

The “Frozen Conflict Perspective” in Eastern Ukraine and its Influence on Identity Construction

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Although socially and politically constructed, the self-identification of the separatist regions in the east of Ukraine and their inhabitants can have a significant influence on the conflict resolution process. Through an analysis of identity construction in Donbas via the self-perceptions of residents of both the controlled and the uncontrolled territories, and their views regarding the introduction of a “special status,” the author aims to answer the following question: Will a special status for the separatists’ territories facilitate conflict resolution, or is it a fixing agent for a constructed identity for territories that are experiencing political confrontations? The author argues that the frozen status of the conflict, in the event of the satisfaction of certain social needs, will lead to the deeper separation of the territories, while a special status within a unitary state will lead to the crystallization of their identity, transforming it from a local-cum-regional one to one with expressed features of a political national identity.

Keywords: Ukraine, Donbas, Identity construction, special status, “frozen conflict”



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Introduction

Regional identities in Ukraine have different dimensions and exist at different levels. In different historical moments, they have played greater or lesser roles in political and social discourse within the country. Some have ethnic or historical backgrounds, due to the long history of changing borders in Ukraine. Some were constructed under the influence of Soviet demographic and social policies including, among others, mass movement of people. Some are political constructs, highly developed during elections and revolutions (both the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity, 2013–14).

In most cases, except for mono-ethnic villages on the western and southern borders of Ukraine, local self-identity did not have an ethnic background, but was constructed under the influence of socio-economic and political factors. The Revolution of Dignity, followed by the Russian aggression in the east of Ukraine, as well as local elites' manipulations, became the factors that triggered a new wave of self-identification in Donbas. Developing within the last five years, it is still difficult to evaluate how strong and fixed this identity is, or what the factors influencing its crystallization are.

The aim of this article is to analyze whether “frozen conflict” status, which has been actively discussed recently, can be a factor for fixing the local self-identification in Donbas as a political construct. By analyzing the population's different perceptions about themselves and their self-identification, as well as views regarding the future status of Donbas, we look at the elements that accompany the so-called “frozen conflict” state of affairs and how this could promote greater separation rather than conflict resolution in Donbas.

The Problem of Identity Construction in Donbas

Ethnic identity is not a part of the so-called Donbas identity, which has nevertheless become well developed in the political discourse, especially since 2004. The opposition of Donbas to the West, and later the central government, became one of the most significant issues in local election campaigns. The latest census, conducted back in 2001, demonstrated that, even in

Donetsk and Luhansk regions – the conflict areas – the ethnic Russian population did not exceed 39% of the total,¹ which is why the slogan “rights of the Russian-speaking population” was used often as an element of local self-identification. At the same time, this slogan helped to diffuse the borders of the area where such population is leaving, or who they (Russian-speaking) are, as allowing this construct to go beyond the Donetsk and Lugansk regions’ administrative borders.

Moreover, as the events of 2013–19 clearly demonstrated, the supporters and the opponents of the central government were drawn from both ethnic groups, Russian and Ukrainian, and this aspect was not among the main determinants of which side to take. In the Ukrainian case, ethnicity and religion come second to political and ideological differences, creating a level of irrationality in this conflict, i.e., pro-democracy (pro-European) sentiments versus pro-Soviet nostalgia (which does not imply agreement with leftist ideas).

The beliefs of the parties in the conflict are political rather than ethnic, and even the language issue, i.e., Russian versus Ukrainian speakers, is a demonstration of a political preference, not a marker of “ethnic belonging.”²

Nevertheless, securitization of the identity problem during the conflict resolution process, especially with the involvement of foreign actors, demonstrates that it is a factor that can significantly influence final resolution modalities, so it is a necessity to look at the additional elements that can shape this identity, thus affecting the peace process. While identity is usually a factor that tends to look to the past, in the case of Donetsk and Lugansk it is more significantly an element of future constructs.

In Yugoslavia in the 1990s, ethnicity was re-engineered as a dominant social category, and the Dayton accords enshrined this charged version of ethnicity as “the only relevant political identity in society.”³ The same happened in eastern Ukraine in 2013–14, when issues of language, as part of self-identification,

1 State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, (2001), *Ukrainian Census*, Available at: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

2 Shelest, H. “Imposed State-Building”, *Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 42, Issue 3, 2018.

3 Ahmagić, E., Denison, B., et al. (2014) “Bosnia is no model for Ukrainian peace”, *Balkans in Europe Policy Blog*, Centre for Southeast European Studies, 20 October, Available at: <http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/biepag/node/106> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

started to prevail in political and social discourse.

When analyzing the development of identities during times of conflict, it is necessary to understand whether this identity is just a sharpening of local identity, which can be found in any society, where big cities or certain territories can create special forms of self-identification and self-attachment, or if it is political nation-building type of self-identification.

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Geographically, Donbas (which originated from the term Donetsk Coal Basin) covers a territory that is not identical to the current uncontrolled, separate districts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions, or even the administrative regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. It covers territories in both the Russian Federation and Ukraine (Eastern and Western Donbas), but does not cover Mariupol city and surroundings, which have been under occupation for several months and remain among the “at-risk” territories. Despite attempts to impose a narrative that all the East “belongs to Donbas,” this part of the Donetsk oblast is referred as Azov region. Interviews conducted by the author in Mariupol in 2016–19 demonstrated that, more and more, the local populace are trying to separate themselves from identification with Donbas, even expressing ideas of an administrative division of the region into two, so as to escape social constructions around Donbas.

In the opinion of researchers at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), “The only way in which a one-off survey can speak to the question of personal identity change is to tap into self-reported changes.”⁴ However, due to the difficult security situation and Russian control over the territories, it is difficult to find fully reliable data. Below we present two surveys conducted by Ukrainian and German think tanks, using different methodologies, which nevertheless allow a closer look at how the self-identification of the separatist regions has been changing over the last five years.

A recent survey conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) in March 2019 at the checkpoints between the

4 Sasse, G. (2017) ‘The Donbas – Two Parts, Or Still One? The Experience of War through the Eyes of the Regional Population’, *ZOIS Report*, No.2/2017, Available at: https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOIS_Reports/ZOIS_Report_2_2017.pdf (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

controlled and uncontrolled territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions demonstrated the following self-identification of people living in the uncontrolled territories and crossing the line to the controlled territories for their private affairs (Table 1).

Table 1. Self-identification of people living in the uncontrolled territories and crossing the line to the controlled territories, March 2019⁵

	%,
Resident of the region (oblast, city, village), where you live	24
Citizen of Ukraine	60
Representative of your nationality, ethnic group	3
Citizen of the Russian Federations/USSR	3
Citizen of 'DNR'/'LNR'	5
Difficult to answer	5

ZOIS conducted its first survey in December 2016,⁶ face-to-face in the government-controlled territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions and by telephone in the uncontrolled territories. The results demonstrated that, as a result of the events of 2013–16, 26.1% of the respondents in the occupied territories said that they felt “more Russian” and only 8.5% felt “more Ukrainian.” At the same time, 20.5% of respondents in the controlled territories said that they felt themselves to be “more Ukrainian.”

In 2019, ZOIS repeated its research,⁷ demonstrating significant changes in the self-identification of people in the uncontrolled territories. About 29% of respondents said that they felt more Russian than before (an increase of 3%); some 28% felt more strongly that they were both Russian and Ukrainian; and around 11% felt more Ukrainian than before. All this happened due to a significant

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5 Ілко Кучерів Democratic Initiatives Foundation (2019) Суспільні настрої та оцінка громадянами ситуації на Донбасі - опитування на КПВВ [Public sentiment and citizens' assessment of the situation in the Donbass - a survey at the CPVV], 25 April, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/suspilni-nastroi-ta-otsinka-gromadyanami-situatsii-na-donbasi-opituvannya-na-kpvv> (Accessed: November 15, 2019).

6 Sasse, ‘The Donbas – Two Parts, Or Still One?...’, *op.cit.*

7 Sasse, G. and Lackner, A. (2019) “Attitudes and Identities across the Donbas Front Line: What Has Changed From 2016 to 2019?”, *ZOiS Report*, No. 3/2019, Available at: https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_3_2019.pdf, p. 8, (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

decrease in those who thought that their identity had not changed – from 45% in 2016 to 32% in 2019.

Regional identities were also more prominent in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (“DNR/LNR”) than in government-controlled Donbas in 2019: 18% in the “DNR/LNR” described themselves as “people from Donbas” and about 12% as residents of the “DNR/LNR,” while in the controlled territories only 12.8% described themselves as a “person from Donbas.”⁸

Special Status as a Fixing Agent of the Identity Construct

One of the main demands, discussed from the very beginning of the conflict in the east of Ukraine and also seen by mediators as a way forward in conflict resolution, is the guarantee of a “special status” to the separatist territories.

The Minsk Agreement II, signed in February 2015 by the representatives of the OSCE, Russia, Ukraine and the two separatist territories, became the first document setting out certain norms of the possible special status. “Complex of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements” envisaged, in its explanatory notes, eight “rights,” some of which concern economic development support and amnesty, but others are important for special status construction: the right to language self-identification; participation of the local authorities in the appointment of heads of the local prosecutors’ offices and courts in separate districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions; and the creation of militia units through the decisions of the local councils, with the aim of supporting public order in the separate districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions.⁹ The protocol on the results of the Trilateral Consultations, signed on the same day by the same representatives, determined (Article 3) “to conduct power decentralization, including by means of adopting a Law of Ukraine ‘On Temporary Procedures of Local Self-Governance in separate Regions of Donetsk and Lugansk Regions’ (Law on a Special Status).”¹⁰

8 Sasse, and Lackner, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

9 Osce.org, (2015) *Complex of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements*, 12 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/ru/cio/140221?download=true> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

10 Osce.org, (2015) *Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group con-*

There are four main groups of views regarding a special status composition for the uncontrolled territories of Donetsk and Lugansk regions: those stated in the current Law; those expressed by the team of the new President Zelenskyy; those articulated by the Ukrainian pro-Russian politicians; and those coming from the Russian-controlled separatists and Moscow itself.

Initial legislation on the special status of certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions was adopted back in September 2014, when the parliament of Ukraine, at the initiative of the president of Ukraine, adopted the law “On the special procedure of local self-governance in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.”¹¹ According to that law, a special status was established for three years, during which Ukrainian legislation could be limited by this legal provision. Among other things, the law guaranteed the use of the Russian language, immunity from prosecution for participation in the events in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, special procedures for the appointment of prosecutors and judges (with the participation of local authorities), a special regime for investment and economic activities, development of trans-border cooperation with neighbouring Russian Federation regions, and the creation of special militia units to keep public order, controlled only by the local authorities. It was expected that this law would be implemented only after elections in the uncontrolled territories taking place according to Ukrainian law, with international observers and media involved. Since then, elections have not been held as the ceasefire has been constantly violated and the sides could not agree on the modalities for holding elections. The latest “Steinmeier formula” sets out only a sequence of activities, not the modalities themselves.

If we consider individual identity as a constructed mechanism to promote group solidarity, then quasi-federalization could

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cerning joint steps aimed on implementation of President Poroshenko's Peace Plan and President Putin's initiatives, 12 February, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/ru/home/123258?download=true> ,(Accessed: November 1, 2019).

¹¹ Parliament of Ukraine, (2014) Закон України Про особливий порядок місцевого самоврядування в окремих районах Донецької та Луганської областей [Law ‘On the special procedure of local self-governance in certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions’], 16 September, Available at: <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1680-18> (Accessed: November 12, 2019).

result from a special status being granted to the separate districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This could lead to the crystallization of their identity, transforming it from a local-cum-regional one to one with expressed features of a political national identity. Moreover, such an identity would not be formed on the basis of ethnicity (internal factor), but in opposition to “the other” (external factor), meaning the rest of Ukraine.¹²

In 2014, both “Donetsk PR” and “Lugansk PR” adopted their “constitutions”, which de facto are identical documents. For example, the “Constitution of Donetsk People’s Republic”¹³ states that the “state languages in the Donetsk People’s Republic are Russian and Ukrainian” (Art.10), and that “each person has a right to define and state his/her national identity. Nobody can be obliged to define and state his/her national identity” (Art. 19). These are the only two articles that at first sight refer to identification issues, leaving these rather blurred. However, the use of the term “citizens of the DPR” throughout the “constitution” text is a way of fixing belonging to a certain entity.

These demands could possibly lead to paralyzing any state activity, rendering the country completely dysfunctional, but also blocking pro-European reforms and Euro-integration as a whole.

At the same time, most of the districts’ requests concerning special status have been stated regularly both directly and through Russian official representatives. Back in January 2016, the representatives of the separatist republics submitted their proposals for constitutional reform in Ukraine, which went far beyond the Minsk Agreements and decentralization reform. In addition to the requests to have a quota for their members in the parliament of Ukraine, to use Russian as an official language, and to have close economic ties with Russia, they insisted on the right to approve all Ukrainian laws as well as the right to veto foreign policy decisions. They also demanded the right to form their own police, security services, judiciary, prosecution, border guard service, and other agencies without the approval of the authorities in Kyiv.¹⁴ These demands could possibly lead to paralyzing any state activity, rendering the country completely dysfunctional, but also blocking pro-European reforms and Euro-integration as a whole. Adding to

¹² Shelest, “Imposed State-Building”, *op. cit.*

¹³ People’s Council of DNR (2015) *Constitution of Donetsk People Republic*, 14 May (edition of 30.11.2018). Available at: <https://dnrsovet.su/konstitutsiya/> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

¹⁴ Censor.net, (2016) ‘DPR’ offers special view of amendments to Ukrainian Constitution, 27 January, Available at: <http://en.censor.net.ua/n371293> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

this police and security services beyond the control of the central government, i.e., a de-facto loss of the monopoly on the use of force; this represents a dangerous accumulation of power that would be far from preventing conflict. Also, these demands clearly demonstrate that it is the political background, rather than identity clashes, that is the root of the conflict.

President Zelensky's team still has not presented a clear plan and vision for the new law on special status that needs to be adopted by 31 December 2019. Normandy Format meeting on 9 December 2019 in Paris were expected to clarify the situation, but a decision was taken to prolong a previous version of the law, and to consider possible changes in 2020. However, the president has announced a few basic elements in interviews: compromises on humanitarian issues; possible regional status for the Russian language; no confirmation of autonomous status; possible relations between the Russian Federation and separatist regions; and elections with "Steinmeier formula" as an element.¹⁵

A survey by DIF, reported in April 2019, demonstrated public opinion regarding the possible options for bringing peace to Donbas across three population categories (Ukrainian citizens as a whole; residents of Ukrainian-controlled Donbas; and residents of the uncontrolled territories crossing the contact line to Ukraine). (All respondents could choose up to three options.)

Table 2. Possible decisions to bring peace to Donbas¹⁶

	Ukraine, May 2018	Donbas, November 2018	Bloc- posts, March 2019
Separation of the territories occupied by 'DNR' and 'LNR' from Ukraine	9.8	6.2	2.8
Granting a special status to 'DNR and 'LNR' within the Ukrainian borders	12.9	24.3	23.1

15 Unian.ua, (2019) У новому законі про особливий статус не йтиметься про автономію Донбасу – Зеленський [The new law on special status does not refer to the autonomy of Donbas - Zelensky], 10 October, Available at: <https://www.unian.ua/politics/10715967-u-novomu-zakoni-pro-osobliviy-status-ne-ytimetsya-pro-avtonomiyu-donbasu-zelenskiy.html> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

16 Ілко Кучерів Democratic Initiatives Foundation (2019) Суспільні настрої та оцінка громадянами ситуації на Донбасі - опитування на КПВВ [Public sentiment and citizens' assessment of the situation in the Donbas - a survey at the CPVV], 25 April, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/suspilni-nastroi-ta-otsinka-gromadyanami-situatsii-na-donbasi-opituvannya-na-kpvv> (Accessed: November 15, 2019).

Introduction of a federal structure in Ukraine	8.7	11.1	3.0
Successful rebuilding of normal life in the territories of Donbas, controlled by Ukraine	30.6	47.7	41.9
Conducting legal elections in the territories controlled by 'DNR' and 'LNR'	13.0	-	-
Granting Russian language the status of a state language	6.5	19.1	15.9
Amnesty to all who participated in fighting in Donbas	7.2	9.4	9.4
Preventing Russia from intervening in the conflict in Donbas (reinforcing international sanctions, pressure of the international structures)	32.0	17.8	16.1
Stopping financing of the territories occupied by 'DNR' and 'LNR' (paying pensions, salaries, etc.)	7.1	4.5	6.1
Rejection of the NATO membership perspective, confirming in the constitution of Ukraine a neutral status.	6.6	8.5	6.9
Regaining control over the territories of 'DNR' and 'LNR' by military force	14.2	7.8	-
Other	2.1	4.5	6.0
Difficult to answer	15.8	17.1	19.0

At the same time, when asked whether it is acceptable to make changes to the Constitution to grant the status of a state language to Russian in order to stop a war in Donbas, the responses differed depending on the region of Ukraine, but also showed a general increase. This demonstrates that, while most of the population do not believe that this measure can help conflict resolution, it is more acceptable to them than a special status, which is a sensitive issue, as it is perceived as a Russian plan for Ukrainian federalization, affecting the sovereignty of the state.

Table 3. How do you consider changes into Constitution to grant a status of the state language to the Russian language as a way to solve Donbas conflict (%)?¹⁷

	West	Center	South	East	Donbas
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¹⁷ Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (2019) Пошуки шляхів відновлення суверенітету України над окупованим Донбасом: стан громадської думки напередодні президентських виборів [The search for ways to restore Ukraine's sovereignty over the occupied Donbass: state of public opinion ahead of the presidential election], 13 February, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/poshuki-shlyakhiv-vidnovlennya-suverenitetu-ukraini-nad-okupovanim-donbasom>

Acceptable	12,9	17,4	49,0	49,2	55,5
Unacceptable	71,5	65,6	29,9	23,8	22,2
Difficult to reply	15,6	17,0	21,2	27,0	22,3

According to the 2016 Survey results by ZOIS, the preferences regarding the future status of the occupied territories diverge significantly. While in Kyiv-controlled Donbas a clear majority (65%) want to be part of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast without a special status, 26% deem a special status within Ukraine necessary, and about 9% see the future of these territories in Russia. The views of the population in the self-declared republics are more diverse than one might have expected: 21% want this area to be part of Ukraine without a special status, and 35% prefer a special status for these territories inside Ukraine. Conversely, 11% want to see the territories as part of Russia without a special status and 33% would prefer a special status inside Russia.¹⁸ The 2019 data demonstrate an increase in those who want to have a special status within Ukraine – up to 30.7% – and a decrease in both variants for being part of Russia.¹⁹

“Frozen Conflict” as a Fixing Agent for Separation

The current stage of the conflict in the east of Ukraine has already witnessed careful questions from some Ukrainian and international politicians and observers, such as: “Should we return those lands, if their special status would affect Ukrainian state sovereignty?”; “Should we choose to enter the EU but without Donbas?”; and “Maybe it is better to develop the Ukrainian state without separatist territories and hope that one day they return voluntarily?” De facto all these questions are pre-requisites to the scenario of the “frozen conflict” for Donbas, if no adequate solution is found in the next few months.

In contrast, the DIF survey conducted in 2018 demonstrated that only 9.8% of Ukrainian respondents agreed with the option “to separate territories occupied by ‘DNR’ and ‘LNR’ from Ukraine.” When looking at the answers among those living in the government-controlled territories of Donetsk and Lugansk

stan-gromadskoi-dumki-naperedodni-prezidentskikh-viboriv (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

18 Sasse, ‘The Donbas – Two Parts, Or Still One? ...’, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

19 Sasse, and Lackner, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

regions, this number fall to 6.2%.²⁰ The numbers differ when respondents are asked about “special status” approval. Of the respondents in Ukraine, 12.9% are ready for such a compromise, compared to 24.3% of those living in the east.

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A “frozen conflict” does not guarantee reconciliation in the future; rather it increases the chances of separation. A creation of the parallel structures, narratives, and systems influence the artificial construction of identities and realities. Moreover, when the conflict is frozen it remains articulated as a conflict, so a generation of people on both sides grows up enemy-oriented. Self-identification is mostly constructed as “us being different from them,” especially when the others are portrayed not just as different, but as adversaries.

The Transnistrian case is a good example for Ukraine. After years of a “frozen conflict,” the parties are used to coexisting. Benefiting from the special status and preferences within Moldova–EU relations, for example, the separatist region has not demonstrated any changes in public or political opinion about reconciliation or a political settlement. Despite the population composition, where Russians, Moldovans, and Ukrainians comprise approximately equal parts, being Transnistrian prevails in political identification and external presentation.

PålKolstø argues that the non-recognized state of the separatist regions is a transitional, abnormal phase of state-building,²¹ while Mikhail Minakov opposes him, stating that “the longer NRS [non-recognized states] exist, and the more they proliferate in the post-Soviet region, the less evident their transitional nature becomes. At least from a mid- to long term perspective, these states seem to be evolving into more stable model.”²² So in our case, the frozen status of the conflict will not lead to an increased

20 Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (2019) Пошуки шляхів відновлення суверенітету України над окупованим Донбасом: стан громадської думки напередодні президентських виборів [The search for ways to restore Ukraine’s sovereignty over the occupied Donbass: state of public opinion ahead of the presidential election], 13 February, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/poshuki-shlyakhiv-vidnovlennya-suverenitetu-ukraini-nad-okupovanim-donbasom-stan-gromadskoi-dumki-naperedodni-prezidentskikh-vivoriv> (Accessed: November 1, 2019).

21 Kolstø, P. (2006) “The Sustainability and Future of Unrecognized Quasi-States”, *Journal of Peace Research*, 43(6): p. 734

22 Minakov, M. (2019) “On The Extreme Periphery. The Status of Post-Soviet Non-Recognised States in the World-System”, *Ideology and Politics*, Issue 1(12), p. 58

probability of conflict resolution, but to the development of a politically constructed identity and a state mimesis.

As far back as 2016, research by ZOIS demonstrated that “self-identification as a Ukrainian citizen marks an important difference between the Kyiv-controlled and the occupied territories. In the DNR/LNR, 54% reported that they felt less like Ukrainian citizens now compared to before 2013.”²³ Special status and conflict freezing will further impact this negative tendency.

Belonging to an unrecognized state is also a matter of strong self-identification. The first search for support and approval is directed not toward the patron state or any international institution but to similar non-recognized entities in the post-Soviet space. However, as Minakov observes, “There is a growing network of cooperation between separate ministries, industries and social organizations across the NRS, but mutual recognition between old and new NRS is not in place. For example, while the ‘DPR’ has recognized Abkhazia’s sovereignty, Abkhazia does not recognize the ‘DPR’. So, in spite of high levels of cooperation, post-Soviet NRS have their own logic of non-recognition.”²⁴

Conclusions

Identity construction during times of conflict is one of the most difficult issues to evaluate, as it relies predominantly on the self-identification of those agreeing to participate in different types of surveys. The security situation, and frequently the absence of a desire for answering or the possibility of asking survey questions, limits the scope of research. However, different attempts to study the situation in Donbas demonstrate the shifts happening in the eastern regions of Ukraine, which are symbolized by a crystallization of local self-identification. Despite the acceptance of the “Ukrainian citizen” identification, all research has nevertheless demonstrated a clear “special status” request, which did not exist before the Russian aggression.

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The frozen status of the conflict with regard to the satisfaction

²³ Sasse, ‘The Donbas – Two Parts, Or Still One?...’, *op.cit.*, p.7

²⁴ Minakov, *op. cit.*, p. 63

of certain social needs (such as pension payments, which currently cannot be made in the uncontrolled territories due to security concerns, so making people travel to government-controlled territories) can lead to a decrease in the numbers of daily crossings at the contact line between the uncontrolled and controlled territories of Ukraine, indirectly leading to the deeper separation of the territories. A stable model of governance that will develop should the security situation improve without a political resolution in place will lead to crystallization of self-identification as belonging to this political unity, with less necessity for interaction with others.

The frozen status of the conflict will not lead to increased opportunities for conflict resolution, but to the development of a politically constructed identity and a state mimesis. The 2016 surveys have already demonstrated the results of an increased feeling of being “less Ukrainian” in the uncontrolled territories of Donbas. The Donbas local self-identity is not based on ethnic differences, but has been constructed in the 20th century due to different historical circumstances and political competition, and therefore with the development of conflict it has every chance of being reshaped according to the conflict logic.