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‘To Peace, to Us – and to Donbas’: Identity Shifts during the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine

MA thesis

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Declaration of authorship

I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints, ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been referenced.

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This thesis conforms to the requirements for a Master's thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to compare the effect of conflict experience on sociopolitical attitudes, emotions and identity shifts of young people in two cities in the Donetsk province under Ukrainian governmental control. While the first city Kramatorsk fell under separatist control during the outbreak of the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine in 2014, the situation in the second one, Bakhmut, stayed largely calm.

The different experiences of conflict of the informants were presumed to have had an impact on their perceptions. Hence, this project examined the attitudes of young people in these two cities towards Ukraine and its nationalising policies, the political elites in the Ukrainian capital, the separatist movement and towards political and cultural affiliations to Russia.

Material for the in-depth examination consisted of 7 focus groups with overall 26 participants (13 in each city) conducted in these cities in Spring 2017. Themes were generated in a bottom-up way in the course of the evaluation and analysis of the focus group transcripts, field notes from participant observation and conversations in the two selected cities. The theoretical framework for the analysis is based on a set of constructivist literature, including Brubaker' triadic nexus (1995) and Fox' and Miller-Idriss' concept of 'everyday nationhood' (2008). This research adds valuable qualitative insights to the existing literature on changes of identities, behaviour and attitudes of civilian population under the circumstances of armed conflicts.

The research revealed, among other trends, that the more extreme the individual conflict-related experience of the focus group participants was, the less supportive seemed these focus group participants of DNR symbols and ideas. Additionally, the study results indicate that the focus group participants in Kramatorsk, who experienced the conflict stronger than most participants in Bakhmut, seemed to be more receptive to nationalising trends than their counterparts in Bakhmut – which indicates an impact of the experience of conflict on nationalising trends in the Ukrainian-controlled Donbas province.

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1. Introduction

A ‘Ukrainisation of Ukraine’ is what the Kyiv-based Peter Dickinson diagnoses in an op-ed article in the Atlantic Council. The demonstrations on Kyiv’s central Maidan, the ousting of Yanukovich, and the beginning of Russia’s hybrid war in 2014 led to ‘a national coming of age’, argues the British journalist. These developments are observed in the public spread of Ukrainian symbols, the ubiquitous national flag and vyshyvankas¹ as well as a poll conducted by the Ukrainian Razumkov Centre (2017), which revealed that more than 90 percent of Ukrainian residents identify as ethnic Ukrainians (Dickinson, 2017).

Many agree with this point. Regardless of Ukraine’s well-researched heterogeneity and its diverging political attitudes across the different regions in the country (Härtel, 2016), numerous researchers argue that the current conflict in the East of Ukraine contributed to the ‘formation and consolidation of Ukrainian national identity in those regions where it was traditionally considered weak, i.e. across the south and east of the country’ (Gentile, 2017: 9).

In a video debate with David Marples Taras Kuzio argues: ‘Conflict and war always changes identity very quickly [...] and in the case of Ukraine, we can thank Vladimir Putin for doing it’ (Ukrainian Nationalism, Volhyn 1943, and Decommunization, 2017). Studies of identity in conflict, such as, by Voors et al.’s (2012) research on Burundi, Bellows’ and Miguel’s study on violence in Sierra Leone (2009) and Coupé and Obrizan on Slovyansk and Kramatorsk (2016) revealed the impact that conflict or war-related experience have on attitudes, emotions or behaviour. This thesis will contribute to the study of populations affected by conflict-related violence.

Being an ethnography-based qualitative research project this thesis complements the research on identity changes in the East of Ukraine methodologically. In contrast to the predominantly polls- and survey-based research it illustrates and analyses the reality of ‘ordinary people’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) in two cities in the Donbas region, Kramatorsk and Bakhmut. By this, the research reveals possible tendencies of emotions and attitudes in these cities, and discusses their relation to the different experience of

¹ Ukrainian national costume

conflict. Overall this research project seeks to provide new analytical tools and insights for further research of war- and conflict-related changes of identities on the Ukrainian Donbas. Therefore, the main research question is:

What impact does the different experience of conflict have on the attitudes and emotions of young people, raised in independent Ukraine and living in the cities of Kramatorsk and Bakhmut in the Donbas region, towards Ukraine and Russia? Does it affect their attitude towards Ukrainian political elites in the capital, towards nationalising policies, the separatist movement and towards their political and cultural affiliations to Russia?

The rationale of this thesis is that a stronger experience of conflict has an impact on attitudes and emotions of young people and on how they relate to the aforementioned themes. In order to investigate how identities change under the circumstances of conflict and war, the researcher conducted fieldwork and ran focus groups in the two aforementioned cities in April and May 2017.

Kramatorsk and Bakhmut are similarly sized, similarly industrially developed, with similar average income, but, in spite of their geographic proximity, the cities faced a different fate in the conflict. Although political legitimacy has been challenged by separatists and their supporters in both cities, the situation in Bakhmut remained largely calm. In contrast, between April and July 2014 Kramatorsk became a base for the ‘hard power of guns and fighters’ (Wilson, 2014: 132).

The developments in the East of Ukraine were an unexpected shock to most scholars focusing on Ukraine and on countries of the former Soviet Union. Within a week from late February through the beginning of March 2014 Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula (Kofman et al., 2017: 1-10). Parallely to this, Russian intelligence fomented violent riots in the Ukrainian Donbas region resulting in a cyclic dynamic of the Donbas-conflict from ‘political, irregular, hybrid, and conventional’ between February and August 2014 (ibid.: 69). As the Ukrainian government officially decided not to call the on-going ‘anti-terrorist operation’ in the East of Ukraine a ‘war’, I stick to the terminology of an ‘armed conflict in the East of Ukraine’.

Though researchers largely agreed that the Donbas was in several ways different from the rest of Ukraine, nobody expected the outbreak of such a conflict. The academic

debates since the independence of Ukraine in 1991 did not discuss the possibility of clashes over separatism in Ukraine, but the compatibility of the ‘regional Donbas identity [...] with various forms of internal Ukrainian pluralism or civic identity’ (Wilson, 2016: 638). Through a qualitative approach, fieldwork and analysis of focus groups this research project investigated whether this ‘regional Donbas identity’ underwent significant changes since 2014.

The first part of the thesis introduces the theoretical framework of the dissertation. After the discussion of social constructivism and Bourdieu’s influence on the perception of the researcher, a discussion and adjustment of the theoretical model of Brubaker’s ‘triadic nexus’ (Brubaker, 1995) follows. This thesis presumes that Ukrainians with Ukrainian as a mother tongue across the country represent a supposed ‘core nation’, while the Russian speaking minority – or rather those, who speak Russian as the first mother tongue – are in the role of a constructed ‘national minority’, with Russia acting as an external ‘homeland’.

After discussing Brubaker’s theory, an illustration of the socio-political background of the Donbas region follows. I elaborate on the peculiar Donbas borderland identity, its history and regional myths. In order to turn away from Brubaker’s elite-centred focus and discuss the theoretical reasoning for the choice of my focus group method and research participants, this research integrated Fox and Miller-Idriss’ theoretical assumptions on ‘everyday nationalism’ (2008). According to these authors the current research on construction of nation, national identity and nationalism neglects the perceptions of ‘ordinary people’ – those who by their routine actions and discussions essentially construct national identity (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). The last theoretical subchapter deepens the discussion on the state of research on identities in conflict, followed by a formulation of assumptions, which are discussed in the empirical part. Concluding from the literature, the author presumes that the stronger experience of conflict leads to

- 1) less support among the focus groups of DNR symbols and ideas,
- 2) a stronger support of political elites in the capital,
- 3) a stronger support of processes of nationalizing, such as an increasing spread of the Ukrainian language and national symbols

- 4) a more critical political stance towards Russia and an increasing feeling of cultural distance.

The second chapter of the thesis elaborates on the methodology. In sum, the heart of my data consists of seven focus groups with 26 participants (13 in each city), my ethnographic field notes from various conversations and general observations from my stay in the Donbas. The set of prepared guiding questions² aimed to initiate discussions about the two main topics in the independently conducted focus groups. They set the ground for the emergence of the analysed themes. Besides focusing on the discussion of the guiding questions, I gathered reactions, emotions and associations of the participants when confronted with five different symbols: the Ukrainian flag, the Russian flag, the DNR flag, the symbol of the nationalist volunteer battalion Azov, and the flag of the historical Ukrainian Insurgent Army [UPA], which is contemporarily used by the Ukrainian nationalist movement 'Right Sector' [Praviy Sector]. I presumed that symbols are relevant for this research, because, firstly, the Ukrainian government and patriotic volunteers invested a lot of effort in plastering the two researched cities with symbols of the country, and, secondly, because such 'cultural ciphers' elicit feelings and thoughts individuals associate with them (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 545).

The sample of research participants includes youth, who did not go through the Soviet education system, do not know any 'other homeland' (Husyeu, 2017) and for whom 'there is nothing artificial about Ukrainian statehood' (Dickinson, 2017). The age of the focus group participants ranged from 16 years to 34.

In the fourth chapter, I illustrate, firstly, the background of the conflict in the east of Ukraine, and introduce the two cities on the basis of intensive research, interviews and ethnographic material. Consequently, I lead over to the analysis of themes, which emerged from the discussions in the focus groups in chapter five. I start with the analysis of the replies of my informants on the different experiences of conflict (5.1.). The different experiences of my research participants during the events in the East of Ukraine between February and August 2014 in these two cities are presumed to have had an impact on different attitudes towards the other themes.

² Appendix 1

In chapter five I compare the themes across the cases. I use quotes in the words of participants to illustrate their different perspectives. Resulting from the analysis of the focus group transcripts and a comprehensive evaluation of the data, I generated themes in a bottom-up way. I start with the analysis of informant replies on the different experiences of conflict. The different experiences in these two cities are presumed to have had an impact on different attitudes towards the following themes: the relation of research participants to the DNR, the current Ukrainian political elites which emerged during the Maidan revolution, the participant's attitudes to Russia, politically and culturally, and the Ukrainian nationalising policy in the region.

The discussion about the informants' experience of conflict in 2014 in many cases automatically led my participants to reflect on their and of their surroundings relation towards the DNR in 2014 (5.2.) and now (5.3.). A major finding of this section is that the more extreme the individual experience of conflict-related clashes personally was, the less supportive seem the focus group participants of DNR symbols and ideas.

The next subchapter (5.4.) is dedicated to the complicated and multi-layered relation of my focus group participants to Russia. The paradoxical relationship became most evident in their reactions to the Russian flag, which turned out to be more controversially discussed in Kramatorsk than in Bakhmut.

Following from the discussion of my informants' relationship to Russia I lead over to a discussion of their general mistrust towards political elites – locally and nationally (5.5.). The final empirical subchapter illustrates the different trends in the way 'nationalising' policies by the Ukrainian government in the cultural and linguistic spheres are perceived. This section reveals that the focus group participants in Kramatorsk and those in Bakhmut, whose experiences were strikingly similar to the informants in Kramatorsk, seemed to be more receptive to nationalising trends than their counterparts in Bakhmut – which indicates an impact of the experience of conflict on nationalising trends in the Ukrainian-controlled Donbas province. The final chapter draws conclusions.

1.1. Maps



Figure 1: Provincial borderlines of the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces (Wilson, 2014: 119)

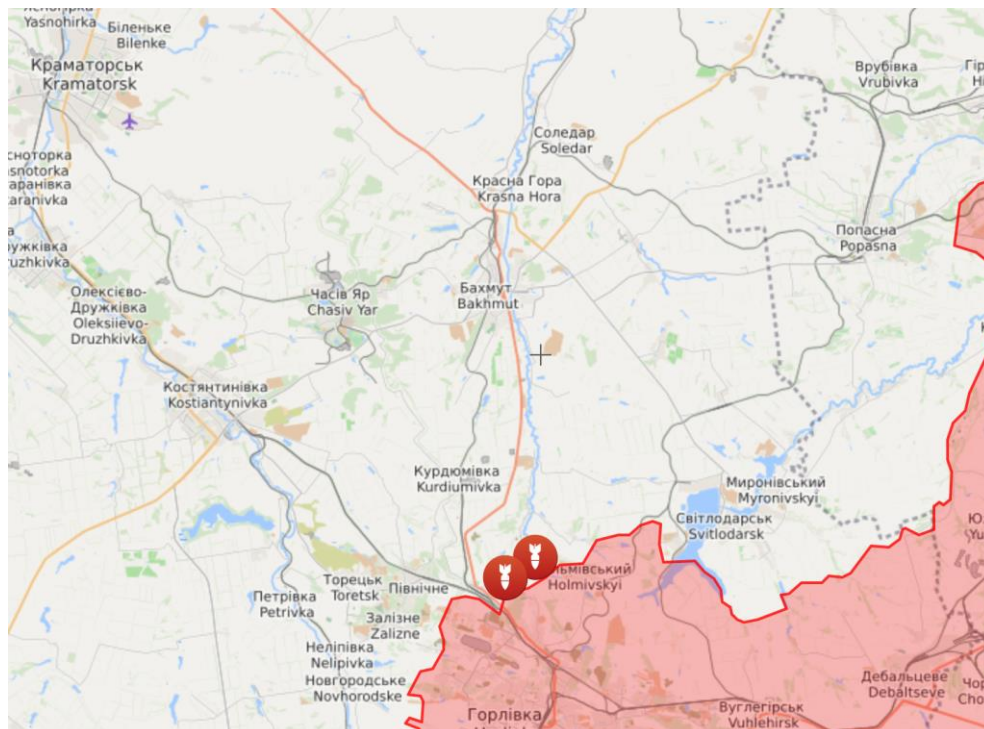


Figure 2: Frontline borders in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces (liveuamap, 22.08.2017)

2. Theoretical discussion

2.1. Investigating multiple realities: Social Constructivism

This thesis stands in the tradition of social constructivism. This theoretical paradigm presumes that the manner of the discourse constructs the way people perceive reality, and that empirical research and theories constitute each other continuously. In this view, the ‘object’ of study is not naturally given in an ‘objective reality’, but constructed by various actors in a ‘research interaction’ (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013: 26). Hence, social constructivists investigate the interplay, variety and intricacy of different and possibly mutually exclusive views instead of narrowing the understanding to generalised categories. They try to comprehend their cases by using a variety of theories through ‘interpretive techniques’ and ‘bridging’ their observations with reflections on their own positionality in the field (Creswell, 2007: 20f.).

This research project deals with the interpretation and relation of social agents to symbols, nations and identity. It lies within the broader research on collective and national identity, nations and nationalism (e.g. Mole, 2007: 5). In the constructivist view nations as much as the other entities, are ‘politically contested and historically contingent social constructs’ rather than ‘natural and enduring givens’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 549).

2.2. World through the lens of Bourdieu

Theories and methodological assumptions of Pierre Bourdieu shaped my perception of the world as ‘a fluid social construction with structured, structuring and symbolic structures’ (Costa, 2014), as much as my reflexive gaze during the fieldwork. As it is typical for Bourdieu-inspired research, I worked with an ‘eclectic mix of methods’, adjusted it over the course of my fieldwork and rejected any ‘constraints of methodological orthodoxy’ (Evans, 2016).

Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to emphasise that agents are constituted through the interplay of history, norms, education, family and other socioeconomic factors. The past structure of the field under study, crucial in the understanding of the *habitus* at present, is illustrated through a literature-based overview on the Ukrainian Donbas before 2014 and after the outbreak of the conflict. The historical and political developments are gradually ‘embedded’ in the *habitus* of the people in the region. To sum up, this literature overview sets the basis for understanding the historical formation of *habitus*.

Theoretically, habitus is conceptualised as a system of subjective but not individual dispositions, in which ‘structuring structures [are] predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53; Bourdieu, 2013: 72). It is an accumulated past and present internalised and shared by agents of a particular group in a distinctive region (Bourdieu, 1976: 165-188). People acquire these dispositions over their lives, through socialisation. Hence, the habitus of a group is shaped in the context of social relations, ‘by interactions within concrete social networks’ (Crossley, 2008: 93). Thus, for Bourdieu no action can be detached from the conditions of the habitus. The incorporated past experiences – not only by the agent, but also by his or her environment and particularly his or her family – function as a lens for action, perceptions and thoughts (Bourdieu, 1976: 169).

The basis of this research project is the analysis of the rich and complex empirical material with some references to ‘thinking tools’ (Grenfell, 2008: 2) by Pierre Bourdieu, rather than an extensive methodological application of his theory. Instead of limiting this research project on a set of fixed tools, the Bourdieusian lens inspired the action of the researcher during the fieldwork and helped gathering valuable insights on how different experience of conflict shapes people, their thoughts and identity – and, thereby, to some extent their habitus (Wilson, 2016: 636).

2.3. Theorising the borderland: Ukraine as a ‘nationalising state’, its Russian speakers in the Donbas and their alleged homeland

*Neither Ukraine, nor Rus,
I fear you Donbas, I fear you.*

*[Ne Ukraina i ne Rus
boius, Donbas, tebia boius, from Nikolai Domovotov, cited by Kuromiya, 2015: 5]*

This thesis situates the analysis of the field close to Brubaker’s triadic nexus. In his seminal work Brubaker conceptualises the triangular relations between a ‘nationalising state’, a ‘national minority’ and (imagined) external national ‘homelands’ (Brubaker, 1995:108). Brubaker perceives these three groups as engaged in an interrelational struggle:

1. the elites of a domestic ‘nationalising state’, of an alleged ‘core nation’, bolster

‘the language, culture, demographic position, economic flourishing, and political hegemony of the nominally state-bearing nation’ (Brubaker, 1995:109)

2. the (constructed) national minorities resist the elites of the nationalising state, and call for autonomy within the ‘nationalising state’
3. external ‘homelands’ allegedly seek to protect ‘their’ ethnic minorities as a result of a ‘sense of shared nationhood across political boundaries’ (Kuzio, 2001: 137).

According to Brubaker this triadic nexus is applicable to the countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, because of the legacy of a ‘distinctive Soviet system of institutionalized multi-nationality’ and the way the ‘centralized rule and state-wide economic integration had led to linguistic and demographic Russification’ (Brubaker, 2011: 1787). His conceptualisation gives us further analytical tools to understand the relations in the Ukrainian Donbas region.

Following Brubaker, this thesis presumes that Ukrainians with Ukrainian as a mother tongue (not necessarily the only mother tongue though) across the country are the ‘core nation’, while the Russian speaking minority – those who speak Russian as the first mother tongue – are in the role of a constructed ‘national minority’, with Russia as an external ‘homeland state’. This does not imply, however, that I perceive the Russian speakers in the Donbas as a real ‘ethnic’ minority, nor as supposedly ‘less’ Ukrainian than people with a Ukrainian mother tongue. Yet in the role of the constructed ‘external homeland’ Russia claims to defend its supposedly ‘co-ethnics across the border’ against potential discrimination by Ukraine (Clem, 2014: 230). These relations became crucial with the beginning of the conflict in 2014, when Russia’s president Vladimir Putin ‘portrayed his country’s role in Ukraine as safeguarding ethnic Russians worried by lawlessness spreading east from the capital’ (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014).

I point out that I did not categorise the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas in relation to Russia out of political reasoning, but firstly, because of the relevance of geographic proximity (e.g. Pop-Eleches, 2007: 909). Secondly, the categorisation seemed accurate, because plenty of research participants in both examined cities claimed their connection to Russia by their either still persisting strong family ties or by

emphasising that the ethnic background of the whole Donbas region – as a ‘settled region’ – is connected to Russia. This kind of historical memory, irrespective of whether it is based on facts or not, is an important pillar for strengthening of any kind of identity (Smith, 1991; Polegkyi, 2015: 170).

2.4. The Donbas as a land of freedom, terror, and dynamic interaction

In the Donbas the internalisation of history – particularly of myths surrounding Soviet and regional identities – and identification with an ethnically mixed population, merged into a regional, ‘borderland identity between Russian and Ukrainian’ (Wilson, 2014: 638). Kuromiya describes this borderland region as an imagined community (Anderson, 2006), which ‘lived up to its reputations of freedom and terror’ (1998: 4). The Donbas became both famous and infamous as a ‘land of freedom’ for outlaws and refugees of various ethnicities, fleeing from political persecution or economic difficulties (Wilson, 1995: 267; Kuromiya, 2015: 2). As a strategically important area in both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, the Donbas continuously required labour force willing to commit to hard and dangerous industrial labour in the extractive economy. This commitment was glorified in the Soviet Propaganda when mine workers were lavished with honours. Urbanisation accompanied this fast economic development. Heavy industrialisation started around 1860s (Wilson, 1995: 279) and was actively subsidised with international investments from Western Europe since the 1880s (Balaban et al., 2017: 20). The Donbas became an ethnic melting pot, where diverse groups mutually constituted each other. ‘Interaction’ in a literal as well as in the constructivist sense was the natural reality.

In contrast to the history of freedom, stands the legacy of terror. Thousands of Donbas inhabitants were imprisoned during the Stalinist terror in the 1930s (Kuromiya, 1993: 217). In addition, the rural population of Eastern Ukraine starved to death on a large scale during the famine following Stalin’s forceful collectivisation in 1932-1933. This crisis is mourned in Ukraine as the Holodomor (Snyder, 2010: chapter 1). After the murderous depopulation of the area, mainly Russian settlers were moved to these lands to fill the labour gap. Wilson states that the ‘region’s pre-Soviet Cossack-agricultural history died with the Holodomor’ (2016: 636).

With the increasing influx of Russian speakers after the thirties and World War II (WWII), the influence of Russian language and culture increased. Russification led to a restriction of access to 'Ukrainian schools, mass media and culture' (Wilson, 1995: 275). While most of schooling was in Ukrainian language during the interwar period, the number of Ukrainian language schools declined steadily since the 1950s. Social realities and language education shifted towards Russification. In 1933 more than 60 per cent of pupils were still studying in Ukrainian in the Donbas. In 1989, two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union and in a time when ethnic identifications were more related to the choice of the language spoken, more than 60 percent of Donbas inhabitants declared Russian as their 'native tongue' (Wilson, 1995: 267).

It is notable, however, that it was not forbidden to educate the children in Ukrainian since the end of the 1950s. The number of nominal Russian speakers increased also because local Ukrainians tended to send their children to Russian speaking schools even if they were not coerced to do so (Wilson, 1995: 275). During the Soviet time, acquiring Russian skills became a valuable form of 'symbolic capital' (Riabchuk, 2009; Balaban et al., 2017: 23; Moore, 2008: 103-106), as Russian was the dominant language in the Soviet Union (Smith, 2013: 220f.). The devaluation of this capital with the dissolution of the Soviet Union led the Ukrainian government to encourage the spread of Ukrainian school curricula. The increase happened, however, not to the same extent in all regions of Ukraine: while the school education in Ukraine was almost exclusively in Ukrainian in the West and the centre of the country by 2011, Russian still dominated the curricula in the East and Southeast of Ukraine (Brubaker, 2011: 1800).

Reflecting on the historical legacies of the region and based on my observations during the fieldwork, I stick to the terminology of 'Russian speakers' instead of 'ethnic Russians' used by scholars like Clem when applying Brubaker's theory (2014: 230). The first reason is that various polls indicate a constant change of identity alignments in Ukraine since 1989. Increasingly, people who formerly identified as ethnic Russians tend to identify as ethnic Ukrainians (Brubaker, 2011: 1793). The second reason lies in the changing number of ethnic Ukrainians in Ukraine particularly over the time of the current conflict since 2014. The increase from 86 percent of people in Ukrainian identifying as 'ethnic Ukrainians' up to 92 percent in 2017 is too high to be explained

solely by a demographic shift within Ukraine due to the conflict (Razumkov Centre, 2017).

Thirdly, many research participants, who were native Russian speakers, did not identify ethnically as simply 'Russian': the answers in the distributed questionnaires³ ranged from Russian, Ukrainian, Ukrainian and Russian to even Slavic. These ambiguous 'mixed and fluctuating identities are characteristic of borderland populations' (Brubakers, 2011: 1793). As I will illustrate later, the relevance of history, family and cultural ties to Russia does not necessarily reflect the political stances of my participants towards their supposed 'external homeland'.

Though the minority might fluctuate in their political and cultural alignment, it remains crucial for an external 'homeland' that 'political or cultural elites' claim the belonging to the same nation regardless of national borders. According to triadic nexus the national minority is torn between the 'two antagonistic nationalisms': on the one hand, the country perceived as a 'homeland' and, on the other, the country the minority is settled in (Brubaker, 1995: 108f.). The 'external homeland' seeks to intervene into the relations between the national minority and their 'new homeland'. As soon as the minority feels that their identity is threatened by the majority, the interrelational structure can lead the minority to actively seek support from the 'external homeland' and the 'homeland' to take action by any means (Brubaker, 1995: 110).

Brubaker emphasises that the perception of external 'homeland' does not necessarily need to be based on any family-based or historical connection of the minority. Thus, "'Homeland" is a political, not an ethnographic category; homelands are constructed, not given' (Brubaker, 1995: 110). By this, Brubaker's notion of homelands, resembles Anderson's definition of nations as 'imagined communities', in which 'members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006: 6-7). Nonetheless, actors construct a common history and culture as a representation of the self and as a tool for political agency. These constructed narratives are continuously produced, reproduced, and adjusted. They

³ all research participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire about them and their family. The questionnaire can be found in appendix 2.

are not static, and change in line with political developments and sociopolitical discourses (Hall, 2003).

The character of Brubaker's model of interrelational field comes close to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of dynamic fields. Brubaker argues that his all three fields, the national minority, perceived homeland and nationalising country, are intertwined. Within the fields 'an arena of struggle among competing stances' exists (Brubaker, 1995: 118). Bourdieu conceptualises his field as an amalgam of objective historical relations, based on peculiar forms of power embodied in capital. This means that history and experience of the agents in the field structure and are structured by the field. The capital relevant in the field is in turn embodied in the habitus of the agents. A common comparison to illustrate Bourdieu's field concept are playing fields. Every playing field has its own rules, goals of the agents, conflicts and relevant resources to win the game played on the field. The agent's actions, success or failure in the playing field depends on their resources (or 'capital') and the habitus (Fuchs-Heinritz and König, 2011: 140-145; Thomson, 2008).

Both Brubaker and Bourdieu assume that these fields not only represent a base for homogenous groups or actors, but are also playgrounds for the struggle of various actors. In Bourdieu's notion agents, who have internalised a feel for the rules, seek to keep or to accumulate capital relevant for the field or to manipulate the rules to their advantage (Fuchs-Heinritz and König, 2011: 145-149). In Brubaker's case, this struggle means, on the one hand, mobilising supposedly ethnic kin against the supposedly host state, which is often depicted as 'nationally oppressive' (Brubaker, 1995: 118). On the other hand, Brubaker infers that the struggle within the field might be inverted by presenting, in the present case, Ukraine as the only real motherland instead of the oppressive nationalising state – as many of my informants did. In their view, the 'external homeland' Russia is now the oppressive state, intervening into the territory of their 'new' home country. Thus, Brubaker's and Bourdieu's theoretical models, with their different angles on societal dynamics, provided complementary thinking tools at different stages of this research, and illuminated the complex interrelational struggles in the field of the 'national minority'.

However, the application of Brubaker's theory is cautious and limited because of the following reasons. Firstly, according to Kuzio, the terms 'nationalist, nationalism

and nationalising’ might be too blurry for the Ukrainian case. He argues that Brubaker classifies policy as nationalist arbitrarily. Nationalising policies – often referred to as Ukrainisation – in Ukraine, for instance, can be simply perceived as ‘nation building’ (Kuzio, 2001: 140). However, this peculiar nation building can be still discussed from various stances, it can have nationalist elements – and certainly does in the field of memory politics (see Kulyk, 2017). The nationalising policy promoting the Ukrainian language (ibid.) evoked heated discussions in the two cities researched.

Secondly, Brubaker’s elite-centred concept directs the attention away from the analysis of voices and dynamics on the ground. While Brubaker criticises the ‘dyadic’ analyses for depicting the minority torn between two states as apathic (Brubaker, 1995: 123) and emphasises their agency within its field, he neglects, the positions, agency and perceptions of the ‘ordinary people’. He presumes them to be just recipients of nationalist ideas, which elites impose on them. The reality in Donbas – particularly since the beginning of the conflict in 2014 – is more complex. Roles of elites are sometimes overstated, sometimes understated, and their effect on the people varies strikingly. Thus, Brubaker overlooks the dynamics of ‘everyday nationalism’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) to which people living in such a border area as the Donbas are exposed to, and neglects the ‘synergy between local and translocal dynamics’ (Polese, forthcoming: 162).

2.5. Looking at the ‘ordinary people’

To avoid Brubaker’s elite-centrism, this research integrates Fox and Miller-Idriss’ assumptions on ‘everyday nationalism’ (2008). They reverse the elite-centred trend in current research on national identity and nationalism by studying reflections of ‘ordinary people’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 538-542). Fox and Miller-Idriss identify the ‘nation as a discursive construct’, which is ‘embodied, expressed and sometimes performed’ in the daily lives of social agents, namely the ‘ordinary people’ (ibid.: 537-542). The authors agree that nation- as well as nationalism-building is actively pursued by elites through ‘standardizing, universalizing, bureaucratizing and culturally indoctrinating processes’ (ibid.: 549). They add, however, that this does not say much about the reception, interpretation and realisation of this input by social agents.

Similarly, Polese analyses how identity was reproduced and performed daily in Ukraine during the Orange revolution. He investigates how identity questions were challenged ‘at the daily and then national level’ (Polese, forthcoming: 162). Though he alludes to the impact that this revolution had for the social interplay between Ukrainians from East and West of the country, his research neglects the East Ukrainian scepticism towards the Orange revolution. His ethnographic article was, nevertheless, inspiring as it put emphasis on the issues of ‘language attitudes, political activism and perception of the other (Russia)’ – themes I also discussed with my focus group participants. Thus, this research follows Polese, Fox and Miller-Idriss in their conviction that ‘nation building can be conceived, performed and engaged in with by people or organizations of people’ (Polese, forthcoming: 163).

2.6. Identities in conflict

The conflict in Ukraine is one of the most recent and still ongoing conflicts, which provides a unique opportunity to research how conflict affects identity in real time. By this, the thesis is in a dialogue with authors like Bellows and Miguel (2009), who examined how the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) affected the political participation of the people. Those participants of their study, who were directly exposed to war experiences, had a higher voting turnout and were more likely to be more socially and politically active. In another research project Voors et al. found out that in Burundi those people, who experienced cruelty themselves, tended to behave more altruistically than those, who did not experience it (2012).

In the context of recent conflict-related literature on Ukraine, the study of Coupé and Obrizan researched a similar subject. The authors analysed perceptions of people in Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, two cities which were both severely hit by the conflict in the East of Ukraine (2016: 201). Coupé and Obrizan researched the effect of ‘personally experiencing the consequences of violence on political participation, views and knowledge, using individual level data from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine’ (Coupé and Obrizan, 2016: 201). Their study revealed stronger support for pro-Western parties among people who personally experienced conflict-related actions than among those who did not. Their findings indicated that those affected by property damage seemed

less likely to compromise with Russia as a solution to the conflict and less supportive of ‘keeping Donbas a part of Ukraine’ (Coupé and Obrizan, 2016: 210).

A recent study by the Berlin-based institute ZOiS (Sasse, 2017) is more similar to this thesis project. Using surveys the researchers investigated how the ongoing conflict in the East of Ukraine affected the identities and attitudes of people living on both sides of the contact line. Regardless of the deadlocked situation between the conflict parties, the study revealed that people stayed in touch with each other beyond the frontline. It illustrated that on both side of the frontline people think more similarly than previous research had suggested. For instance, around 14 percent on the government controlled side and around 20 percent in the currently occupied territories became increasingly convinced that due to the conflict they identify as both Russian and Ukrainian (Sasse, 2017: 1).

In the ZOiS study the majority of the survey participants identified Russian as their native language, roughly 50 percent in the Ukrainian controlled Donbas and about 60 percent in the DNR or LNR (Sasse, 2017: 7). In addition to these 50 percent, more than thirty percent on both sides confirmed a ‘bilingual identity’ with both Russian and Ukrainian languages as their mother tongues (ibid.). Besides these points, the survey results indicate identity shifts on the Ukrainian controlled side of the Donbas over the last five years, changing from stronger identification as a ‘Ukrainian citizen’ five years ago to a higher importance of a Ukrainian ethnic identity or a regional Donbas identity more recently (Sasse, 2017: 6f.).

This thesis complements the previously reviewed literature on identity in conflicts and particularly in the East of Ukraine with a different methodological stance. In contrast to Coupé, Obrizan, and Sasse, rather than focusing on the examination of polls and surveys this thesis investigates the changing of attitudes and identity affiliations in the Donbas by employing a qualitative analysis in a dynamic focus group environment. Topics were introduced by the researcher during these group talks, and resulted in different emerging themes induced by the research participants. By this, the research revealed the ‘basic interests of respondents.’ Such qualitative approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the fluidity of opinions (Herbst, 1992: 221).

A further distinctive feature of this research project is its inspiration by a comparative model. The researcher analysed similarities and differences in two cities,

whose political control was contested in 2014, but which are again under full control of the Ukrainian government. The population of these cities was, however, exposed to strikingly different experiences in 2014. The next chapter is dedicated to methodology, which helped me to answer the following research question:

What impact does the different experience of conflict have on the attitudes and emotions of young people, raised in independent Ukraine and living in the cities of Kramatorsk and Bakhmut in the Donbas region, towards Ukraine and Russia? Does it affect their attitude towards Ukrainian political elites in the capital, towards nationalising policies, the separatist movement and towards their political and cultural affiliations to Russia?

3. Research Design: Qualitative Analysis inspired by a comparative method

This thesis is qualitative and inspired by a most similar system design with a small n-case study. Most similar system designs are common in social sciences and particularly in the field of area studies, where it is often required to point out and explain differences in research objects (such as countries or cities) while illustrating and controlling the commonalities of them. This research investigates the different perceptions in two industrial, similarly located, sized cities in the Ukrainian controlled Donbas, where most inhabitants experienced the conflict in 2014 differently. The cities of Bakhmut and Kramatorsk are the cases analysed.

3.1. Case Study research

Case study research is defined by Creswell as ‘a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases), through detailed, in-depth data collection’ (2007: 73). Gathering evidence for qualitative studies is, to put it with Gerring and Creswell, ‘naturalistic (a “real-life context”)', based on holistic assumptions (Gerring, 2007: 94). Therefore, qualitative research enables examining a holistic picture of a research object, focusing on ‘the world of lived experience’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 8). The researcher becomes the ‘key instrument’ for collecting data in the field, observing researching participants in their natural environment, and listening to stories of ‘silenced voices’. Instead of limiting the study on ‘cause-and-effect relationships’, qualitative researchers investigate various perspectives on a situation, illuminating a larger picture (Creswell, 2007: 36-40).

During the process of my qualitative research, I reflected on my positionality in the field and sought to interpret ‘phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3). To illustrate this, I use quotes in the words of participants. Resulting from the evaluation and analysis of the focus groups transcripts, field notes from participant observation and conversations in the two selected cities, I generated themes in a bottom-up way. The data was categorised in the phase of analysis into ‘more abstract units of information’ (Creswell, 2007: 39f.). I remained open for adjustments of the research and guiding questions, and flexible for new participants for my study over the process of fieldwork. The collected data was systemised through the qualitative software Nvivo. During the coding process, I developed a system of codes and categories (‘nodes’), and derived the examined themes, making the analysis a bottom-up process. Strength of this case study comparison lies in its application of multiple methods to investigate ‘ordinary people’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) located in two cities of the same region.

From the review of the existing literature on identity in conflict and particularly on the conflict in the East of Ukraine, I cautiously generated the following assumptions discussed in the empirical part:

The stronger the experience of conflict personally was

- the less supportive are the focus group participants of DNR symbols and ideas. Thereby, the focus groups in Kramatorsk should show a weaker support for DNR than the groups in Bakhmut.
- the more supportive is the perception of elites in the capital. Thereby, the focus groups in Kramatorsk should show a higher support of the elites in Kyiv than the groups in Bakhmut.
- the more supportive are the focus group participants of processes of nationalizing, such as an increasing spread of the Ukrainian language and national symbols. Thereby, the focus groups in Kramatorsk should show a higher support for these kind of policies than the groups in Bakhmut.
- the more critical are the focus group participants of Russia politically and distanced culturally. Thereby, the focus groups in Kramatorsk should be more critical of Russia's politics and culture than the groups in Bakhmut.

3.2. Ethnographically inspired research

The epistemological assumptions discussed in the theoretical part are put into practice using ethnographically inspired research methods. By conducting the focus groups, talking to participants before and after the groups, and taking field notes, I tried to reduce the distance between me and my research subjects (Creswell, 2007: 18). During the days I spend in the cities, I tried to get a feeling for the places I have been to and to investigate information about them, which were difficult to acquire before, such as average income in the cities.

Ethnography as a method is typically 'used to study culture (meaning systems) or other aspects of the broadly conceived social, such as economy, power (politics), or social structure' (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013: 27f.). Crucial method of ethnographic research is participant observation. Consequently, this thesis is the written outcome from my data collected in the field, during the fieldwork as much as during the focus groups.

3.3. Sampling

The basis of this study consists of seven focus groups with the total of 26 participants, a background interview with one of the participants in Bakhmut, and field notes from participant observation in the analysed cities between 22nd April and 9th May 2017. Four focus groups were conducted in Kramatorsk and three in Bakhmut. As the experience of conflict of internally displaced people is expected to be entirely different to city inhabitants without the experience of displacement, this analysis excluded them from the research. All focus groups were conducted in Russian and lasted between one and two hours. All participants of the focus groups were recruited via snowball sampling with the help of the intermediary Ulyana Egorova, who works for the organisation 'Responsible Citizens' [Otvettstvennye Grazhdane].

The chosen sampling method is a typical method for recruiting people for such sensitive research topics. Due to Ulyana's regular work-related trips over the whole (Ukrainian government-controlled) Donbas area, I gained access to a diverse network of people from different strata of the society, with different educational and social backgrounds and various political views and experiences. By gaining access to Ulyana's broad local networks I avoided 'capturing a biased subset', a common problem with snowball sampling (Morgan, 2008: 816).

I chose to analyse youth groups, who did not go through the Soviet education system to minimise the impact this might have had on personal development of people. The age of my participants ranged from 16 years to 34. Authors like Yuriy Husyev, former Deputy Minister of Defence of Ukraine (2015-2016) emphasise the different generational beliefs, sets of values and notions that divide the Ukrainian society. Husyev depicts the generation born in 1980s and 1990s as the first one that does not know any 'other homeland' and who feel more committed to the Ukrainian state (Husyev, 2017).

From a Bourdieusian point of view, however, the impact of the parent and even grandparent generation might be bigger than Husyev assumes. As mentioned before the habitus of the people is constituted by the environment, societal structures and families they are raised in (Bourdieu, 2013: 72-76). Being aware of this, I tried to gather mostly young people, who were 1) raised in the cities I chose as my cases and 2) whose parents were socialised in the Donbas region. With the Bourdieusian relevance of family

influence in mind, I expected to get a more representative picture of the regional youth. This made the focus groups I examined by default diverse enough to have a more representative sample for the cities, but still homogenous enough to enable fruitful discussions without possible discriminative factors such as a supposedly unequal relationship between the participants based on age difference.

3.4. Focus Groups

In relation to my research question I sought to investigate the youth groups in a dynamic social research environment. Focus groups are interactive by definition. On a broad level, they can be defined as ‘collective conversations or group interviews’ (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 887). The particular ‘interaction’ in a focus group setting enables a contextualisation of ‘historical and cultural settings of the participants’ (Creswell, 2007: 21) and reveals valuable insights on the social discourse and dynamics in which opinions are brought up. On the one hand, this dynamic disclose ‘unarticulated norms and normative assumptions’ of the research participants, but also their ‘particular memories, positions, ideologies, practices and desires’ (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 902-904).

Fox and Miller-Idriss recommend this ‘dialogic, and democratic practice’ method (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005: 887) for ‘capturing variation in the nuance and texture of everyday nationhood’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 555). They argue that the method of focus groups is useful to grasp the reproduction of nation and nationhood, which is elicited ‘through talk and interaction’ and by ‘performing the nation’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 537-542). Their argument is in line with Bourdieu-affiliated researchers like Pouilot who argue that focus groups minimise the impact of the behaviour of the interviewer on the research situation. Besides that, a focus group, with its ‘non-discursive forms’ and bodily expressions during the exercise, can be treated as a performance itself (Pouilot, 2013: 54; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 555).

Before I arrived in Kramatorsk, I communicated with Ulyana extensively over social media about my research and about the desired sample. Over the time of the fieldwork, I discussed all my concerns with her, and adjusted the research process in accordance with the development of my fieldwork. Almost all of the focus groups were conducted in cosy café environments in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut.

Research adjustments to the initial plan included the number of participants. Initially, I planned to conduct four focus groups with five participants each. During the first focus group on the 23rd April one participant, who did confirm his attendance before, did not show up. Instances of people being late or needing to leave early were common and are common when applying this method (Barbour, 2005: 45). For these reasons, the number of participants in the focus groups ranged from two participants to maximum six. During one focus group in Bakhmut the unplanned participant was from a different settlement than the city under research. In spite of his 'difference' I decided to keep him in my sample, to see whether his attendance might trigger interesting comparisons in the group.

The set of prepared guiding questions aimed to initiate discussions about the two main topics and set the ground for the emergence of further themes. In the course of the group talk, I asked the participants what they associate with five different symbols: the Ukrainian flag, the Russian flag, the DNR flag, the symbol of the nationalist volunteer battalion Azov, and the flag of the historical Ukrainian Insurgent Army [UPA], which is nowadays used by the Ukrainian nationalist movement 'Right Sector' [Pravii Sektor]. I presumed that symbols are relevant for this research, because, firstly, the Ukrainian government and patriotic volunteers invested a lot of effort in plastering the two researched cities with symbols of the country, and, secondly, because such 'cultural ciphers' elicit feelings and thoughts individuals associate with them (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 545). It seemed clear that the nationalising 'Ukrainisation' policy initiated by the post-Maidan political elites in the capital sought to establish 'nation, or people [...] one with their state' by enhancing 'the promotion of standardized languages, national (and nationalist) educational curricula' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 536f.). Hence, I discussed with the participants their relationship to these symbols, the changes in the city since the beginning of the conflict, their personal experiences and identity-related thoughts, emotions and reflections. To complement information and gain relevant information about the family background of informants at the start of every focus group, I distributed a questionnaire gathering some basic demographic data⁴.

All the focus groups were recorded on audio files, with the consent of all participants. The audio recorder was clearly visible in all situations of the research. I

⁴ You will find a sample of this questionnaire as appendix 2 attached to this thesis

moved the cassette recorder from place to place, but usually at some point the group members just took over this task, and started passing it to each other. This increased the interactive element of the work. I would take some notes, but did it in a way so that all participants could see what I was writing down. From the feedback I received after some focus groups I can judge that such openness increased the level of trust between me and the participants.

A danger of focus group research on such sensitive topics might be potential self-censorship by group participants. I tried to neutralise this by working as transparently as possible and emphasising that, firstly, the information will be anonymised and, secondly, I am not there to judge anyone. I was there to listen and told them that I appreciate every opinion. The only thing that I requested was that they respect each other opinions the same way I do it. By the last phrase, I tried to prevent people censoring themselves because of other participants. In addition to that, Ulyana introduced me and my research project. Because of the snowball sample, she was familiar with at least one participant in every focus group. This facilitated the process of trust-building, as most of the people perceived her as an open person. Over the course of the focus groups all participants stayed respectful, even when they disagreed on various points. Because people living in the same cities often experienced similar events – though in some cases from different angles – they could mostly relate to each other and complement each other's experiences during the group talks.

3.5. Ethical and axiological considerations

The anonymity and security of the research participants remained the highest priority of that research. The sensitivity of the topic caused understandable suspicion among some of the focus group participants. I sought to be as open with the research participants as possible and to inform them about the character of the project they participate in. All participants supported the project voluntarily (Christians, 2005: 144f.). Overall, I think I could dissolve this suspicion in most of the cases – also due to the excellent assistance of Ulyana or longer conversations I had with some individuals before the actual focus group.

Being aware that qualitative research is 'value-laden and that biases are present' (Creswell, 2007: 17f.), I tried to minimise them by reflecting on them and trying to

distance myself from political alignments or judgemental behaviour as much as possible. As I pointed out, I focused on the words of the participants more than on my interpretation of them. When I entered the field for my research in the Donbas, I was politically convinced that I support the Maidan revolution, and democratic change in Ukraine. I was aware, however, that my opinion is not shared by everyone in the cities. I also came to realise that participants have different notions of various terms, 'democratic change' is only one example. Hence, over the time of the research I avoided own political contributions to discussions to avoid a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1980), in which people avoid contributions out of the fear of social isolation or judgemental treatment by me as a researcher.

3.6. Positionality of the researcher

I reflected on my positionality as a researcher in the field and the impact my social situation might have for the research. As qualitative research is based on an examination of what researchers 'see, hear, and understand' (Creswell 2007: 39), I acknowledge that my personal background, my 'cultural, and historical experiences' inevitably impact not only my views but also how people perceive me in the field. Hence, I adhere to the notion that the reality I am describing and analysing is 'filtered through my lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 6). I reflected on the power relations in the field between me and the participants of the study, created by economic, educational, institutional inequality and already by the simple fact that since 2004 I have the German citizenship.

My family emigrated from Russia and Ukraine to Germany in 1991, when I was five months old. Though I was raised in Germany, I learned Russian at home as the first language in my childhood. My family has a Ukrainian-Jewish background. My parents were born and raised in Ukraine. Over the course of this research I realised that my (at least) bicultural background and the fluency in a Russian working class sociolect significantly facilitated access to, research and communication in the Donbas. Theoretically speaking, the proficiency in this Russian sociolect turned out to be a valuable symbolic capital (Riabchuk, 2009; Moore, 2008: 103-106), in the sense of Bourdieu, which eased access and communication with the local population in these predominantly working class cities.

3.7. Emotional Involvement

While I was preparing for the fieldwork, I reflected on possible emotional involvement while researching in a conflict or conflict-affected area. Even though I was aware that full ‘neutrality on the researcher’s part is practically unachievable’ (Malyutina, forthcoming), I tried to stay as politically and emotionally distant as possible. I did expect, prior going to these cities, to hear breath-taking conflict-related stories. In such cases, the strategy I prepared proved to be useful: When I spotted emotional involvement, I accepted these feelings – but postponed dealing with them after I exit the field. Following this strategy, I tried to keep my field notes as neutral as possible, remained in the constant awareness of the inequality of power between me as a researcher and the participants in which I cannot avoid representing ‘university-based authority’ while undertaking fieldwork in a ‘local community’ (Christians, 2005: 146). These reflections, the psychological strategy and the short period of the fieldwork made me as far from an insider as possible, while it still enabled me to shed light on the conflict-affected participants in the East of Ukraine and to make their reality visible (Helbardt et al., 2010: 349).

The following chapter illustrates and introduces the background of the conflict, and provides largely ethnographic descriptions of both cities.

4. Empirical Part I: Background of the cases

4.1. Igniting the fire: Background on the conflict in the East of Ukraine

In the end of November 2013 former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich decided against signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in the framework of its Eastern Partnership programme. This decision sparked mass protests on Kyiv's Independence Square [Maidan Nezalezhnosti], better known as simply 'Maidan'. Demonstrations and the reaction by the government escalated violently and led to the removal of Yanukovich from office in February 2014. Together with some close political allies Yanukovich escaped to Russia (Clem, 2014: 219). From a Russian political perspective, the following takeover of the political power by a quickly consolidated pro-Western interim government was considered a sudden loss of political and economic leverage in one of its most relevant neighbour countries (Kofman et al., 2017: 1).

The immediate Russian reaction was to initiate two military operations to regain strategic influence over Ukraine again. Within a week from late February through the beginning of March 2014 Russia seized control of Crimea by invasion, occupation and finally annexation of the peninsula (Kofman et al., 2017: 1-10). Parallel to the developments in Crimea, Russian intelligence incited violent riots in the East of Ukraine resulting in a cyclic dynamic of the Donbas-conflict from 'political, irregular, hybrid, and conventional' in the period of February to August 2014 (ibid.: 69).

Military action in both cases was accompanied by severe mass propaganda campaign in Russian media outlets. Kofman et al. emphasise that the Russian disinformation attempts – targeting not only Ukrainian audiences, but also the domestic Russian audience and Russian speakers worldwide – had (and still have) three crucial goals: 'discrediting the new government in Ukraine, emphasizing the grave danger to Russians in Ukraine, and ensuring the display of broad support for Crimea's 'return home' to the safety of Russia' (Kofman et al., 2017: 13).

The Russian media propaganda in 2014, however, took advantage of severe political mistakes by the Ukrainian government, such as the abolition of the special status of the Russian language. This and similar political decisions fuelled the anxiety of Russian speakers in the East of Ukraine, increased their mistrust and eased the preparation of a fruitful ground for 'a rapid and well-coordinated deployment of Russian

forces' (ibid.: xii).

In the shadow of the ubiquitous anxiety and insecurity about the political developments in Kyiv, dubious figures, mostly with a criminal background or criminal ties appointed themselves as 'people's mayors' and 'people's governors'. The Ukrainian government neglected the internal dynamics in the Donbas region as well as the well-researched divisions of the country (e.g. Rodgers, 2006; Wilson, 2015) and condemned the protests in this region as deliberate Russian provocations. Though Russian intelligence, individuals with imperialist beliefs and propagandists may have played a significant role in fuelling the public anger in the beginning of the protests, however, the vexation and public uproar in the East of Ukraine were real and most of the demonstrators locals (Kofman et al., 2017: 33-34).

However, Russia supported the Ukrainian riots through their intertwined oligarchic, business and criminal networks in the Donbas, with intelligence agents, and an informal network of former combatants from previous wars in the post-Soviet space. Russian tactics seemed to support and employ a variety of individuals, who were only unified in their hostility towards the new Ukrainian government, such as mercenary soldiers, nationalists and paramilitaries (ibid.: 38-40). Instead of a coordinated operation pursuing strategic political goals, 'Russia invested in a mess' (ibid.: 67).

Armed separatists captured administration buildings all over East Ukraine from 6th April to 23rd April. The city halls of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk were seized on 12th April. Police forces in the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Slovyansk and Kramatorsk were either afraid of the separatists or deserted to them. The Ukrainian army was puzzled and overstrained with the situation and clueless about how to tackle the separatists and their civilian supporters (ibid.: 40f.).

The conflict dynamic can be seen with the help of Brubaker's previously discussed model. Vast part of the Russian speaking 'minority' felt under threat – regardless of whether the threat was real or not – by the political takeover of representatives of the supposed Ukrainian 'core nation', and their looming nationalising policies. With the beginning of the Russian annexation of Crimea, Russia deliberately presented itself as an 'external homeland state', defending its supposedly 'co-ethnics across the border'

against potential discrimination by Ukraine (Clem, 2014: 230; Council on Foreign Relations, 2014).

Instead of framing the conflict as a war, the Ukrainian interim government signed a declaration starting the so-called anti-terrorist operation in the East of Ukraine (Balaban et al., 2017: 35; ZN.UA, 2014). By choosing this terminology, Ukraine remained eligible for continuous reception of international economic assistance (Yekelchuk, 2015: 151). Most people I talked to in Kramatorsk, however, seemed rather skeptical towards the term ‘anti-terrorist operation’:

- FG4-Af: *They are saying, this is not war. That this is just a conflict, terrorist acts and so on. But I do not know, what is war then if this is not war?*⁵

During spring 2014, the positions of the various involved individuals and groups swayed between a federalisation of Ukraine or a full secession with the goal to join Russia (Kofman et al., 2017: 40). Former key figures of the separatist movement, such as Igor Girkin [nom de guerre: Strelkov] for instance, counted on a Russian military invasion in the Donbas similarly to the Crimean annexation. As illustrated in the empirical chapter, various focus group participants confirmed that the hope for a Crimean scenario fomented the public support in the cities for separatist rebels.

In the beginning of July the fights in the north of the Donetsk region escalated again. In the course of these fights, the groups around Girkin withdrew their fighters from cities like Slovyansk, Kramatorsk and Artemivsk/Bakhmut for the city of Donetsk (Balaban et al., 2017: 39). Not long after this withdrawal, Girkin and other ideologically minded key figures of this phase of the conflict were removed from their offices by Russia by summer 2014. The think tank RAND Corporation concludes that Russia ‘clearly had other plans and sought to avoid an overt military invasion’ as these figures expected it (Kofman et al., 2017: 67).

⁵ At the start of every focus group, I would sketch the seating on an extra sheet of paper and allocated a Latin letter to every person in the focus group: A, B, C, D, E, G, and one time I used the letter X for a person, who was more than half an hour late. This procedure sought to strictly anonymise the data of all participants. According to these codes, I constructed the names of the participants in the empirical part. The first letter stands for the city (B for Bakhmut, K for Kramatorsk), the second part tells the number of the focus group in this city (FG1 to FG4), the third part stands for the allocated letter in the group (A, B, C, D, E, G, X) and the small letter at the end for the gender of the participant (m for male, f for female).

After a major blow to the Ukrainian army in the city of Debaltseve in February 2015 – around 100 kilometres away from Kramatorsk and less than 60 kilometers away from Bakhmut – on the 12th February the Ukrainian government signed the Minsk II agreement. According to this agreement, the Ukrainian government accepted, among other points, to grant a special status for the separatist regions, to change the constitution by implementing crucial decentralisation reforms, and regulating release and exchange ‘of all hostages and unlawfully detained persons’ (bpb, 2015).

At the time of the fieldwork and during the research for this thesis, the conflict was in a cyclical phase, with some irregular peaks of fights, such as in winter and spring 2016 (Kofman et al., 2017: 41). Meanwhile, the separatist territories were undergoing a structural consolidation. Russia supports with troops, weapons and intelligence the transformation of the separatist fighters into a regular army (ibid.: 45).

Since the beginning of the conflict, the whole Donbas region struggles with a humanitarian crisis, such as of a significant deterioration of living conditions, shrinkage of industrial production, surge of criminality, and a high number of internally displaced persons (Balaban et al., 2017: 45f.). This will be also taken into account in the following section, when I will introduce the two analysed cities. This descriptive part will be a compilation of research on the cities and my ethnographic material, as well as interviews in the cities or material gathered in the focus groups.

4.2. Kramatorsk – the ‘West-Berlin of the Donbas’?

Kramatorsk is an industrial city, where most of the cityscape is characterized by Khrushchyovkas, these concrete-paneled five-storied apartment buildings, developed in the USSR during the 1960s. I was struck by the overabundant patriotic decorations. Playgrounds, graffitis, various walls and even some trees in the city were painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, in blue and yellow.

As most of the focus groups were conducted in the early evenings, I spent time during the day walking and observing people. Most people, regardless of their age, class or educational background speak a regional dialect called surzhyk here. It is essentially Russian with a Ukrainian pronunciation or Ukrainian words (Rodgers, 2006: 162). The

predominant number of working class people in this city seem to use surzhyk not only as a dialect, but also with elements of a sociolect, such as a simple syntax, and a common use of swear words. I observed various groups of young people, mainly boys, entering kiosks and using ‘bliad’ [Russian swear word, something like ‘bitch’] as a fill word in almost every sentence.

Another striking factor is the ubiquitous alcohol consumption in the town. Starting from around 3:30 pm every day groups of men, mostly coming from the factories in the city, start crowding in pubs and restaurants to drink. They order bread or snacks and 100 gram of Cognac or Vodka. When I was looking for a restaurant to have my lunch, a guy approached me, approximately 40. ‘It is not worth going there’, he told me. ‘You won’t get anything to drink there before 5 o’ clock.’

Parallels of this ubiquitous working class habitus can be drawn to Paul Willis’ famous study of working class boys in Britain. In this seminal study Willis analysed social dynamics in boys group and depicted how class behaviour and career paths were reproduced in a working class town in England, where ‘the overwhelming majority of the population are [employed] in some form of manual work’ (Willis, 1977: 6).

Similar structures as depicted by Willis seem to be prevalent in Kramatorsk in 2017. From the end of the 19th century Kramatorsk became one of Ukraine’s focal centres ‘for the manufacture of heavy machinery and machine tools for the metallurgical, mining, power, and chemical industries’ (Campbell, 2008a). The main manufacturer producing heavy mining and metallurgy equipment in this city now is ‘New Kramatorsk Machinebuilding Factory’, abbreviated NKMZ [Novokramatorskii Mashinostroitelnyi Zavod]. Most of the people in the city work for this factory, which the focus group participants often referred to as the ‘breadwinner’ of the city.

- KFG4-Af: [...] people moved here from Russia and worked for the factories. When NKMZ was built, people started building small villages around NKMZ, this became a township [...], and then it grew to a city.

Some workers working for this manufacture told me proudly that NKMZ did not close down for a single day since the end of the German occupation of the city in WWII. Thus, it did not only continue working during the armed conflict in 2014, but

additionally supported its employees financially, and provided shelter during shelling in the early evenings and even over nights.

- FG4-Bm: *The salaries were paid, our boss was supporting us in every way and even paying extra money, in addition to the salary.*
- FG4-Am: *Employees [...] were even staying over night in the factory sometimes. Because it has bomb shelters. Because it was scary to get home and even scary to stay at home.*

Though this city can be described as a middle-sized city with its roughly 160,000 inhabitants, many people here depict it as rather provincial. Locals emphasise that the town gained its importance only with the beginning of the conflict. KFG4-Af, a woman born and raised in Kramatorsk, said:

- KFG4-Af: *When my grandma was watching the news, and they were mentioning some Ukrainian cities, I was always puzzled: Why is nobody talking about our city? I love this city so much. Is there really nothing happening here which is worth mentioning? Since 2014 I understood that it would have been better, if the name of the city remained unmentioned.*

This quote illustrates how the conflict in the East of Ukraine changed the relevance of this formerly unremarkable city. Wilson contrasts the role of Kramatorsk and Slovyansk in 2014, where ‘the hard power of guns and fighters was based’, to the role of Donetsk, headquarter of the ‘agents provocateurs, Putin’s tourists and paid demonstrators’, in short ‘the soft power’ of the DNR (Wilson, 2014: 132). Kramatorsk was under the control of pro-Russian rebels for three months, until the Ukrainian army reconquered the city in July 2014 (Brunner, 2016).

Since the Ukrainian military reconquered this city, the central administration of the Donetsk Oblast was relocated from the city of Donetsk to Kramatorsk. Following these developments, national and international organisations started relocating their offices to this city as well, the Ukrainian government and international donors started investing in the development of the city. KFG4-Af comments on these developments with a proverb: ‘If you do not have fortune, misfortune can help as well.’

In interviews with journalists the vice-governor of Kramatorsk Jevgenii Vilinskii proudly depicted Kramatorsk as the ‘West-Berlin of the Donbas’, referring to the

isolated half of Berlin during the Cold War (Brunner, 2016; Seiler, 2017). In this time, the Federal Republic of Germany subsidised the development of Berlin heavily, aiming to show its systemic superiority towards East-Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic. Analogically, Kramatorsk is now subsidised by the Ukrainian government to prove its superiority towards the self-proclaimed 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DNR) and 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LNR).

Since 2015, the mayor of Kramatorsk is Andrii Viktorovich Pankov. In 2017 he is listed as an independent candidate (Kramatorsk City Council (Official Website), 2017). Yet according to the 2010 local parliament data from 2010, he was member of the Party of Regions and their leading candidate in 2010, the same year Yanukovich won the position as a president (Central electoral committee of Ukraine, n.d.,a). Dominance of the Party of Regions is typical for the East of Ukraine and it developed from the working class background of the Donetsk and Luhansk region and the sociopolitical dynamics here during the transition period in the 1990s (Kuzio, 2015:181; Wilson, 2007; Carroll, 2014). Regardless of the demise of the Party of Regions following the ousting of president Yanukovich in 2014, both analysed cities exemplify strong political continuities with similar key figures in charge as during Yanukovich's last presidency.

Besides the increasing national and international attention on the city, the trauma and supposedly shifted political and identity alignments investigated in this research, the conflict brought economic problems to the inhabitants of Kramatorsk. The flow of people, not only expats working for international organisations, but also internally displaced people from the DNR and LNR territories caused a skyrocketing of rent prices in this city.

According to information I gathered average income per month stagnates between 100 to 200 Euro in Kramatorsk as well as in Bakhmut. These figures are gathered by talking to various informants, people on the streets as well as by conversations to NGO employees during the participant observation. At the time of the fieldwork the currency exchange fluctuated between 28-30 Hrivna equating 1 Euro (hence income varied between 3000-5000 Hrivna). It was rather difficult to determine average income, because tax enforcement is fairly low and the persisting informal sector of income flourished since 2014 even more. As a typical example of apparent informal trends, the

central market in Kramatorsk is often crowded by elderly people selling flowers, fruits, vegetables from their gardens by which they subsidize their low pensions. An average pension in both analysed cities is between 50 to 60 Euro a month. KFG2-Cm illustrated the economic relevance of these informal markets for his family during the DNR rule in the city in 2014:

KFG2-Cm: [...] *It was only three of us, me, my grandma and my aunt. And a huge garden [laughing], which needed to be managed. Thanks to this garden we survived.*

During the day, a lot of elderly women sat in front of the entrances of the khrushchyovkas. On one day I sat down next to a group of six old ladies. One of them asked the other one whether she knew a good place to have some coffee in Kramatorsk, ‘as mild as the coffee in Moscow’. Another one sarcastically replied: ‘Shush, or people will think you are a separatist!’ Reactions like this hint to a general feeling of insecurity and mistrust towards each other in the society. During the conversation, I asked these women about their experience of conflict. ‘It was terrible! We hid wherever we could, ran into our cellars, did not sleep, and what for? We live now worse than in Africa, on ranking number 134!’

According to the data of the CIA World Fact Book Ukraine ranks 148th of 230 countries overall in terms of GDP per capita (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017). The Legatum Prosperity Index 2016 lists Ukraine on rank 107 out of 149 countries, with ranking 134th on the sub-category of ‘safety and security’ (Legatum Institute, 2016). As evident from the conversation with the elderly women and the observations on the ground, not only the ongoing armed conflict has a strong impact on the perception of the people, but also the ongoing humanitarian crisis. ‘The West-Berlin of the Donbas’ is far from the prosperity West-Berlin experienced while being heavily subsidised by the economically and politically stable (West-)German government during the Cold War. Vice-governor of Kramatorsk Jevgenii Vilinskii does not consider the situation of the ‘ordinary people’.

4.3. Bakhmut – A master and his protégés

The master of Bakhmut, mayor Alexei Alexandrovich Reva is a local legend. He holds his position since 1994 (Politrada, n.d.) and various informants told me that he and his family are connected to the majority of businesses in the city, and completely

dominating the political sphere in Bakhmut. Not even the armed clashes in 2014 in this region could oust the former member of Yanukovich's Party of Regions from office – he managed to agree with the rebels to leave the city quietly in July 2014. The local population, his protégés, seem grateful.

As mentioned in the previous section on Kramatorsk, both Reva in Bakhmut and Pankov in Kramatorsk with their former affiliation to the Party of Regions follow a regional trend. In 2010, 48 of 52 members of the local parliament in Bakhmut were members of this party (Central electoral committee of Ukraine, n.d., b). The successor party 'Oppositional Bloc' won almost 74 percent of the votes in the local elections in 2015 in this city (Bakhmut.com.ua, 2015b).

Wilson describes the Party of Regions as a 'clientelistic and authoritarian organisation', which 'reward[s] its friends and punish[es] its enemies' (Wilson, 2007). It successfully merged legacies of 'left-wing paternalism Soviet nostalgia, and big businesses', while being able to 'neutralise' political and economic opponents by defeating or absorbing them into the own political scheme (Kuzio, 2015: 177). Reva can be identified as a typical outcome of these regional networks, a local 'patron' in this city, who transformed his political power 'into access to final resources for patronage and clientelism' (Kuzio, 2015: 177). He and his family run the city entirely.

I stayed in Bakhmut during the first week of May 2017. Similarly to Kramatorsk, Bakhmut has a history of industrialisation, it is known for its 'production of non-ferrous metals' and famous in Ukraine for the so-called Artemivsk Salt mines (Campbell, 2008b). Artemivsk was the former name of the city until the local parliament decided in September 2015 – in line with the Ukrainian laws of decommunisation – to change the name to the city's historical name Bakhmut (Bakhmut.com.ua, 2015a).

Four things seemed significantly different from Kramatorsk. Firstly, though patriotic graffiti, flags and signs were almost as prevalent in the cityscape as in Kramatorsk, the city looked quite differently overall. From an architectural perspective, it was way less covered with Khrushchyovkas, but presented a more eclectic mixture of buildings from various centuries. Secondly, less drinking men were present on the streets at four pm, overall everything seemed more neat than in Kramatorsk.

Thirdly, the city was much more difficult to reach. The city is surrounded by checkpoints. In comparison to the rather well-connected Kramatorsk, it was more difficult to travel to Bakhmut and even more difficult to leave it. The last busses and trains were leaving the city around six pm every day. The elderly woman who rented out her flat to me commented on this by calling the city an ‘abandoned territory’.

With its roughly 80,000 people the city is smaller than Kramatorsk. It might be home to a couple of thousand more people now, as the demographic structure of the city changed during the armed conflict in the region. Many internally displaced persons moved to Bakhmut from the currently occupied territories (Novosti Donbassa, 2017a) and not everyone registers at new place of residence in Ukraine. My local landlord mentioned that plenty of people living in DNR and LNR commute to Bakhmut once a month to get their Ukrainian pensions, which might require registration in this city as well.

Additionally, the numerous soldiers in this city – who are also significantly more prevalent in the public space than in Kramatorsk – could have also contributed to an unofficial surge of the population. During my fieldwork I ran into a volunteer working for an NGO in Bakhmut. He told me that people feel both secure and insecure by the large presence of the soldiers at the same time. On the one hand, they feel defended by them, but on the other hand, plenty of them feel tense seeing new soldiers, from which they initially do not know what to expect. Focus group participants and this NGO worker explained that particularly in the beginning of the conflict many locals witnessed different kinds of misbehaviour by soldiers, starting with strong alcoholism to various kinds of (mostly drunk) harassments of civilians.

This leads over to the fourth difference to Kramatorsk: It was more difficult to recruit participants for my study in Bakhmut than in Kramatorsk. Less people were willing to talk about the conflict and the situation in the city. Overall, it was more difficult to approach people in the city and to talk about any kind of topics considered sensitive. In many cases my initial attempts to communicate with locals were met with suspicion because of my foreignness and led to subsequent avoidance. My intermediary Ulyana had similar experiences in the city while helping me to find suitable participants for the focus groups. BFG2-Cm emphasised during a conversation before the focus

group that

in these times it is better to stay neutral. This is the reason why nobody here wants to talk about politics. They do not know who they are dealing with and who might be in power soon.

During the focus group BFG2-Cm reiterated his point by stating: ‘Do not trust anyone.’ His habitus, behaviour and way of communication seemed to suit the working class characteristics described in the ethnographic part about Kramatorsk. He had both a stronger surzhyk dialect and a sociolect, signified by a massive use of swear words. By slightly adapting my own way of speaking to his way, I managed to gain his trust over a couple of hours before the focus group and to weaken his hesitation to talk to me about sensitive topics. This seemed to have accelerated the dynamics in the focus group later. He was actively passing the audio-recorder during the focus group and trying to involve other people in the group. All of them were either his acquaintances, his family or close friends. During our conversations before, however, as well as during the focus group later he stayed strikingly nervous about the audio recorder and confronted me with his assumption that I might be a spy. In my particular case this suspicion was also related to a class-related lack of experience with both university institutions and academics. On my reply that I am just a sociologist, he said: ‘I don’t know what this is. For me, you are a spy.’

It is significant for this research to illustrate the role Bakhmut’s mayor Reva played during the armed conflict, especially during the attempted takeover of Bakhmut – back then Artemivsk – by the pro-Russian rebels. The city was barely affected by any violent clashes, but the DNR flag was unobtrusively installed in Bakhmut on 12th April 2014. The law enforcement authorities of the cities neither supported nor impeded the action. The mayor accepted the flag at the city council and officially depicted it as a ‘compromise’ to prevent a violent takeover of the city as it happened in various neighbouring cities. When a journalist asked him why he did not put up a flag of Ukraine next to the DNR flag, Reva replied: ‘What is more important: a flag or peace in the city?’ (Bakhmut.com.ua, 2014).

To get a better picture about his role during the conflict, I asked the focus group participants about him. Almost no one was really enthusiastic about him, but people

respected him for two things. In the first place, they appreciate his role in preventing larger violent clashes in Bakhmut in 2014 – the striking difference to Kramatorsk and the reason why I chose to compare these two cities.

- BFG2-Em: *I am 95 percent certain that he reached an agreement, because he is a... master [Khoziaistvennik].*
- BFG2-Cm: *Rumours started to spread that he was paying both sides [in the conflict] so that everything stays calm on the territory of Artemivsk, no military clashes.*
- BFG3-Am: *I mean, he was somehow sponsoring DNR. At the beginning. Then, at some point, the DNR fighters moved from Artemivsk to Debaltseve. [...] Now he just continues working and is, currently, on the side of Ukraine.*

BFG2-Cm also mentioned in an interview before the focus group that other people involved in businesses in the city had applied the same strategy to keep their business running. They tried to prevent ‘fights or change of power’ in the city.

Secondly, Reva is appreciated for maintaining law and order in the city [poriadok] and a picture of a prosperous city, with the development of playgrounds and parks. The corruption allegations he is facing (Novosti Donbassa, 2017b; vesti-ukr.com, 2017) are perceived either as normal or as a necessary evil. Overall, he is seen as a successful master [khoziain or Khoziaistvennik] of the city.

- FG2-Df: *So let him [Reva] rob. But the city develops.*
- FG2-Em: *He is the only mayor, who did not change a single time in Ukraine, since the end of the Soviet Union. [...] He is like a good running car, which does not get old. It drives, works, everyone benefits.*
- FG3-Bm: *He is a master. Fully into business, whole sphere of services, brought all kind of services under his control and under the control of his family. In general, the city is not bad. Some things are built, something is developing [...].*

Economic priorities like ‘development of the city’ are not new to this region and were saturated by the Party of Regions before 2014. Electorate in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast was known for prioritising strong and clearly defined hierarchical structures with a strong ‘patron’ guaranteeing political and economic developments, and a strong focus on ‘stability’ (Kuzio, 2015: 178). FG3-Bm added that he does neither like Reva’s leadership style, nor his lack of principles, but he cannot think of a better ‘master’ for this city.

- FG3-Bm: *This person has only one principle: power and wallet. That's all. [...] But I do not see any other person, who would be a suitable master. I mean, it could be much worse.*

The awareness of a peculiar mentality with the aforementioned priorities by many (though by far not all) people in this region can be identified as one factor, which contributed to the development of negative stereotypes about the Donbas in other regions of Ukraine. BFG1-Cf explained that people in the West of Ukraine often confront her with stereotypical accusations and generalisations, telling her that all people in the Donbas are ‘bandits, robbing and killing everyone with their Yanukovich’. Such stereotyping seems to feed a common regional inferiority complex, to which people, at least in Bakhmut, tend to resist with a persistent strengthening of their local and regional identity. Regardless of the frustrating stereotypes BFG1-Cf is confronted with, she remains proud of her region, and emphasises the regional legacies of a ‘hard-working miner’s region’ – a pillar of the local identity. She mentions a popular toast in the region epitomising the strength of this unique regional identity: *‘To peace, to us – and to Donbas’*.

5. Empirical Part II: Analysis of themes

5.1. Experience of Conflict in 2014 in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut

This chapter compares the themes across the cases. I start with the analysis of informant replies on the different experiences of conflict. The different experiences in these two cities are presumed to have had an impact on different attitudes towards the following themes: the relation of research participants to the DNR, the current Ukrainian political elites which emerged from the Maidan revolution, the participant's attitudes to Russia, politically and culturally, and the Ukrainian nationalising policy in the region.

5.1.1. Experience of Conflict in 2014 – Kramatorsk under fire

As illustrated before, Kramatorsk was severely affected by the armed conflict in 2014. This severity of experience was reflected in the emotional atmosphere during the focus groups. In the first group in Kramatorsk, a soldier acted as an emotional icebreaker sharing his experiences during this period.

- KFG1-Bm: *All, parents, and me... aaah, we just sat in the flat on Valerian⁶. There weren't many comfortable things [during this time]. And on the next day [laughs uneasily], I continued drinking Valerian at work. Because I was seriously frightened by all this. [...] I was riding every day to work on a bike through these separatist checkpoints... I just wanted to throw a grenade on them.*

While KFG1-Bm conveyed his thoughts and experiences, the other focus group participants seemed noticeably tense. KFG1-Af started crying. KFG1-Bm switched his seat to her and held her close, provided emotional support, while other participants continued reflecting on their thoughts and experiences. When KFG1-Af calmed down, she added her memories.

- KFG1-Af: *At 7 o' clock in the morning I woke up from an explosion instead of an alarm. They were bombing the neighbouring courtyard. It was a sound of something rolling, as if somebody was crushing crystal under my feet. [...]*

Most participants in Kramatorsk had equally appalling experiences, however some managed to express themselves in a less emotional manner. The third and the fourth group seemed less emotionally involved during their narrations. They soberly illustrated stories out of their lives from this time.

⁶ common tranquilliser in Ukraine and Russia

- KFG3-Cf: *We live in the very city centre, and it happened that very close to us, 300 meters away, a missile fell. [...] The first thought was just that, “shit, if they are already bombing the centre, so, that’s it. Then we are seriously at war.”*
- KFG3-Am: *When all this takeover happened, my friend was working in the Ukrainian army on a contract and his father joined the [DNR] militia. [...] When they were shooting the airport [where the son served], they were calling each other, and somehow saving each other’s life.*
- FG4-Af: *[...] At one or at two in the night were often shootings. We took this [emergency] suitcase [laughs uneasily], went down the stairs to the first floor and realised that there is no bomb shelter nearby.*

FG4-Bm was working for NKMZ (see 4.2.). They provided one of the best shelters in the cities.

- FG4-Bm: *I was only afraid to leave work. [...] I mean, we were leaving work at a particular time, for instance, at 4 or 5, depending on the department. And at this time the shooting started, missiles were falling not far from the exit doors [...].*

The experience of conflict for the participants was period of life in a state of emergency. All of them experienced to different extents various war-related actions, personal loss and strong anxiety. A theme which naturally emerged as participants were reflected on their experiences was their stance on the DNR separatists and their supporters. The conflict-related stories in Kramatorsk stand in stark contrast to the experiences in Bakhmut.

5.1.2. Experience of conflict in 2014 in Bakhmut – ‘in comparison to other cities, this was nothing’

As illustrated before, the conflict in Bakhmut, and struggle for power between local politicians and the DNR was strikingly different than in Kramatorsk. In line with the lack of military action in the city, people’s reflections on the conflict were far less personal or emotional. When participants in Kramatorsk shared detailed stories of suffering, most people in Bakhmut expressed themselves in more general terms; they reported the main events speaking in a news-like manner.

- BFG2-Am: *Well, Artemivsk was lucky because we did not have any real military actions here. In comparison to cities like Horlivka, Slovyansk, Kramatorsk. We had one or two shootings over all the period, three or four victims. In comparison to other cities, Artemivsk was much luckier.*

- BFG3-Bm: *Not much happened from April to July 2014 in our city. The DNR tried to capture the military sector of the city. But they failed. Apart from this there were no remarkable events, from a military point of view.*
- BFG2-Am: *The only thing, yes, was the prosecutor's office [...].*
BFG2-Em (continues for FG2-Am): *But they shot only a bit [there]. In comparison to other cities, this was about nothing. If you compare...*

One girl from Bakhmut moved to the city of Donetsk for her studies. As she was moving between the two cities, she could directly compare the developments.

- BFG1-Bf: *I was studying in Donetsk at this time, at the national university. [...]*
You can say that I was living in the centre of the events. Here [in Bakhmut] it was very different to there. You could not hear shootings that often.

Nonetheless, experiences of violence, anxiety during that conflict and shelling remain individual. People reacted strikingly differently to the situation, even in the city, in which everyone agreed that it was largely spared from as serious clashes as in Kramatorsk.

The reactions depended, firstly, on which area of the city the participants lived in. FG1-Cf, for example, lived close to the military settlement in Bakhmut, a district called military town. As FG3-Bm said, in spring 2014 it was the main heavily contested area in the city. Her perception, thus, differs from many other the focus group participants – and comes closer to the experience of most of the participants in Kramatorsk.

- BFG1-Cf: *[...] Several times they tried to capture the military part and I remember when we were waking up, at 3 am, at 4 am, from that the [picture] frames were trembling. We ran out, all neighbours, to a bunker, and when it happened for the first time we didn't even know what to do [...]. Damn, I am 25, I could not imagine that I can distinguish weapons by the sound of them [...].*

Secondly, the media and information environment had a strong effect on the perception of the people. The disinformative media was used as a weapon of war (Kofman et al., 2017: 13) and efficiently functioned. In both cities it caused anxiety and insecurity. Besides spreading distrust and alienating the population of the East of Ukraine from the government in Kyiv, the media campaigns by Russian state media or the DNR information channels were complemented by the spread of rumours in the cities. This contributed to a generally widespread feeling of anxiety [strakh] in the Donbas region,

exemplified by remarks of my informants in both cities.

- BFG2-Em: *At some point the media [Russian: SMI] just twisted the situation... which was not there. This affected the psyche, not only mine but also of all my surrounding friends and people.*
- BFG2-Xf: *When the DNR was here, they were telling us terrible things about Ukraine. We were afraid that Ukraine arrived. They told us...*
BFG2-Cm: *About Maidan, yes...*
FG2-Xf: *... and they would kill us, and would shoot us all, and rape all of us. We were really afraid.*
BFG2-Em : *Everyone wanted to obtain weapons.*

Thus, this media environment might have reinforced a negative relationship of the participants towards the political elites in Kyiv, regardless of the experience of conflict. The reflections of informants, however, indicate a strong level of awareness and differentiation on the topic of their own exposure to propaganda and disinformation. This is in line with current surveys, which indicate that both use and trust in Russian media in the government controlled Donetsk province is markedly shrinking since 2014 (Internews Network, 2016).

Regardless of their personal experience, all participants in Bakhmut unite their strong awareness that the conflict is still continuing in the surrounding cities. Still, the rather casual emotional climate particularly in BFG2 and BFG3, even when talking about such stirring topics as the experiences of conflict, was strikingly different to the tense situations, I observed in all four focus groups in Kramatorsk.

This chapter illustrated the awareness of the focus group participants of the different experience of conflict in Bakhmut and Kramatorsk. While Kramatorsk was violently taken over by the separatists, followed by a roughly three months long violent control of the city, the situation in Bakhmut remained rather calm during the same period. Subjectively this difference played out in differing emotional climate within the focus groups, as well as different level of emotional involvement in sharing the stories in two cities. While in Kramatorsk, people illustrated their experience of conflict with shocking, detailed personal stories and sometimes even cried while recollecting, in Bakhmut, in many cases people gave rather general and detached accounts in a rather relaxed setting. Both cities were, however, strongly affected by a large disinformation

media campaign. While critically reflecting on the impact of media on their perception of events during the focus groups, my informants remembered, however, how strongly emotionally susceptible they have been to its effects in 2014. The following chapter compares the emergent themes and investigates differences in both cities.

5.2. Stances towards the DNR – 2014

‘Change! ... our hearts demand. Change! ... our eyes demand’
(Viktor Tsoi, song: ‘Khochu peremen’ 1989)

The discussion of feelings or political stances towards the DNR emerged naturally in the very beginning of the discussions. While reflecting on the events of 2014, people mentioned who they sympathised with and how they were involved in developments in the city. I tried to dig deeper with further questions on personal alignments and general motivation of supporters in their city. By doing this I developed a comprehensive picture of the relation of my focus group participants towards the DNR. The outcome of these discussions is presented in the following section on the ‘stances towards the DNR’. The chapter starts by illustrating the various reasons why people supported the DNR.

Firstly, in both cities dubious people were involved in business schemes related to the Party of Regions and, by this, provided jobs for many of the people in the whole Donbas region. One example illustrated in KFG3 was Viktor Pavlovych Pshonka, formerly a loyal associate of Viktor Yanukovych and, according to investigative journalists, a notorious underground figure in Kramatorsk (Carroll, 2014). Pshonka and Yanukovich closely cooperated with each other since 1990s, when Yanukovich was governor of the city of Donetsk (Byrne, 2010). Pshonka invested in factories in Kramatorsk and was thought of as Kramatorsk’s patron (Wilson, 2014: 126). According to KFG3-Am, ousting of Yanukovich meant a concrete loss of jobs for people working in businesses, owned or financed by figures dependant on Yanukovich’s political clan. KFG3 argued that this increased the support by working class people significantly, because they were particularly afraid that Yanukovich’s associates would withdraw their investments from the region leading to large scale job losses.

- KFG3-Am: [...] *Before Maidan I was working for a jeweller and the master of various jewellers was a corporation of three jewellery factories. There was a guy*

called Pshonka. Who was Pshonka? [rhetorical question]

KFG3-Bm: General Prosecutor of Ukraine.

KFG3-Am: General Prosecutor. And then Pshonka gets kicked out by Yanukovich out of Ukraine... [...] and in fact 1000 people, roughly 1000 people from these three jewellery factories lose their jobs. What kind of relation should I have then to the activists of Maidan? Of course a negative one.

As this snippet from a focus group illustrates, many people working for these businesses were either afraid of or directly affected by job or other kinds of economic losses during the Maidan revolution. Thus, they did not associate the ousting of the clientelistic Party of Regions from the parliament with a democratic turn of the country, but primarily with increasing economic insecurity.

- *BFG2-E: It happened that [during the Maidan revolution], the US-Dollar went up, government in Kyiv took away our bread. Our business was dependant on the currency exchange rate to the US-Dollar. [...] That's why I had a negative relation [towards the new government].*
- *KFG3-Am: I was siding of course with the DNR. Why? Because, like, when West and Central Ukraine initiated Maidan, I lost my job. [...]*

Secondly, as illustrated in chapters 4.2 and 4.3 the current stark investments in the development of the two analysed cities cannot detract people's attention from the critical economic problems: high unemployment rates and poor living conditions of many people in this region. Elderly people, in particular, suffered already before the war. Disastrously low pensions and fairly low life expectancy fed nostalgic feelings about a perceived security in the Soviet Union. The average life expectancy of people in the west of the country was roughly five years higher than in the east of Ukraine (Guilford, 2014). For the marginalised people in Donbas, the post-Maidan elites represented 'the other' Central and Western Ukraine and thus were not trusted to tackle their personal needs – regardless of whether the Yanukovich government did it. Consequentially, the spreading propaganda by DNR and Russian information channels found a fruitful ground in people, who hoped to flee their miserable economic situation and felt inspired by the Russian land grab of Crimea, which many perceived as a successful integration of a neglected territory into a more prosperous country.

- KFG4-Bm: *Wind of change. Our hearts demand change. I think, people were tired from their circumstances, and most people, those who live here... they just survive. I mean, they earn only money to pay for their utilities, to buy food. Maybe some minimal needs. [...] Everything happened in the beginning on Crimea. And, well, at least what they showed, that everything turned out well there. [...] And people were just hoping here that exactly the same will happen here, easy and painlessly.*
- BFG1-Cf: *They started organizing a referendum, and a lot of people... they went to this referendum. And people voted, but... But I saw these people [...], they had sparkling eyes... I mean what was the goal of the people?*
 BFG1-Bf (adds): *'You will change something!'*
 BFG1-Cf: *They went with sparkling eyes, because 'yes, something will change! Everything will be better! Yes guys, we will start living! Now we will have the Donetska Narodna Respublika and everything will be great!' [...]*

The support of nostalgic elderly people, desiring for the comeback of supposed Soviet stability, was mentioned by my respondents in both cities. Overall, the informants distinguished between different generational motivations.

- BFG1-Bf: *I can add that those people, who were supporting DNR, who were going to the referendum, were either grandmas [babushki] [BFG1-Cf is affirmatively nodding heavily], who thought that they will get back to the Soviet Union. When they had stability and... now is Ukraine, where it is not clear what will be later. Not clear what kind of pensions they will get, and back then they knew: this is their job. And they work all their lives on it. Ukraine could stop paying their pensions at any moment.*

Thirdly, the generation of 'parents' of my participants, people in their 40s and 50s, were motivated by a feeling of economic imbalance between the Ukrainian regions. They were not necessarily involved in the dubious business schemes, and not necessarily worse off than people in other regions of Ukraine – but felt economically discriminated on the basis of a peculiar economic myth, which came up various times during the focus groups. According to this belief, the Donbas region is characterised as the 'breadwinner' of the country.

- BFG-Bf: *I mean people around 40 or 50. They were going [to vote in the referendum] for instance, because they thought that there will be a decentralization and they didn't understand why [...] the money earned by Donbas is going to Kyiv and is not distributed back to us. Our streets are not developed. The people didn't see the money they earned for the state, why they are not used for that region.*

- KFG2-Cm: I have a [relative involved in DNR], *as I told you already, we were very close. [...] And he was telling me that... [...] how they planned to develop the economy, well, I mean, while establishing DNR. [...] And they said, their main goal is that all money stays in the Oblast.*

The Donbas indeed remained an economic heavyweight of Ukraine after the country gained independence in 1991. The coal deposit of the region is the basis of the Ukrainian energy. Steel is extracted in the region and remained, next to agricultural products, the main product of Ukrainian exports. The myth, however, that the Donbas is investing more into Kyiv than it gets back, cannot be confirmed numerically, it is rather the other way around. The year before the outbreak of the conflict, the Donbas region could only cover of 40 percent of its own needs (The Ukrainian Week, 2014).

People like KFG2-Cm's relative might have been part of the ideological supporters of DNR, who aimed to change the region for the better, fight social inequality and support 'the ordinary people'. Being ideology-driven some of them hoped, similarly to Communist utopians, that they would redistribute wealth and assets. Others simply believed that they were fighting for a good cause.

- KFG2-Cm: *Of course, yes, they also stole cars, and robbed, but [...] they also helped people, [...] distributed medicine, and food and vouchers*⁷.
- BFG2-Em: *They had, DNR had a strong feeling of fairness and for inequality. Firstly, they started dealing with those, who were dealing with drugs. [...] At one point, they were thinking about social inequality, wanted to take from the poor...*
[interrupts] BFG2-Am: *Take from the rich, give to the poor.*
BFG2-Em: *Yes, like Robin Hood somehow. At some point, something like two weeks [since they could place their flag], they tried to take something away from someone, to give something to someone. Something like that. That was basically all their political power.*
Igor: *How did this work out?*
BFG2-Em: *Well, not at all. Nobody wanted to give anything.*
BFG2-Cm: *No, wait. They did it by coercion. The one with the gun is always right [sarcasm]. In every kind of understanding, I mean. I have the machine gun, so I am*

7 The parcels KFG2-Cm was distributing with DNR rebels were funded by the local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. Interestingly, plenty of the humanitarian aid people receive now in the conflict affected territories, are also funded by him. Besides his humanitarian aid on both sides of the contact line, Akhmetov is known to have funded both conflict sides in the beginning of 2014 (Kofmann et. al., 2017: 61f.), allegedly similar to the mayor of Bakhmut.

right. I don't have a machine gun, so I am not right. [...] And you will not do anything against my machine gun.

Lastly, focus group participants in both cities emphasised the involvement of different kinds of criminal elements in the DNR, which supported them in two ways. On the one hand, criminal elements were most ready to take guns and get involved in violent behaviour, particularly when they were paid or were earning money in other dubious ways. This is a common pattern observed in conflicts, such as the Yugoslavian dissolution wars or the genocidal war in Rwanda in the 1990s (Mueller, 2000).

- *BFG3-Bm: A lot of people joined just simply to rob. A lot of them were not good elements from the society, criminal elements among the DNR fighters. I mean, in the shadow of these events explicitly criminal elements decided to join the ranks of DNR.*
- *KFG3-Am: I have some acquaintances, who sat in jail for a few years. I mean they sat for some kind of robbery. There were these people, who in principle... a normal person would be scared to go and kill or... but those, who are more inclined to banditry, they were brave enough to go there, and additionally they were also payed adequately.*

This section illustrated the various reasons why people in both cities sympathised with the DNR. Informants in both cities, with the exception of KFG2-Cm, remembered the DNR mostly with negative feelings of mistrust, disillusionment up to disgust. In sum, most of the reasons why people supported the DNR were of economic nature. One reason was the belief in a widespread economic myth characterising the region as the breadwinner of the country, which fed the despair of the many marginalised people in the region. These people, part of the constructed Donbas-based 'Russian speaking minority', did not trust the new emerging political elites in the capital enough to take a side against the DNR. These elites of the 'nationalising state' were met with rapidly increasing suspicion, when they introduced nationalising policies, such as the abolishment of the special status of the Russian language shortly after their political takeover. At the same time, ideology-driven individuals joined the ranks of the DNR, seeking to change the rampant social inequality in the region. Beyond that, various people, whose salary was directly tied to businesses run by associates of the Party of Regions, felt afraid to lose their jobs and, lastly, criminal elements used the unrests as a

lucrative opportunity. The next section analyses the reactions of my focus group participants to symbols of the DNR during the group talks.

5.3. Feelings towards the DNR – 2017

After initially depicting the similar relation of people in both cities towards the DNR in 2014, in this section I evaluate the reactions of my focus group participants towards the symbol of the DNR. By this, I wanted to observe and investigate the feelings of ‘ordinary people’ in the region and analyse whether there is a difference in the relation to the DNR between the two cities. The relation to DNR is relevant, when we think about the ‘nation as a discursive construct’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), which emerges not only from daily interactions, but also from the reflection on what people do not want to identify with. The DNR represents in this logic a ‘significant other’ (Hall, 2003), an alternative model to Ukraine, which failed to put roots in the cities of Kramatorsk and Bakhmut. Hence, it can be presumed that people feel more negative about the DNR the more they experienced war-related activities. Logically it might stand out that the more negative people feel about the ‘other’ DNR, the more positive they feel about Ukraine. People in Kramatorsk were uneasy by the DNR symbols and expressed explicitly negative attitudes, in some cases these symbols evoked the memories of their horrifying personal war-related experiences from 2014.

- KFG1-Bm: *Take it away... simple, simple answer... take it away.*
KFG1-Cf: *Take it away, please, yes. We cannot have a good relation to this.*
KFG1-Gf: *Negative emotions, very much.*
- KFG3-Am: *This flag, I associate... an unfortunate project. A divorce. Divorce of Mr Putin [laughs uneasily]. Negative [feelings]... frustration. It causes a feeling, not negative, not positive, but.. [...] Sadness. Disappointment. That such a stupid idea manifested is sad.*

Two focus group participants, mentioned, however, that they relate rather neutrally towards the symbol. One of them emphasised that running around with this flag might cause you plenty of trouble now.

- KFG2-Dm: *I don't know, I like the combination of colours. Which association with that... the association is disputable. I don't know... If you wear this in our city, then... you can quickly run into a lot of problems. In general I relate neutrally to this.*

A couple of people in both cities mentioned, similarly to KFG2-Dm and the six elderly women in the field description in 4.2. that freedom of speech in their country declined. They had the feeling that people get blackmailed for opinions varying from a perceived ‘patriotic’ mainstream. A group of NKMZ workers, which I joined for dinner, even asked me whether there was a ‘real freedom of speech’ in my country (Germany), pointing out that they perceived it differently in Ukraine right now. KFG3-Bm and KFG3-Am had a strikingly similar feeling of freedom of speech inhibition when I showed the Russian flag in their focus group:

- KFG3-Bm: *Unfortunately... Why did I say unfortunately [wonders about himself]? Fortunately or unfortunately this flag doesn't hang anywhere here. Well I don't know, it is forbidden. O, prohibition, yes, seriously. Probably, [I feel] somehow even scare. [...] I would be afraid, for instance, to wear a jacket with a Russian flag and walk out to the street. I am serious, I would be afraid. [...] No, not afraid from the side of the aggressor, oh lord. Because there are the same kind of people as we are [...].*
- KFG3-Am: *[...] I know that this flag now is very... perceived aggressively because Russia is the aggressor state. This flag is forbidden. [...]*

Two things can be said about the overall political atmosphere in the city. On the one hand, it can indicate an awareness of my informants that most people in Kramatorsk have strong pro-Ukrainian emotions and negative emotions towards the DNR. The informants might be afraid that these reactions might be shown to such extent, that people, if confronted with the DNR flag, could violently show their siding with Ukraine. On the other hand, it might show a feeling of political censorship. Informants might be afraid that police or secret services would arrest them for allegedly supporting the DNR. This would mean a rather tense and mistrustful relationship between individuals and the ‘nationalising state’ as well as individuals between each other.

The DNR flag was shown to the groups after gathering their reaction towards the Ukrainian and Russian flag. Hence, some participants were comparing their emotions directly to the previous symbols.

- KFG4-Bm: *In comparison to the Ukrainian flag, this one is more negative. I mean it represents some kind of a threat.*

KFG2-Cm, whose relative was involved in the DNR, is an ostentatious exception. He

does not feel anything negative towards the DNR. His frustration about his current living circumstances, however, increased by the fact that he told me that he got blacklisted by the Ukrainian government because of his relative and retracted from an unconditional offer to study at a Ukrainian university. Such secondary results of the conflict, seem to impede the building a trustful relationship between the current political, ‘nationalising’ authorities in the capital and individuals in the Donbas region.

In a striking difference to the reactions in Kramatorsk, most reactions towards the DNR symbols in Bakhmut were rather neutral.

- BFG3-Bm: *Let's say, my attitude towards this is neutral. [...]*
BFG3-Am: *My feelings are neutral. [...]*
- FG2-Cm: *Not really familiar. [...]*
FG2-Em: *Nothing, whatsoever it...*
FG2-Df: *I don't know, I have something... Is this the DNR one? I see blood somehow. I don't know why. But somehow blood. Somehow. I don't know. Because of war. These are my first impressions.*
FG2-Cm: *Absolutely no feelings. It didn't catch us strongly, we don't understand it. You need to show this in other provinces [oblasts]. They can tell you more in detail. It [DNR flag] does not touch us at all.*
FG2-Bf: *Absolutely nothing. [Seen it] Sometimes. Overall.*
FG2-Am: *Indifference.*

In Bakhmut, BFG1-Cf and BFG1-Bf reacted most negatively towards it. As mentioned before, one lived close to the military settlement, which was severely contested in 2014, but successfully defended by the Ukrainian army. The other girl studied in Donetsk, where events developed strikingly differently and which is now the unrecognised capital of DNR.

- FG1-Cf: [twitches with her eyebrows] *Aggression. It causes aggression in me. I remember the negative emotions, which I felt when I saw particularly this flag with this symbol in my city. Because... it is shooting. It is... bad people. [...]* *You go into a shop and next to you stands a soldier and pushes a machine gun into your back. You make a remark and he tells you not really nice things as a reply. This picture causes aggression in me. Aggression, discomfort and tension. In other words, I am sitting and it makes me feel tense.*
FG1-Bf: *Yes, it is not a nice feeling. It just reminds me of the negative feelings as FG1-Cf said. [...]* *Discomfort...*

The different experience of the conflict by BFG1-Cf and BFG1-Bf in comparison to the other FG participants in Bakhmut might relate to their stronger and more negative stance towards the DNR symbols than of the other focus group participants in Bakhmut. While most of the informants related neutrally in this city, BFG1-Cf's and BFG1-Bf's associations stand out as similar to the reactions I observed in Kramatorsk. At least among my informants these patterns indicate a cautious confirmation of my first assumption: that the more extreme the individual experience of conflict-related clashes personally was, the less supportive are the focus group participants of DNR symbols and ideas. The focus groups in Kramatorsk show a generally weaker support for DNR than the groups in Bakhmut. Informants in both cities, however, indicated various levels of mistrust on two levels: the state-individual – between alleged 'minority' and 'nationalising state' – and between individuals.

The next section discusses the relation to another crucial significant 'other' in Ukraine. As illustrated in the historical background of the region, the borderland identity of the Donbas region was never fully loyal towards any ideology or government, neither towards Ukraine nor Russia (Kuromiya, 2015: 2). As the region is now violently torn between these countries since 2014, the next theme investigates: How did the conflict change the relationship of the informants towards Russia?

5.4. Russia – 'aggressor' and 'brother-nation'

Polegkyi distinguishes two types of narratives about Russia: post-imperial and post-colonial. Echoes of both of these narratives were evident among the focus group participants. In the post-imperial narrative Ukraine is allegedly situated in the history of a 'fraternal union' with Russia. It is usually concomitant with feelings of nostalgia, glorifying the past and a supposed 'brotherhood' of nations in the Soviet Union. Adherents of this narrative usually contradict this idealised memory of 'a simpler past' to 'a confusing or uncertain present' (Polegky, 2015: 184). In stark contrast to the 'post-imperial', the 'post-colonial' discourse envisages the 'empire' as the significant 'other' of the Ukrainian identity.

This chapter compares the feelings of the focus group participants towards this alleged 'significant other' – politically, culturally, and language-wise. When it comes to

their feelings towards Russia, many people in the focus groups seemed to feel caught in a paradoxical situation. The paradoxical relationship became most evident in their reactions to the Russian flag, which turned out to be more controversially discussed in Kramatorsk than in Bakhmut.

On the one hand, many participants in Kramatorsk were raised with relatives in Russia, the Russian language as their lingua franca and narratives portraying Russia as a close ‘brother-nation’ to which they and their families have a historic relationship.

- KFG4-Af: *I don't know what kind of thoughts I have. This is the Russian flag. We talk in Russian. [...] My grandma is from St. Petersburg, my great-grandma is from St. Petersburg. They moved here with my grandpa, to Kramatorsk. Kramatorsk is fully Russian speaking. [...] If you take any person on the street and you ask him what roots does he or she have. Probably many have Russian roots, Ukrainian roots, we are all Slavic people. [...] It does not cause any negative feelings... Russian... language, Russian flag.*
- KFG3-Am: *Here in Kramatorsk all my friends have Russian roots.*
KFG3-Dm: *Not only yours, all have Russian roots.*
KFG3-Am: *Because this is a settled region. People went here, all my friends, family, my close ones – they all settled over from Russia. [...]*

The replies indicate that people internalised the previously illustrated (2.4.) borderland identity, with strong historical or family ties to both Russia and Ukraine. Their strong identification with Ukraine is evident in the use of pronouns, such as ‘our country’.

On the other hand, in Kramatorsk most people associated the Russian flag with terms that have a rather negative connotation, such as ‘dictatorship’, [Russian president Vladimir] ‘Putin’, ‘aggression’ or the ongoing conflict in their region.

- KFG4-Bm: *I associate this flag a bit with the problems in our country. Because, after all, Russia has a clear influence on what is happening here. I mean, I do not have a negative feeling towards Russia in general, but towards the leadership, as all what is happening here does not happen without their interference.*
KFG4-Af: *That's why I say: Show me a photo of Putin – I tell you, yes, he is an aggressor. Show me the flag of Russia – I tell you this is a brother-nation.*
- KFG1-Bm: *The flag causes in me disgust. [...] The feeling that they ruined everything. Everything that we had before [...] ... that flag ruined everything. [...]*
KFG1-Af: *[...] some kind of rejection, anger. Some kind of tension arises. [...]*

KFG1-Cf: *For some reason, when I see this flag... I see immediately the face of Putin. That's what I have... the next word – this is dictatorship. [...]*

KFG1-Af: *While I was listening to the others, another picture in my head emerged [...] that on the side of the 'enemy' – this is the term that appeared in my head – it is safer than here. At least they do not have war. You don't live there on a tinderbox [porochovoi bochke].*

KFG1-Af last quote illustrates the relevance of the conflict in her perception explicitly and ties it to the feelings of danger, fear and uncertainty. In the third focus group KFG3-Am explained that he felt indifferent towards the flag itself, but associated it with a former brotherly country.

- KFG3-Am: *In principle, I feel indifferent. It is the flag of the neighbouring country [...], our brotherly country, formerly.*

Some mentioned their internal conflict, namely, that they feel pressured by the nationalising state to perceive Russia as the 'aggressor state' in the current conflict. In some cases – without any insinuation – people structured their arguments in opposition to negative attitudes: 'I do not have any negative feelings' or 'I do not think this is an aggressor state'. The fact that these statements came up without neither me nor other participants insinuating the opposite before, indicates the strong awareness of the negative, dichotomising, official narrative by the 'nationalising state' towards Russia, the 'external homeland' – and a subliminal resilience of the people towards this narrative. This resilience might relate to the discrepancy between this imposed narrative and their internalised ambivalent borderland identity.

- KFG4-Bm: *[...] They impose that Russia is an aggressor state. This causes... mh... a conflict. I mean a negative and a positive relation I mean... [pauses]. I think everything happens to push people to some kind of war, to aggression.*
- KFG2-Dm: *I feel absolutely neutral about it. No negative feelings.*

KFG2-Cm, who did not feel negative about the DNR flag, was the only informant in Kramatorsk, who was really enthusiastic about Russia without confining it to any negative associations in the same context. He did however, emphasise out of the blue that he does not associate the flag with 'militant people', showing an awareness of prevalent discourses in his environment. As he mentioned, there could be no significant difference observed between the way he felt seeing the Ukrainian flag, what indicates

that he internalised the previously discussed borderland identity as well:

- KFG2-Cm: *I have the same relation to it [as to Ukraine]. I love Russia. So. It is an independent country, I have plenty of acquaintances over there. It is a cool country. Moscow in particular. This is strikingly cool. I love going there. So well, I have quite the same relationship to that flag like to Ukraine. [...] But the Ukrainian flag, this is a flag, under which I grew up. And the Russian... this is...*
KFG2-Am: *the neighbour...*
KFG2-Cm: *...Yes, for me, the flag of our neighbour. Not... of my enemy, or of an anyhow militant people, which are against me, but the flag of my friends.*

KFG2-Cm's unreservedly positive stance towards Russia might relate to the peculiar involvement he had with the DNR, the pro-Russian separatists in 2014. Besides this, he told us that many of his friends moved from the DNR territories to Russia to study there. This might have increased his frustration about his politically motivated withdrawal from studying at a Ukrainian university.

In focus group 2 a quarrel about the use of Russian and Ukrainian language in Donbas occurred:

- KFG3-Am: *[...] I don't like, for instance, that the Russian language is suppressed [here]. I cannot go the cinema and watch a movie in Russian. I don't want to watch it in Ukrainian. [...]*
KFG3-Cf: *But why, I am wondering, by the way. Sorry, that I interrupted you...*
KFG3-Am: *I was studying [in school], by the way, in Ukrainian...*
KFG3-Cf: *I am always wondering, when people tell me this: I want to go to the cinema and watch a movie in Russian... [...] I say, what do you mean by 'I want?' What kind of childish 'wanting' [khotelki] is this, not talking about the fact that you already understand this language.*
KFG3-Am: *My language is Russian. I was studying in a Ukrainian class, I finished school in the Ukrainian language.*
KFG3-Cf: *I understand that, but you live in Ukraine.*
KFG3-Am: *So what that I live in Ukraine. Do we have one or two languages in Ukraine?*
KFG3-Cf: *Well, currently one, that's the point.*
KFG3-Am: *Before, there were two.*

KFG3-Cf emphasised in this quarrel that Ukrainian nationalising policy and the spread of the Ukrainian language – often referred to under the term of 'Ukrainisation' – started long before the current conflict. Russian, however, had an official status in Ukraine and was under protection under the Yanukovich government. In February 2014, shortly after

the removal of Yanukovich as a president, the Ukrainian parliament abolished this special status again. Though the interim president Oleksandr Turchynov decided not to approve this law (Kofman et. al., 2017: 20), the discussion illustrates that the law added more wood to the fire in the East of Ukraine in 2014.

In stark contrast to Kramatorsk, in Bakhmut most focus group participants seemed to be less torn between positive and negative feelings towards Russia. While seeing the flag the following reactions emerged:

- BFG2-Em: *Good one [flag].*
 BFG2-Df: *Powerful nation.*
 [...]

 BFG2-Xf: *Powerful, yes.*
 BFG2-Df: *Eh, it is worth being afraid of it, yes? I guess so.*
 BFG2-Cm: *Good streets, yes?*
 BFG2-Df: *Yes.*
 BFG2-Cm: *Immediate association. In comparison to our Ukrainian [streets] [...], good roads, not so many soldiers, yes... laws are functioning. I mean, from the perspective of a car driver, yes. [...]. That's all I would say... well and our language. [...]*
 BFG2-Am: *Respect and some kind of... order. Order, yes.*
 BFG2-Em: *Yes, I am also seeing, an order ...*

BFG2-Am and BFG2-Em emphasised the association with ‘order’, what might imply that Ukraine is a country in ‘disorder’ in contrast to Russia. Additionally, they did not mention Russia as a source of this disorder, which was strongly evident in the quotes from Kramatorsk. Both informants in the last focus group in Bakhmut had no identification with Ukraine whatsoever. BFG3-Bm even used the pronoun ‘our’ for Russia instead of Ukraine.

- BFG3-Bm: *It triggers positive emotions. Well, I think that Russia – this is our native land. This is where my mom was born, my dad, my grandma. In fact, all my family is born in various regions of the Russian Federation. The culture here is fully Russian, the language Russian.*
 BFG3-Am: *My opinion is more positive than neutral. While it is neutral towards Ukraine – I cannot call it neither a friend nor a foe – towards Russia, yes, it is*

friendship.

In the first focus group with the youngest participants in Bakhmut, people related mostly neutrally to Russia. They explained that they do not feel bothered by the Russian flag as nobody is ‘imposing’ it on them. Even BFG1-Cf, who showed the strongest reaction towards the DNR flag, did not show any stronger emotions towards Russia or the Russian flag though, similarly to the informants in Kramatorsk, informants intuitively polemised against an imagined dominant dichotomous narrative.

- BFG1-Cf: *This causes in me... indifference. I don't see anything aggressive in it. Nothing terrible. Yes, it is just the flag of the neighbouring country. They are just the same people. [...] But there, they do not have painted pillars or houses [with their national flag]. And you won't see a flag on every balcony. [...]*
BFG1-Em⁸: *For me it is the flag of the neighbouring state. I don't have any negative emotions, because nobody is imposing it on me. I don't see it anywhere.*

Various points can be distilled from this comparison. Firstly, it seems rather clear that the increasing relevance of the Ukrainian language in the Donbas region did not supersede the relevance of Russian, and seems unlikely to do so in the near future. The focus groups in Kramatorsk, however, related more ambiguously towards the Russian flag than the informants in Bakhmut. While emphasising that the flag itself does not always cause negative feelings, most participants in Kramatorsk immediately brought up the political dimension: Terms like ‘dictatorship’, ‘Putin’, or ‘aggression’ were mentioned, which is in line with results of current polls: According to the ZOiS study, 88 percent of the respondents in the Ukrainian controlled Donbas do not trust the Russian president (Sasse, 2017: 13). In contrast to Kramatorsk, the flag and topic of Russia caused much less controversial discussions among the participants in Bakhmut, just referring to it as a ‘strong’ or ‘neighbouring’ nation, who they perceived as rather similar to theirs.

While the discourses in the focus groups in Bakhmut can be identified as rather ‘post-imperial’ (Polegky 2015), the controversial discussions in Kramatorsk are harder to categorise. Informants mixed yearning for political independence with a perception of

⁸ BFG1-Em was not from the selected cities, but from the settlement Kurdiuvivka, roughly 19 kilometers away from Bakhmut. I kept BFG1-Em in the sample, to avoid getting mistrust by the other participants by excluding one of their friends and because I assumed that FG1-Em’s background might lead to comparisons in the group conversation.

a (formerly) ‘fraternal union’ between Ukraine and Russia. Thus, the analysis reveals that rather post-imperial narrative of most participants in Bakhmut is less shared among the informants in Kramatorsk. In regards of the general assumptions of the thesis, it can be tentatively confirmed that the stronger the experience of conflict personally the more critical are the focus group participants towards Russia politically. This does not necessarily lead to an increasing aversion of cultural distance towards Russia.

Polegky illustrates that the more nationalist ‘post-colonial’ discourse – which epitomises the imperial ‘other’ as Russia – is more prevalent in the west and centre of the country. In summer 2017, when Ukraine and the European Union introduced a visa-free regime in June 2017, current president Petro Poroshenko reproduced the ‘post-colonial’ narrative in his speeches:

‘We are separating finally from the Russian empire. The democratic Ukrainian world is leaving the authoritarian Russian world. Finally, we are independent from each other – politically, economically, in terms of energy – and mentally’ (Kellermann 2017, citing speech of Poroshenko).

In this discourse, the negation of everything related to ‘empire’ is crucial for the construction of the (perceived Ukrainian) ‘self’ (Polegky, 2015: 174; Hall, 2003: 223). Russia is apprehended as ‘inherently despotic and expansionist’, an antithesis to ‘European Ukraine with democratic traditions’ (Polegky, 2015: 183).

Adherents of the ‘post-colonial identity’ do not typically perceive the borderland identity of people in the Donbas as an own identity, with its regional peculiarities and myths, but as another version of the significant ‘other’. These opposed discourses might be one reason why sociological surveys conducted by the Razumkov Centre in 2005 and 2006 illustrated that Ukrainians in the east of the country tended to feel closer to Russians and Belarusians than to Ukrainians in the west of the country (Polegky, 2015: 176f.).

The stronger experience of conflict seems to have undermined the formerly prevailing post-imperial narrative in Kramatorsk noticeably stronger than in Bakhmut. Following Polegky, the absence of a collective memory in Ukraine, or a ‘shared past’ (Hall, 2003), might remain an obstacle in constructing a common ‘Ukrainian identity’ – at least in the sense the nationalising ‘core nation’ (Brubaker, 1995), represented by the current Ukrainian government under Petro Poroshenko seeks it. The next section

investigates how the current Ukrainian government or current political elites in the capital are perceived by my respondents in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut.

5.5. Mistrust towards political elites and political activism

As illustrated in the sections before, respondents in both cities seemed rather averse to the anti-government demonstrations on Kyiv's Maidan, that started at the end of 2013 and culminated in the ousting of Viktor Yanukovich. This distaste seemed to relate to the following factors. Firstly, Yanukovich – as little as people liked him in Donbas – was perceived as kind of 'their' man. His corrupt behaviour was perceived as natural for every figure within the political class, as mentioned in the instance of Reva. The notion of all politicians being intrinsically corrupt and detached from the 'ordinary people' resulted in a lack of hope in political change in general. My informants' opinions towards political elites and activism reflected this scepticism and were similar in both cities, regardless of age, sex or educational background.

- BFG3-Bm: *In my opinion, Reva [mayor of Bakhmut] is the same kind of bribable politicians as all the others.*
- KFG4-Bf: *And all this fighting [referring to the ongoing conflict in the east of Ukraine], I think is stupid and only about some political interests... something like that.*
- KFG4-Af: *Well, what I understood, is that all this war, the people [in Ukraine] themselves do not need it. In reality only the elites need it, to divide some kind of territory.*
- BFG2-Bf: *Because none [no side in the conflict in 2014] of them is doing anything. They do not think about the people at all. No-one...*
BFG2-Cm: *I agree.*

The last quote alludes to the second point of the argument explaining the distaste towards political elites: economic disillusionment. Having their own financial problems or the ubiquitous poverty in the region in mind, the informants in both cities do not believe that any politicians – neither on a local nor on a national level – pursue policies, which might positively affect their economic situation. Thus, as illustrated before, they did not associate the ousting of the corrupted Party of Regions from the parliament with a democratic turn of the country, but merely with increasing economic insecurity (5.2.).

Thirdly, the mistrust in political elites seems to be accompanied by a general mistrust towards any kind of political activism. The rejection of political activism, such as the demonstrations on the Maidan in the end of 2013 and at the beginning of 2014, might relate to the previously discussed working-class heritage of this region. BFG2-Cm and BFG2-Em were reproducing typical working-class stereotypes in the focus group about the ‘lazy students’ on Maidan, whose political activism for seizing political power is associated with, to put it with Willis, ‘unjustified authority’ (Willis 1977: 146). In the view of the focus group participants, the only legitimate political power can be provided by a ‘patron’ or a ‘master’, as illustrated with the example of Bakhmut’s current mayor Reva.

- BFG2-Cm: *I came home from work, turn on the TV, yes, they are people jumping, leaping on the Maidan. I think: Oh, very good that we don’t have anything like this [in Artemivsk]. [...] And you think, they would be better off going to work, instead of lazing around and freezing there.*
- BFG2-Em: *According to statistics, who was standing at Euromaidan? Only ragamuffins [golodrantsy]. [...] Who didn’t have anything to do and who are incapable of doing anything. That’s what I think. [...] We were riding with the guys...*
 BFG2-Cm: *We were working, while everyone was jumping around.*

Willis provocatively describes this attitude as a division of people into those who are ‘good with their hands’ and those who ‘good with their heads’ (Willis 1977: 146). In the perception of BFG2-Cm and BFG2-Em as much as in the world of the ‘lads’ in Willis’ study, students (involved in ‘mental work’) and the ‘manual work[ers]’ stand fiercely opposed to each other (ibid.).

Younger participants in both cities, however, such as KFG1-Cf or BFG1-Cf, who reported stronger patriotic sentiments and had higher education, did not comment on the political developments on the Maidan, but seemed to be overall motivated to act politically and to foster the development of their region.

- KFG1-Cf: *I feel good, free, and want to work on making other people understand and feel the same way I do [about Ukraine].*

Fourthly, in contrast to most respondents in Kramatorsk, respondents in Bakhmut brought up the topic of ‘law and order’ more often. According to Kuzio (2015), this

used to be a common and relevant thread for the electorates in the whole Donbas region. In my sample, however, only older respondents in Bakhmut (between 25 and 30) mentioned this topos, while in Kramatorsk KFG3-Am blamed ‘West and Central Ukraine staging Maidan’ for the loss of his good job.

- BFG2-Cm: *I am just saying that we didn’t want to have such a mess [besporyadok] in Artemivsk as in [Kyiv].*

ZOiS researched the level of trust in political leaders and institutions as an indicator of ‘political stability and regime legitimacy’ in the government controlled Donbas. The survey results indicate that over 87 percent in this region do not trust the Ukrainian president (Sasse, 2017: 12). Poroshenko, decided to actively promote the ‘post-colonial’ narrative, as illustrated above. Judging from the replies of my informants in the two cities, it seems highly improbable that this decision will boost trust in him, thus making it difficult for him to be perceived as a representative of the full country. Fomenting this discourse by his speech acts might rather confirm the perception of people in the Donbas that he is from the perceived ‘other’ – west and central Ukrainian clique.

Polls indicate, however, that these ‘others’ in west and central Ukraine are not really fond of him either. Poroshenko is unpopular over the whole country for restraining democratic reforms in order to install his own ‘patronalistic regime’ in the country (Umland, 2017). At least some of my informants seem willing to challenge this political authority in the future. As some replies of my informants indicate, his political authority might be challenged by some civil society activists from the two cities analysed in this research. The patriotic sentiments, of informants like KFG1-Cf or BFG1-Cf can be derived from their stronger experience of conflict. The assumption that a stronger experience of conflict might increase the support of elites in the capital, cannot be confirmed by this research. The focus groups in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut seemed sceptical towards the elites in the same way. The patriotically minded young people among my informants, however, seemed to be more motivated to initiate their own ‘nationalising policies’ in their direct environment, regardless of support of elites in their region or in the capital.

After revealing the general mistrust towards the political leadership in both cities, the last empirical section analyses how the ‘nationalising’ policies by the Ukrainian government and the general sentiments towards Ukraine differ among the focus group

participants in both cities.

5.6. Love and ‘imposition’ – Nationalising policies in Kramatorsk and Bakhmut

The last thematic analysis illustrates the different relation, sentiments and attitudes people in the focus groups had towards Ukraine and its nationalising policies. Ola Hniatuk describes a new peculiar type of identity emerging in Ukraine. This new identity is based less on linguistic or cultural factors, but on loyalty to the Ukrainian state (UCMC, 2017). This section tries to test Hniatuk’s inference by analysing the Ukrainian nationalising discourses in focus groups in Kramatorsk and, secondly, comparing them with Bakhmut. This section illustrates that the nationalising policies in the cultural and linguistic spheres have a stronger impact on my focus group participants in Kramatorsk than in Bakhmut. Roughly half of my informants in Kramatorsk confirmed that their patriotic feelings significantly grew with the beginning of the conflict in 2014 and that a rather patriotic mainstream emerged in their city. The same applies to my informants in Bakhmut with comparable experience of conflict in 2014, such as BFG1-Bf and BFG1-Cf.

As illustrated by the discussion between KFG3-Cf and KFG3-Am in chapter 5.4., the use of Ukrainian or Russian language remains a highly sensitive topic. KFG3-Am admitted, however, that by insisting on a right to use Russian in various contexts, he feels like an outsider in Kramatorsk. He explained on how the relation towards the Ukrainian language changed by most people in the city since 2014. The nationalising social pressure by the ‘ordinary people’ in his environment, seem ubiquitous:

- KFG3-Am: *The Ukrainian language became almost ‘number one’, and next to it nothing should prevail. I know people, who used to talk and write in Russian and they flipped. They started writing in Ukrainian, try to talk in Ukrainian. For them, for many in our city, the Ukrainian language became a super-language.*

Confronted with the Ukrainian flag, KFG3-Am emphasised that now he does not like ‘his’ flag, though this had changed with the conflict. Differently from Russian-leaning informants in Bakhmut, KFG3-Am’s use of ‘his’ indicates a prevailing sense of belonging to the Ukrainian nation. However, he admitted that he stopped liking the Ukrainian colours, because they were overabundant– ‘at fences, [and] pillars’.

In many regards KFG1-Bm can be seen as KFG3-Am's antagonist. His way of speaking and gestures seem similar to KFG3-Am; both seem to share an internalised working class habitus and consider Russian as their mother tongue. But KFG1-Bm patriotic feelings grew due to the conflict. Not only his reactions to the Ukrainian flag were remarkably positive.

- KFG1-Bm: *The feeling of patriotism arises... A feeling of refreshment, freedom. I remember these shootings... it was simply a nightmare. In general, I associate red colours since then with blood and with their [DNR] flag. [...]*
KFG1-Cf: *The feeling of pride arises. A feeling of love. A feeling of the notion that I am a Ukrainian and this is my favourite country [liubimaia strana].*

The same applies to my informants in Bakhmut with comparable experience in 2014, such as BFG1-Bf and BFG1-Cf.

- BFG1-Cf: *I became more secure with Ukrainian literature and vocabulary. I can read more Ukrainian. I think I even started thinking differently.*

KFG1-Gf, KFG1-Cf and KFG2-Am mentioned that their schooling in Ukrainian contributed to their stronger connection to the language already before the conflict.

- KFG2-Am: *Ukrainian flag. Our native flag. In this sense, since the childhood, Ukraine, Ukraine... Golden wheat, blue sky, from the bench from school times, from the Ukrainian language classes [Ukrainska mova] to Ukrainian literature...*

Though they were taught in Ukrainian already in school, the connection of KFG1-Gf and KFG1-Cf to the language seemed to have increased since the beginning of the conflict, as for all in their focus group.

KFG4-Af also emphasised her strong patriotic feelings. She was sceptical, however, towards all the ubiquitous nationalising trends in Kramatorsk, because she could not understand why people did not emphasise their love for Ukraine before 2014. In her view, painting the flag on the asphalt is not only pointless, but also disrespectful. BFG1-Cf and BFG1-Df, who were from Bakhmut but experienced the conflict in 2014 more similarly to my informants in Kramatorsk, argued in the same way.

- BFG1-Cf: *[...] the flag is a symbol of the state... It is something sacred. A cultural value. But now we created something... hell knows what.*

- KFG4-Af: *It is just... where was this patriotism before? The same people in Kramatorsk? Why weren't you a patriot before 2014? [...] A flag or a coat of arms painted on the asphalt – this is disrespectful. A flag must unfold in the sky, in the air. [...] You mustn't step on a flag.*

As part of the ongoing nationalising policies, the government increased the share of Ukrainian songs in the radio. All four focus group participants of KFG1 spoke about the increasing appeal of Ukrainian music and literature.

- KFG1-Af: *I was so surprised that there is 'drum-n-base' in Ukrainian language [...]. And it is really cool in Ukrainian [...]. So well, it changed. Before the war, [...] Ukrainian was for me... a subject in school. It was necessary to read texts in Ukrainian. Now I read it with pleasure. [...] ... the same with the [Ukrainian] flag. It is home, native, warm.*

KFG4-A4 criticised the previous separation of students into Russian and Ukrainian classes. Instead, she suggested starting classes taught in Ukrainian from the kindergarten.

- KFG4-Af: *... And not only with one group in the whole kindergarten studying Ukrainian, how it used to be, but all of them. The child will get used to Ukrainian speech from childhood. They will talk to their parents in Ukrainian and the parents will step-by-step get used to this speech as well. [...]*

However similar efforts to reverse the former policies, which had buttressing the status of Russian, would be too abrupt and are perceived by many informants as an 'imposition' [naviazanie]. This particular word 'naviazanie' was common in both cities when referring to the ubiquitous Ukrainian symbols across the cityscapes. Even patriotically-minded participants did not support the ubiquitous promotion campaign. In Bakhmut people criticised the 'imposition' of the Ukrainian symbols more often.

- KFG4-Af: *But it is real that imposing causes the opposite effect. [...] When it comes from the heart, it is great. When you only do this, to impose it on someone [...] than this will only push people away.*
- BFG1-Df: *The only thing that I don't like is... as I said, I like the Ukrainian culture. I like its peculiarities and everything. But now, in our eastern region, they are imposing it strongly. You need to wear, to buy a vyshyvanka. [...] But a person needs to do this from his or her soul.*

In striking contrast to the trends in Kramatorsk, the rejection of Ukrainian

nationalising narratives as well as the aforementioned ‘imposition’ of Ukrainian language and culture seemed stronger in the focus groups in Bakhmut. Those, who experienced the conflict in 2014 differently from the participants in Kramatorsk, did not mind the flag or the Ukrainian language per se, but neither identified with it strongly nor showed any understanding for the nationalising policies in their environment.

The discussion in the second focus group in Bakhmut was mainly focused on their economic situation and a feeling that these policies cannot solve the perceived marginalisation of the region.

- BFG2-Bf: [...] *It is just unclear what this is all for.*
BFG2-Cm: *Oh! You are right!*
BFG2-Bf: *They changed the names, they changed the names of the streets, but nothing really changed. Life did not get better here. The salaries did not increase.*

Concerning Ukrainian language policies, the main argument here was that Ukraine had two national languages on an equal footing. In the perception of Bakhmut-based informants, the mother tongue and lingua franca simply depended on the region you were raised in.

- BFG2-Am: *This is the same as if I would go to Lviv now and force them to speak Russian. They are used to speak Ukrainian, they do not understand Russian anymore.*

As illustrated in this chapter, nationalising policies in the cultural and linguistic spheres seem to have a strong impact on my focus group participants in Kramatorsk. Roughly half of my informants in Kramatorsk confirmed that their patriotic feelings grew with the beginning of the conflict in 2014 and that a rather patriotic mainstream emerged in their city. Some informants illustrated how the Ukrainian part of their borderland identity felt threatened by the pro-Russian militias and activists. These people seem to welcome certain nationalising policies – such as the quota for Ukrainian music on the radio. The same applies to those participants in Bakhmut, who experienced the conflict as strongly as my informants in Kramatorsk. In line with the assumptions of this thesis, people in Kramatorsk seem to be more receptive to the ‘nationalising policies’ by the constructed Ukrainian ‘core nation’.

The acceptance of the ‘nationalising’ trends seems higher, however, when

‘nationalising policies’ are not perceived as imposed by the state or the elites in the capital, but naturally emerging through the spread of music and literature or choices of ‘ordinary people’. Regardless of their position towards Ukraine or Russia the overarching number of respondents in both cities criticized the distribution of symbols across their cities. These symbols were referred to as ‘imposed’ [naviazanye]. The criticism and resilience to ‘imposition’ by the nationalising state might indicate that the growth of national sentiments and spread of the Ukrainian language – are less triggered by the nationalising policies of the state, but by the personal experience of conflict.

The majority of my participants in Bakhmut were simply puzzled about the purpose of government-promoted nationalising policies because it did not have any impact on their everyday economic difficulties.

Therefore, the initially formulated assumption about the attitudes towards the spread of national symbols needs adjustment. More informants in Kramatorsk, seemed to be receptive for nationalising policies, such as the rising importance of the Ukrainian language in their environment and a stronger consumption of Ukrainian music and literature. While the connection to Russia culturally and politically seemed to shrink, Ukraine as a state seems to have successfully filled the gap of this former ‘external homeland’ or former ‘fraternal nation’ in Kramatorsk – yet the nationalising effort is met with mixed feelings. The majority of focus group participants in Bakhmut, in contrast, perceived the spread of the Ukrainian language simply as a puzzling obstacle.

Ukraine’s regional and cultural diversity is characterised by different and coexistent narratives with their own peculiarities. The current elite-driven nationalising policies ignore and disregard these peculiarities. Therefore, the replies of my informants indicate that the intentions of these policies are mostly misunderstood and seem to fail in Bakhmut, a city largely spared by the violent clashes in 2014 and after. In contrast, the nationalising policies are putting down roots in Kramatorsk – however not because of their design, but because of a lasting attachment and stronger experience of violence under the control of DNR rebels.

Hniatuk’s argument about the emergence of identity based on political loyalty needs adjustment (UCMC, 2017). The nationalising state Ukraine tries to actively

strengthen the loyalty of its citizens by different means and in different spheres, in order to diminish the influence of the ‘significant other’ – Russia – on its territory. These dynamics are also enforced by a new generation of people in Ukraine, raised in a different – neither Soviet nor Russian – reality (Matusova, 2017). These young ‘ordinary people’, together with activists, artists or authors promote a new Ukrainian identity. The relation to the Ukrainian language in this process as an increasingly valuable ‘symbolic capital’ (Riabchuk, 2009) seems to be more relevant than Hniatuk assumes. Informants, particularly in Kramatorsk, illustrated how ‘ordinary people’ in the city exert a nationalising pressure towards each other. As KFG4-Af suggested, people can get accustomed also without pressure to the Ukrainian language and culture step-by-step through the influence of beloved people in their environment, such as by their children, who get a full Ukrainian schooling, or by their close friends. Such a careful process might lead to a more positive relationship of people in Donbas with their nationalising state within a single generation.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effects of conflict on attitudes and emotions of young people raised in independent Ukraine and living in the two cities of Kramatorsk and Bakhmut. The researcher applies a qualitative method, inspired by a most similar system design with a small n-case study. The two analysed cities are similarly sized, similarly industrially developed, with similar average income and similarly located in the government-controlled Ukrainian Donbas region – but experienced a different fate during the beginning of the ongoing armed conflict in the East of Ukraine. Although political legitimacy has been challenged by pro-Russian separatists and their supporters in both cities, the city of Kramatorsk was violently taken over by the separatists, followed by armed conflict and violent control lasting roughly three months. Kramatorsk became a base for the ‘hard power of guns and fighters’ (Wilson, 2014: 132) of the separatists between April and July 2014. In the meantime the situation in Bakhmut remained rather calm. Bakhmut’s mayor and local patron Aleksey Reva takes the credit for a successful mediation between government forces and the separatist fighters, which prevented overt violence.

This thesis investigated whether the different experience of conflict of young inhabitants of these cities led to varying attitudes and emotions towards Ukraine and its nationalising policies, Ukrainian political elites in the capital, the separatist movement DNR and towards their political and cultural affiliations to Russia. The basis of my analysis were transcripts of seven focus groups, three in Bakhmut and four in Kramatorsk, which I conducted between 22nd April and 9th May 2017. Overall, I talked to 26 participants, conducted background interviews, and collected field notes. The age of my participants ranged between 16 and 34.

Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work adds valuable insights and thick analysis of people’s perceptions to the existing literature on the effect of armed conflicts and wars on identity. In the tradition of social constructivism, this research project examined how informants in both cities constructed their ‘multiple realities’ in a ‘research interaction’ (Aronoff and Kubik, 2013: 26) with the researcher, as well as with each other. Envisioned within the constructivist paradigm, this thesis situated the

analysis of the field close to Brubaker's model of triadic nexus. In his seminal work Brubaker conceptualises the triangular relations between a 'nationalising state', a 'national minority' and (imagined) external national 'homelands' (Brubaker, 1995: 108). This thesis presumes that Ukrainians with Ukrainian mother tongue (though not necessarily the only mother tongue) across the country are the 'core nation', while the Russian speaking minority – or rather those, who speak Russian as their first mother tongue – are in the role of a constructed 'national minority', with Russia acting as an external 'homeland state'.

The choice to categorise the Russian speakers in the Donbas as 'minority' did not follow a political reasoning, but the logic of the beginning of the current armed conflict. Brubaker emphasises that the perception of an external 'homeland' does not necessarily need to be based on any family-based or real historical connection of the minority to this state. Thus, "Homeland" is a political, not an ethnographic category; homelands are constructed, not given' (Brubaker, 1995: 110). To balance Brubaker's elite-centred bias this research integrated Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) concept of 'everyday nationhood', which focuses on how nationhood is 'embodied, expressed and sometimes performed' in the daily lives of [...] the 'ordinary people' (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 537-542).

The first major finding was that informants in both cities, with the exception of a single case, remembered the DNR mostly with negative feelings of mistrust, disillusionment and sometimes disgust. However, the more extreme the individual experience of conflict-related clashes personally was, the less supportive seemed the focus group participants of DNR symbols and ideas. Thereby, the results of this study illustrate that the focus groups in Kramatorsk showed stronger negative attitudes towards the DNR and its symbols than the groups in Bakhmut.

The second major finding concerns the political and cultural relationship with Russia. The discussions in the focus groups indicate that the stronger the experience of conflict personally was, the more critical the focus group participants were towards Russia politically. Confronted with the Russian flag, informants in Kramatorsk associated it more often with rather negative terms, such as 'dictatorship', usually in

connection with the name of [Russian president Vladimir] 'Putin', 'aggression' or the ongoing conflict in their region. In contrast, the flag and topic of Russia caused much less ambiguous reactions among the focus group participants in Bakhmut. They were referring to it just as a 'strong' or 'neighbouring' nation, which was rather similar to theirs.

However, as the discussions also showed, a critical political stance on Russia does not necessarily include a feeling of cultural aversion towards Russia. The focus groups in both cities illustrated a strong borderland identity, with a connection to the Russian language, strong historical or family ties to both Russia and Ukraine. Russia was often referred to as a 'brother nation'. In some cases – without any insinuation – people structured their arguments in opposition to russophobic attitudes: 'I do not have any negative feelings' or 'I do not think this is an aggressor state'. The fact that these statements came up without insinuation of the opposite indicates the strong awareness of the negative, dichotomising, official narrative by the 'nationalising state' towards Russia, the 'external homeland' – and a subliminal resilience of the people towards this narrative.

The penultimate result of this study is that the focus groups in both Kramatorsk and Bakhmut seemed similarly sceptical towards the elites in the capital. Thus, a stronger experience of armed conflict does not seem to increase the support of both local of national elites. The patriotically minded young people among my informants, however, seemed to be more inclined to initiate their own 'nationalising policies' in their direct environment, regardless of support of elites in their region or in the capital.

This leads to the last major findings of this project. The focus group participants in Kramatorsk seemed to be more receptive to the nationalising policies by the representatives of the constructed Ukrainian 'core nation'. More informants in Kramatorsk, seemed receptive to nationalising policies, such as the growing importance of the Ukrainian language and a stronger consumption of Ukrainian music and literature. While the connection to Russia culturally and politically seems to shrink, Ukraine as a state seems to successfully fill the gap of this former 'external homeland' in Kramatorsk. Roughly half of my informants in Kramatorsk confirmed that their

patriotic feelings grew with the beginning of the conflict in 2014 and reported that a rather patriotic mainstream emerged in their city.

The acceptance of these ‘nationalising’ trends seems higher, however, when ‘nationalising policies’ are not perceived as imposed by the state or the elites in the capital, but naturally emerging from the ‘ordinary people’ in their surroundings or through the increasing acceptance of Ukrainian music and literature. The vast majority of my informants in both cities – regardless of their patriotic feelings – criticised the overabundant promotion of national symbols. The ubiquitous Ukrainian national symbols were perceived as an ‘imposition’ [naviazanye]. The resilience to ‘imposition’ by the nationalising state might indicate that the growth of national feelings and spread of the Ukrainian language – are less triggered by the nationalising policies of the state, but by the personal experience of conflict.

‘Where is Ukraine’s national awakening leading the country?’, asked the British journalist Dickinson in his article on the success of nationalising practices across the country. None of the informants in the present research stated that the success of nationalising policies could solve the overarching social, economic and political problems of the Ukrainian or Donbas society. It might, however, contribute to the development of a responsible civil society in a region, in which civil engagement was traditionally considered weak (Mangas, 2016). The emergence of this stronger civil society in the Donbas, might help to overcome the prevailing quarrels and stereotypes between the different regions of Ukraine – and eventually set the ground for a united generational takeover of the country from old patronalistic elites.

7. References

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8. Appendix 1: Guiding questions for the focus groups

- How did you perceive the events in your city from April 2014 until (roughly) July 2014?
- With which side did you sympathise or support when the unrest started and why?
 - Follow-up question: Did the insurgents have support from the local civilian population?
- How was the city governed during the control of the insurgents?
- How did your life change during and after these events?
- Could you work/ coordinate projects during the time of the insurgent control?
 - Follow-up question: If yes, how and who did you approach from the side of the city?
- What did the insurgents try to change in the city? Which symbols did they establish?
- “Focusing” exercise (Bloor et. al., 2001: 43):
What feelings and thoughts evoke seeing these flags and symbols?
 - 1) Ukrainian flag,
 - 2) Russian flag,
 - 3) Flag of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic,
 - 4) Emblem of the Azov Bataillon,
 - 5) Flag of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army [Ukraïns’ka Povstans’ka Armiia]
- Did the importance of the Ukrainian language in your everyday life change since the beginning of the war?

9. Appendix 2: Questionnaire for focus group participants

Анонимный опрос демографических данных

Информация, которая будет использована в диссертации. анонимна.

Пол:	Мужской Женский N/A (предпочитаю не отвечать)
Возраст участника:	
Место рождения:	
Место проживания:	
Гражданство:	
Этническая самоидентификация:	
Родной язык:	
Семейное положение:	не женат / не замужем женат / замужем разведен / разведена гражданский брак
Дети-иждивенцы:	да/нет
Уровень образования:	начальное среднее среднее специальное высшее
Трудовой статус:	трудоустроенный профессия – должность безработный самостоятельно занятый
Родители из Донецкой или Луганской области? (да/нет)	
Возраст родителей:	Мать: Отец:
Уровень образования родителей:	Мать: начальное среднее среднее специальное высшее Отец: начальное среднее среднее специальное высшее

Употребляете или покупаете Вы какие-либо местные продукты или бренды, если да, то по каким соображениям?

Имя исследователя: Игорь Мичник

Число, подпись исследователя:

Участник

Число, подпись: _____

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