the patented self-identification myths" (KORZHOV, G. 2006).

Rethinking the regional identity of the Donbas has developed in two directions: the top-down and the bottom-up. The first direction is represented by the new narrative on Donbas launched by Ukrainian government officials about the artificiality of Donbas as a region. In other words, the new narrative opposes the use of the term Donbas for something more than the coal mining area. In particular, Oleksiy Danilov, the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, expressed this argument in the following way: "There is no Donbas; it is very dangerous when we start saying such things. This is the definition imposed by the Russian Federation". According to Danilov, "the concept of Donbas has been purposefully used by the intelligence services of the Russia as an instrument of information warfare since 2000, and especially actively during the Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014. The goal is to oppose and artificially separate a certain region of Ukraine as a territory that seems to have special rights and status, which gives further grounds to justify the creation and existence of the pseudo-states" (DOROSH, S. 2021).

The second direction is a redefinition of the existing Donbas identity or the search for a new one by ordinary people. Among the factors pushing the residents of the government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions to rethink their regional identity, there may be the need to mentally escape from the Donbas, which has become a symbol of war and decline since 2014. Also, the Donbas is no longer a single industrial complex, as most of the highly industrialized areas of the two oblasts were left outside the government-controlled territory. In 2014–2021, Donetsk lost both administrative and symbolic status for the government-controlled

areas, and, thus, people should have reoriented to the other centres. “What is Donbas now? Donbas is where the war is. Many call it the “Old Industrial Area”. The so-called “Russian-Ukrainian alliance” has existed there... .. It disintegrated in 2014, when these people started to determine who they are” (SEMYVOLOS, I. 2016).

Mariupol in 2014–2021: capital of re-emerged Pryazovia or Donetsk’s successor?

The southern part of Donetsk oblast seems to be one of the areas that have distanced from the Donbas. In the broadest geographic sense, Pryazovia (literally Cis-Azov region) is referred to the northern coast of the Sea of Azov. From this point of view, Pryazovia includes the southern parts of Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts and the eastern part of Kherson oblast in Ukraine, as well as a portion of Rostov oblast of Russia adjacent to the northern shore of the Taganrog Bay. Pryazovia differs from the surrounding areas from the standpoint of economy and history. Except for the city of Mariupol, it is a less urbanized, agrarian, fishing, and seaside resort region in contrast to the highly urbanized industrial and mining areas of Donbas and Prydniprovnia bordering it from the north. Pryazovia has a significantly more heterogeneous ethnic structure compared to surrounding areas. Ukrainian Cossacks came to the northern shore of the Sea of Azov in the middle of 18th century and founded such military administrative units as Kalmiuska Palanka of the Zaporozhian Sich (1739–1775) and Azov Cossack Host (1832–1862). The Azov Greeks were relocated to Pryazovia from the Crimea by decree of tsar Catherine II in 1778–1779. Also, Pryazovia was settled by German colonists, Russian Old Believers, Dukhobors and Molokans. In the days of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1917–1921), the Azov Land with the centre in Mariupol was envisaged as one of the first-order administrative units of the state (KOTYHORENKO, V. et al. 2014; RUSCHENKO, I. et al. 2015).

Indirect evidence of the developing Pryazovia identity comes from toponyms. Although the names of enterprises and organizations, derived from “Donbas”, tend to spread across the whole Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, they are relatively scarce in the extreme southern part of Donetsk oblast (GNATIUK, O. and MELNYCHUK, A. 2019), while the latter appears extremely rich with names derived from “Pryazovia” (MAPIAR 2019). Direct evidence comes from sociologists. Survey carried out in 2015 (RUSCHENKO, I. et al. 2015) used two markers of Pryazovia identity: (1) identification of a residence place as Pryazovia and (2) self-identification as Pryazovia resident. As for the first marker, 27.1 percent of respondents identified their place of residence as “Pryazovia”. Regarding the second marker, 63.6 percent of the respondents considered themselves Pryazovians (30.9% – definitely yes; 32.7% – rather yes).

Mariupol, a mid-sized port city (population ca. 450,000) in the southern part of Donetsk oblast, is the largest city and the informal capital of Pryazovia (DAVYDENKO, O. 2019). According to the survey of 2015, the highest priority to Pryazovia as a perceived residence place (41.2%) was observed exactly in Mariupol, and the three top-ranked famous personalities representing Pryazovia turned out to be Mariupolitans (RUSCHENKO, I. et al. 2015). Mariupol was temporarily controlled by the DPR during the late spring months of 2014, but soon liberated by the Ukrainian troops on June 13, 2014 and de-facto converted into the administrative centre of Donetsk oblast. However, since October 11, 2014 the oblast government moved to the much smaller city of Kramatorsk (population ca. 150,000) in the northern part of Donetsk oblast, although military agencies remained in Mariupol due to its proximity to the front line. In 2022, during the wide-scale Russian military invasion into Ukraine, Mariupol was besieged by Russian troops and systematically destroyed by them.

The first historical settlements at the site of contemporary Mariupol were established by Zaporozhian Cossacks and Crimean Greeks

(KOTYHORENKO, V. et al. 2014). Until the end of the 19th century, Mariupol was a port city that prospered due to trade and fishing. The new period of the city development began in 1898 with opening of a steelworks. Until 2022, the city's economy was dominated by two large steelworks, both controlled by the Metinvest Corporation. Mariupol is often considered as a typical company town, in which owners and managers of dominant factories, nicknamed job-givers, have a decisive voice in the city's decision-making (MATSUZATO, K. 2018), while grateful employees and members of their families are thanking them with their votes in the elections (DEHTERENKO, A. 2008). The industrialization resulted in massive inflow of workers and their families and, consequently, in rapid growth of the city's population, as well as gradual loss of original urban identity. Nowadays, the city is predominantly Russian-speaking: in 2001, 89.7 percent of urban population spoke Russian, 9.9 percent spoke Ukrainian, and only 0.2 percent spoke Mariupol Greek and Urum; at the same time, Ukrainians constituted 48.7 percent of the urban population, Russians 44.4 percent and Greek 4.3 percent (Population Census 2001).

Furthermore, Mariupol has all grounds to be considered as a geopolitical fault-line city – a site of heightened political confrontation, where irreconcilable narratives tensely coexist, and where fundamental aspects of historical memory collide (GENTILE, M. 2017). It is located in proximity of the Russian border with all expected consequences like intense cross-border ties, exposure to the Russia's informational spaces, relatively weak connections to the national centre of power in Kyiv, and blurred national identity. In 2020, Mariupolitans appeared to be surprisingly frank in revealing opinions that contradict the nationwide narrative of Ukrainian unity, and the city population was divided between a large openly pro-Russian minority of at least 40 percent and a small explicitly pro-Ukrainian and pro-European minority, represented by between 10 and 20 percent of the population (GENTILE, M. 2020).

Nevertheless, the initial difference in local history and economy in Mariupol from the rest of Donetsk oblast still manifests itself. For instance, MATSUZATO, K. (2018) noticed the local politician's expression on the local mentality that "the Donbas people are coal miners, so they act as they are ordered to. We are metallurgists, so we do not act unless we are persuaded and convinced". After the occupation of a portion of Donetsk oblast by the Russian-supported separatists in 2014, proposals to separate Pryazovia from Donetsk oblast were voiced by a plenty of politicians and statesmen. For instance, Serhii Taruta, ex-governor of Donetsk oblast, claimed that "intellectuals in Mariupol distinguish Pryazovia from the coal-mining Donbas". The idea of uniting the historical areas of Pryazovia into a single administrative unit (oblast) was definitely supported by 17.8 percent and rather supported by 43.6 percent of the respondents (RUSCHENKO, I. et al. 2015). Thus, it is probable that since 2014 some part of Mariupolitans is cultivating the Pryazovia identity as an alternative or supplement to Donbas identity.

On the other hand, the occupation of Donetsk since 2014 resulted in the competition between the cities claiming the role of a new oblast capital, primarily Mariupol and Kramatorsk. In 2019, a petition was registered on the website of the President of Ukraine with a proposal to change the name of Donetsk oblast to Mariupol oblast. The petitioner argued that the administration and residents of Donetsk have shown "disloyalty to the Ukrainian state and sided with the Russian occupiers", so it is advisable to move the regional centre to Mariupol and rename the whole oblast. This petition did not receive the required number of votes for consideration by the President, but it can be considered as a message of relevant public inquiry from, at least, a part of Mariupolitans (Radio Svoboda, 2019). Here we see coexisting and competing ideas "Mariupol is a capital of Pryazovia" vs. "Mariupol is a capital of [Donetsk] oblast": the first is clearly linked to the Pryazovia identity, the latter identifies

Mariupol rather as a Donbas city – a successor of Donetsk, but both ideas have in common the desire to make Mariupol a regional centre, no matter the name of the region.

Data and methods

The research is based on the survey data ($n = 1,251$, aged 18+) collected in Mariupol in 2020 through personal interviews commissioned from the Kyiv-based Center for Social Indicators, which shares its resources with the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. The sample relies on a household-based sampling frame, and only one person was selected within each household using a somewhat modified version of the so-called Kish table (KISH, L. 1949). The response rate is 30 percent, taking into account all forms of non-response. The main themes covered by the survey relate to current political and geopolitical situation in Ukraine in general and in Mariupol in particular.

In the first stage of the study, we assess how widespread Pryazovia identity is in Mariupol, and how it relates to Donbas identity and to the desire to see Mariupol as the regional (oblast) centre. For this, we analyse responses to the following survey questions:

- Q1: (agreement with statement) “Pryazovia differs from the rest of Donetsk oblast in the specifics of the local society and culture” (four-option symmetric Likert scale: completely agree, rather agree, rather disagree and completely disagree);
- Q2: Mariupol is primarily a city of...? (options: Donechchyna, Donbas, Pryazovia, South-Eastern Ukraine);
- Q3: (agreement with statement) “It is necessary to create the Pryazovia oblast, and Mariupol should be its centre” (four-option symmetric Likert scale: completely agree, rather agree, rather disagree and completely disagree);
- Q4: (agreement with statement) “Mariupol should be the regional centre of Donetsk oblast (instead of Kramatorsk)” (four-option symmetric Likert scale: completely

agree, rather agree, rather disagree and completely disagree).

Positive (completely agree, rather agree) answers to the first question, as well as the answer “Pryazovia” to the second question, are considered as indicators (markers) of identification with Pryazovia. The third and the fourth questions are designed to estimate the support for the status of Mariupol as a regional centre (the phenomenon of “Mariupolocentrism”) in two versions, corresponding to the ideas of the “capital of Pryazovia” and “Donetsk’s successor”, respectively.

The second stage of the study was designed to determine the specific predictors of Pryazovia identity and “Mariupolocentrism” (if any), employing binary logistic regression. Our dependent variables are based on the four aforementioned indicative questions and are designed as indicators of Pryazovia identity and “Mariupolocentrism”:

- Dependent Variable (DV)1: Agreement that Mariupol is primarily a city of Pryazovia (yes = 1, otherwise = 0);
- DV2: Agreement that Pryazovia differs from the rest of Donetsk oblast in the specifics of the local society and culture (agree = 1, otherwise = 0);
- DV3: Support for creating new Pryazovia oblast with a centre in Mariupol (agree = 1, otherwise = 0);
- DV4: Support for moving the centre of Donetsk oblast to Mariupol (agree = 1, otherwise = 0).

In defining independent variables, summarized in *Table 1*, we started out from the idea that Pryazovia identity and “Mariupolocentrism” should qualitatively differ from Donbas identity (see PAKHOMENKO, S. 2015; SEMYVOLOS, I. 2016). The hypothesis is that Donbas becomes stigmatized for a pro-Ukrainian and pro-European part of the population since it begins to associate with geopolitical rival (Russia), as well as war, destruction, and decline. The reactive search for a new host identity is a way to escape from the traumatic past via distancing from the stigma-

tized identity. Consequently, self-identification with Pryazovia and, to a lesser extent, “Mariupolocentrism”, are expected to have positive correlation with Ukrainian ethnic-national identity, non-industrial culture, and negative (or at least neutral) attitudes towards the Soviet past and the Russian geopolitical narrative. Also, we expect from positive correlation with the support for Ukrainian central government policy and legislation, which reflects Ukrainian civic-national identity (Table 1).

of Donetsk oblast in the specifics of the local society and culture, including 17.3 percent of respondents that definitely agreed with this statement (Table 2). On the other side, only 10.2 percent of respondents definitely disagree with the cultural and societal difference of Pryazovia from the Donbas. In this way, the opinion about the cultural and societal distinction of Pryazovia from the rest of Donetsk oblast is prevalent among Mariupolitans. At the same time, only 16.6 percent of respondents consider Mariupol primarily a city of

Table 1. Independent variables for binary logistic regression and their rationale

Independent variable (covariate)	Rationale
Sex: male (ref. female)	Standard demographic control
Age: 40–59 years; 60+ (ref. 18–39 years)	Standard demographic control
Education: higher (in)complete: (ref. other)	It is expected that people with higher education are more aware of Pryazovia history and geography
Feeling European: yes (ref. no)	Indicator of European identity
Feeling Soviet: yes (ref. no)	Indicator of Soviet identity
Language used at home: Ukrainian and/or other, except for Russian (ref. other)	Indicator of Ukrainian ethnic identity. This is stronger indicator than simply ‘Feeling Ukrainian’ since many ethnic Ukrainians speak Russian
Heavy industry should be the basis for the development of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	Indicator of industrial culture
Crimea is and will always be a part of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	Indicator of central government policy support: attitude to the territorial integrity of Ukraine
Russian must be the second state language in Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	Indicator of central government policy support: attitude to the national language policy
Was it necessary to demolish the monuments to Lenin?: yes (ref. no)	Indicator of central government policy support: attitude to the national decommunization policy
Was 11 May 2014 DPR referendum legitimate: agree (ref. disagree)	Attitude to the Russian-supported Donbas separatism
Ukraine should be in Russia’s sphere of influence: agree (ref. disagree)	Support for the Russian geopolitical narrative
Ukraine is actually ruled by external forces such as the George Soros or Bill Gates organizations: agree (ref. disagree)	Belief in one of the most widespread Russian propaganda myths

Expectably, older age correlates with feeling Soviet, but not completely, and all models have passed the multi-collinearity test (VIF values) with good margin.

Results and discussion

More than a half of respondents (59.9%) think that Pryazovia differs from other parts

Pryazovia, while the vast majority (54.4%) considers it primarily the city of Donbas. Thus, although 64.5 percent of respondents declared at least one marker of Pryazovia identity, only 11.9 percent declared both of them (Figure 2, a). This means that the vast majority of those who recognize the cultural distinction of Pryazovia consider Mariupol primarily a city of the Donbas. Such results suggest that although for most Mariupolitans Pryazovia

Table 2. Responses to the indicative questions for Pryazovia identity, in percent

Yes		No		Hard to say
Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather no	Definitely no	
<i>Q1: Pryazovia differs from the rest of Donetsk oblast in the specifics of the local society and culture</i>				
59.9		33.3		6.2
17.3	42.6	23.1	10.2	
<i>Q2: Mariupol is primarily a city of</i>				
Donechchyna	Donbas	Pryazovia	South-Eastern Ukraine	
11.8	54.4	16.6	14.7	

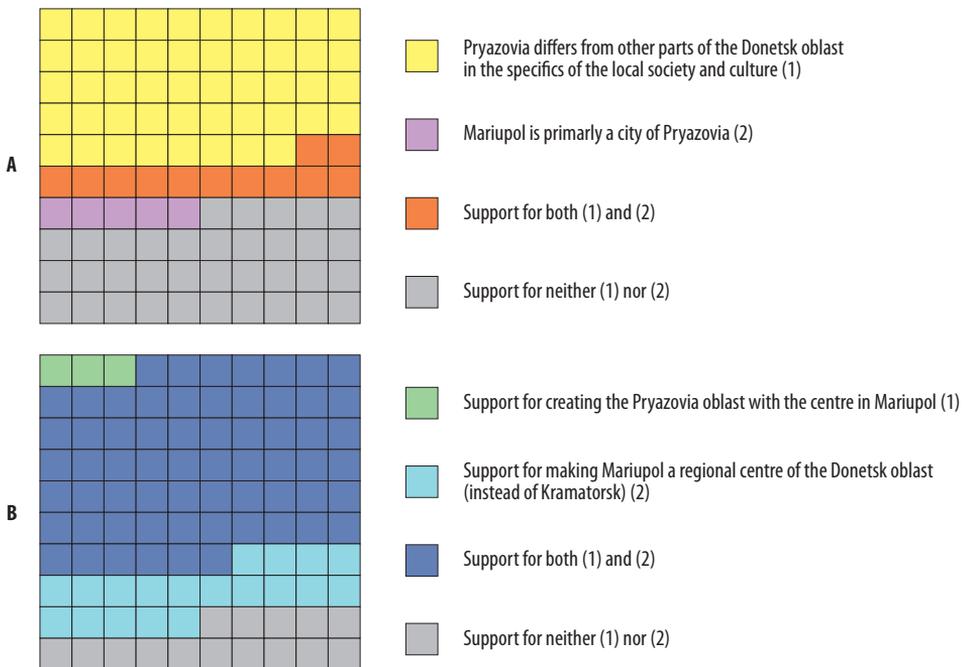


Fig. 2. Distribution of Pryazovia identity and “Mariupolocentrism” markers in the Mariupol population

is clearly not the same as Donbas, it is rather a distinct part (a kind) of the Donbas then something outside from the Donbas. In other words, our findings support the model according to which Pryazovia is a culturally specific sub-region of Donbas rather than a separate region compared to the Donbas. While the first model is supported by almost two thirds of respondents, the second is supported by

only one in ten respondents. Consequently, Pryazovia identity appears to be rather a sub-identity built over the Donbas identity than truly independent identity equal to Donbas identity. Of course, it is necessary to keep in mind that only the identity of Mariupolitans is discussed here; in the other territories, for instance, outside Donetsk oblast, other models of Pryazovia identity are possible.

The vast majority of respondents want to see Mariupol as an administrative regional (oblast) centre (Table 3). Those who support the idea of Mariupol as the centre of Donetsk oblast (81.9%) prevail over those who support the idea of Mariupol as the centre of the newly formed Pryazovia oblast (66.0%). However, these two groups of respondents widely intersect – the fact meaning that most respondents support both options (Figure 2, b). Notably, even among the respondents who definitely deny the cultural distinction of Pryazovia, 46.5 percent and 26.8 percent respectively stay in favour of making Mariupol the centre of Donetsk / Pryazovia oblast. Simultaneously, those who recognize the cultural distinction of Pryazovia are more supportive of moving the centre of Donetsk oblast to Mariupol than of the formation of separate Pryazovia oblast. This not only supports the conclusion about the umbrella status of Donbas identity for Pryazovia identity, but also means that for significant part of the respondents the main thing is the status of the regional centre for Mariupol – no matter which region: most Pryazovians are “Mariupolocentrists”, but not all “Mariupolocentrists” are Pryazovians (see Figure 2).

According to binary logistic regression model (Table 4), people who consider Mariupol to be primarily a city of Pryazovia demonstrate strong Ukrainian civic identity on a number of issues. In particular, they disapprove Russian as a second state language and consider DPR referendum illegitimate. Also, they reject Russian propaganda myth about the external control on Ukrainian government, and they are certainly not bearers

of industrial culture. We found statistically significant correlation neither with feeling European or Soviet nor, especially, with Ukrainian ethnic identity. Model quality check indicates that it is well calibrated and explains a significant part of the dependent variable dispersion. Thus, this relatively thing group of Mariupolitans at least partially fit out initial assumption about the Pryazovia identity predictors. These people seem to be the strongest Pryazovians with a clear pro-Ukrainian civic position, immunity to the Russian propaganda, and strong negation of industrial culture. However, their pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian position is embedded into the local context of the ongoing geopolitical clash and reflects their civic identity rather than ethnic one. In particular, these people may speak Russian language at home and feel Soviet, but they obviously seeking to distance from Donbas identity and to support the Ukrainian government position.

The characteristics of people recognizing Pryazovia as a region different from the rest of Donetsk oblast fits the initial hypothesis on Pryazovia identity significantly worse. Although they support for territorial integrity of Ukraine and refuse to accept Russian as a second state language, they tend to believe that Ukraine should be in Russia’s sphere of influence and that DPR referendum was legitimate. Correlation with European and Soviet self-identifications, as well as with Ukrainian ethnic identity, was not found for this dependent variable too. Besides, the selected model performs badly in this case considering the statistical tests. Thus, we consider these people to be a rather vague group

Table 3. Responses to the indicative questions for “Mariupolocentrism”, in percent

Yes		No		Hard to say
Definitely yes	Rather yes	Rather no	Definitely no	
<i>Q3: It is necessary to create Pryazovia oblast, and Mariupol should be its centre</i>				
66.0		16.3		17.4
23.3	42.7	11.4	4.9	
<i>Q4: Mariupol should be regional centre of Donetsk oblast (instead of Kramatorsk)</i>				
81.9		8.8		9.1
35.6	46.3	7.2	1.6	

Table 4. Binary logistic regression results: predictors of Pryazovia identity

Independent variables (covariates)	Odds coefficient = Exp(B)	
	DV1: Mariupol is primarily a city of Pryazovia	DV2: Pryazovia differs from the rest of Donetsk oblast
Male (ref. female)	1.222	1.049
Age 40–59 years (ref. 18–39 years)	1.634*	1.028
Age 60+ years (ref. 18–39 years)	1.442	0.975
Education: higher (in)/complete: (ref. other)	0.838	1.247
Feeling European: yes (ref. no)	1.411	0.836
Feeling Soviet: yes (ref. no)	0.757	0.772
Language used at home: Ukrainian and/or other, except for Russian (ref. other)	1.376	2.518
Heavy industry should be the basis for the development of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	0.403***	1.029
Crimea is and will always be a part of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	1.078	1.569***
Russian must be the second state language in Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	0.572*	0.646*
Was it necessary to demolish the monuments to Lenin?: yes (ref. no)	0.997	1.301
Was 11 May 2014 DPR referendum legitimate: agree (ref. disagree)	0.455***	1.845***
Ukraine should be in Russia's sphere of influence: agree (ref. disagree)	0.707	1.553*
Ukraine is actually ruled by external forces such as the George Soros or Bill Gates organizations: agree (ref. disagree)	0.468***	1.063
Constant	1.164	1.211
Hosmer-Lemeshow Test (Sig.)	0.565	0.028
Nagelkerke R Square	0.205	0.076

Notes: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

in terms of their geopolitical preferences and civic positions. Probably, their awareness of Pryazovia refers to their *objective knowledge* on the local geography and history rather than *conscious identity* resulting from rethinking of the current situation in the region.

Table 5 characterizes all “Mariupolocentrists” as people with higher education and supporters of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This is where the similarity between the two groups of “Mariupolocentrists” ends. Apart from the support for the belonging of Crimea to Ukraine, supporters of Mariupol as a centre of Pryazovia oblast turned out to be opponents of the Ukrainian government position. In particular, they support the official status of the Russian language, agree

with the legitimacy of DPR referendum, and believe in Russian propaganda myth that Ukraine is ruled by external forces. Consequently, this Pryazovia-focused kind of “Mariupolocentrism” represents something opposite to that initially expected from Pryazovia identity. The attitude to the status of Crimea indicates that the Ukrainian state is present in their world views, but their vision of Ukraine fits the Russian narrative. We may guess that they imagine hypothetical Pryazovia oblast as a region with a broad autonomy from the central government in Kyiv.

At the same time, supporters of Mariupol as a centre of Donetsk oblast are rather amorphous group almost indistinguishable from the rest of Mariupolitans, since this kind of

Table 5. Binary logistic regression results: predictors of “Mariupolocentrism”

Independent variables (covariates)	Odds coefficient = Exp(B)	
	DV3: Support for Mariupol as a centre of Pryazovia oblast	DV4: Support for Mariupol as a centre of Donetsk oblast
Male (ref. female)	0.902	0.989
Age 40–59 years (ref. 18–39 years)	1.030	0.868
Age 60+ years (ref. 18–39 years)	1.410	0.903
Education: higher (in)complete: (ref. other)	1.508*	1.923***
Feeling European: yes (ref. no)	1.021	1.214
Feeling Soviet: yes (ref. no)	0.721	0.824
Language used at home: Ukrainian and/or other, except for Russian (ref. other)	1.300	1.378
Heavy industry should be the basis for the development of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	0.751	0.672
Crimea is and will always be a part of Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	3.766***	1.492*
Russian must be the second state language in Ukraine: agree (ref. disagree)	4.097***	0.821
Was it necessary to demolish the monuments to Lenin?: yes (ref. no)	1.049	0.807
Was 11 May 2014 DPR referendum legitimate: agree (ref. disagree)	1.380*	1.251
Ukraine should be in Russia’s sphere of influence: agree (ref. disagree)	0.796	1.048
Ukraine is actually ruled by external forces such as the George Soros or Bill Gates organizations: agree (ref. disagree)	1.350*	0.647*
Constant	0.293	7.809***
Hosmer-Lemeshow Test (Sig.)	0.148	0.647
Nagelkerke R Square	0.161	0.016

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

“Mariupolocentrism” has no statistically significant predictors in terms of both ethnic and civic identities and geopolitical preferences. Their refusal to believe in the Russian propaganda myth may follow from their higher level of education and, consequently, greater capacity to critical thinking. We guess that their motivation to make Mariupol a regional centre is driven by rather economic than geopolitical reasons and reflects the desire to improve the position of Mariupol in the competition for resources, as well as economic and political influence (cf. PAASI, A. 2009).

Discussing the findings, it is necessary to keep in mind that the answers of the respondents could be potentially distorted by the

interviewer effect. The political situation in Ukraine and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict of the last 8 years could create some biases in the answers of the respondents. The general explanation for this is known as social desirability bias – respondents answer some sensitive questions in such a way as to comply with what they think society find more desirable, even if they hold only vague or no preferences on the issue or have a different opinion (BERINSKY, A.J. 1999). The respondents could avoid responses that might offend the interviewer of the opposing geopolitical preferences and of being frank (or at least franker) with similar views (cf. LIPPS, O. and LUTZ, G. 2010; NÉMETH, R. and LUKSANDER, A. 2018). In

particular, given that the interviewers represented the Kyiv-based sociological services, some respondents could have been inclined to conceal their sympathies for Russia and the separatist movements. However, the survey was performed by the reputed sociological institutes, and measures have been taken to eliminate the interviewers conveying significantly biased results during the test surveys prior to the main study.

Conclusions

The case of Mariupol shows how military events, accompanied by the spatial disintegration of the old regions with the emergence of new borders and front lines, lead to urban identity rethinking. The identity that prevailed before the conflict (e.g., Donbas identity) becomes stigmatized for a certain part of population as being associated with (geo)political rivals, war crimes, destruction, and decline. In order to escape from the stigmatized past, people start to search for a new identity, which may be invented *de novo* or represent already existing identity that had been silenced due to the historical circumstances but receives a new momentum for development (e.g., Pryazovia identity). At the same time, the case of Mariupol, a geopolitical fault-line city with already existing internal tensions and irreconcilable narratives (GENTILE, M. 2020), clearly shows that this identity rethinking is neither rapid nor straightforward. After almost a decade of the conflict, only tiny minority of Mariupolitans have developed strong new identity challenging the very grounds of the stigmatized old identity. Instead, Donbas identity appears quite persistent, while the new Pryazovia identity functions mainly as a complementary one. Such identity dualism may represent just a first step in escaping the stigmatised identity. However, the other possibility is that the majority of Mariupolitans are not consciously rejecting their old stigmatized identity but rather are starting to build it upon an alternative Ukraine-centric narrative. In this

way, stigmatized identity is redefined on a new ground by a part of population, which contributes to growing heterogeneity of Donbas identity (cf. KORZHOV, G. 2006; ZOLKINA, M. 2017).

The rethinking of identity is influenced also by the conflict-driven redrawing of political and administrative map. If the perceptual core of the existing region is cut off by the contact line or newly emerging administrative border, it loses its visible integrity, so the population of its peripheral parts is tempted to break with the old identity and seek a new one. Previous studies have demonstrated the dynamism of the region's perceptual boundaries due to the administrative changes in historical retrospective (cf. GNATIUK, O. and MELNYCHUK, A. 2019 for Ukraine; MAREK, P. 2020 for Czechia). The case of Mariupol, where Donbas identity is redefined and simultaneously gradually complemented/substituted by Pryazovia identity, allows us to contemplate this process in real time. As a result, the disappearance of old regional identity and the emergence of new identities are observed (cf. PAASI, A. 2009: "The institutionalization of a region is accompanied with the de-institutionalization of some other regional units which takes place either through integration or dispersion"). In this way, the military conflict revealed the internal heterogeneity of the Donbas, revitalizing informal borders artificially hidden by the Soviet administrative division (cf. SEMYVOLOS, I. 2016; ZOLKINA, M. 2017).

The search for a new identity includes re-assessment of the city's role in the region. "Mariupolocentrism" may be considered as a shift from the regional (Donbas) identity to local level (urban) identity. The public request for higher administrative status for Mariupol can be seen also as a desire to institutionalize (and, accordingly, legalize) a new regional identity as a projection of local urban identity. Transforming into the regional capital would be an attempt to officially map the territorial shape of the urban region (either redefined Donbas or newly minted Pryazovia). For some people, rethinking of identity may be driven

by rather economic than geopolitical reasons, since the official status of a regional centre would allow Mariupol to compete more successfully for resources: “Established regions are then ‘ready’ to be used in struggles over power and resources (which manifests itself most typically in regional policy)” (PAASI, A. 2009). Consequently, bearers of different markers of new identity may be quite diverse (up to contrasting) in terms of civic attitudes and geopolitical preferences. Nevertheless, in case of Mariupol, civic-national identity, including law abidance, shared beliefs and adherence to state-promoted values and institutions (SHULMAN, S. 2002; LEONG, CH. et al. 2020), is more relevant in understanding the military conflict driven identity transformation compared with ethnic-national identity (cf. GENTILE, M. 2015; GIULIANO, E. 2018; ALIYEV, H. 2019; KULYK, V. 2019) – a conclusion that may be extrapolated on the other geopolitical fault-line cities in Ukraine.

From the practical case-oriented point of view, the results of the survey might be important for further analysis of the situation in the region in a medium- and long-term perspective after the end of the war. Given that the city is currently destroyed, the status of Mariupol as the capital of Donetsk oblast is not relevant at least until its rebuilding, although the symbolical significance of a city substantially increased on the both sides of the conflict. The local territorial identity of Pryazovia might be used by the Russian occupational administration to legitimate establishment of a hypothetical “Pryazovia” statelet or a “federal region” as a part of Russia, exploiting the Pryazovia-focused kind of “Mariupolocentrism” with certain pro-Russian cultural sentiments. However, according to our analysis, the strongest bearers of Pryazovia identity clearly support pro-Ukrainian civic position and resist the Russian propaganda, therefore such attempts, if any, will most likely not be successful. On the other hand, if the city is recaptured by Ukrainian army, the idea of Pryazovia might be promoted by the Ukrainian state in order to build *de novo* the urban identity of a res-

urrected city and ultimately link it with the Ukrainian nation-state geopolitical narrative. This potentially refers not only to Mariupol, but to the other cities on the coast of Sea of Azov under the Russian occupation as well (Melitopol, Berdiansk, etc).

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