

# Ukrainian Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

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Seven years and two presidencies into the Ukraine crisis, what is left to learn about popular attitudes on geopolitical orientation and foreign policy in Ukraine? More than one might imagine, despite continuous public opinion polling and analysis of the subject. Leading analysts of public opinion, such as Haran and Zolkina, accurately describe the general contours of attitudes about Ukraine's foreign policy orientation.<sup>1</sup> Since 2014, popular support for engagement with Europe has increased, especially with regard to economic integration with the European Union. Russia, meanwhile, has lost influence; attitudes favoring economic integration and security alignment with Eurasia have declined precipitously. There has also been a softening of the regional divide in opinion about Ukraine's geopolitical orientation, despite the persistence, especially among a segment of the population in the east and south, of support for the Russian vector that characterized attitudes prior to 2014.

These trends, however, form only part of the story, and therefore understate important aspects of popular attitudes on foreign policy in recent years. As opinions move toward Europe, there has been a corresponding rise in attitudes that support Ukraine charting an alternative course in its foreign policy. First, a substantial minority of citizens prefer that Ukraine engage with *both* Europe and Russia; they support a multi-vector foreign policy. Second, other citizens favor a different direction: they want Ukraine to remain independent of both Europe or Russia, or non-aligned. What do these attitudes mean and what is their significance for Ukrainian politics? This paper will address these questions by analyzing first, public opinion polling data and the framing of survey questions that elicit that data; and second, statements made by Ukrainian citizens in focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019 in Kharkiv and Dnipro.

My point in directing attention to popular attitudes that fall outside of the dichotomous categories of east and west is not to consider whether they form realistic policy options for Ukraine or whether they are desirable. Rather, my goal is to emphasize that these opinions exist among a considerable swathe of the Ukrainian population, not only in eastern and southern Ukraine, but also in the center and even to some degree in the west. This fact complicates our understanding of Ukraine's population as polarized along a geopolitical dimension. It also suggests that there may be more mutability and variability in foreign policy opinions within the Ukrainian electorate than is generally recognized. These two points, in turn, have implications for party development and democratic elections in Ukraine. Ukrainian elites—including political leaders as well as civic leaders and intellectuals, tend to reify the presence of polarization in geopolitical orientation among Ukrainians, viewing it as evidence of a deep and even incommensurate divide in citizens' understandings of Ukrainian history, statehood, and future. But the presence of alternative attitudes backing either Ukraine's engagement with all sides or its non-alignment—even though they are not majority opinion—suggests that for many citizens, Ukraine is not locked in a grand geopolitical contest between competing great powers.

After 2014, most political parties and politicians, understandably focused on solidifying Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU while countering an enormous and present threat from Russia, did not voice or represent alternative attitudes concerning foreign policy. During

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<sup>1</sup> Olexiy Haran, Mariia Zolkina, "The Demise of Ukraine's "Eurasian Vector" and the Rise of Pro-NATO Sentiment" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, No. 458, 2017.

the 2018-19 presidential election season, Zelensky's campaign offered an ambiguous and less confrontational toward Russia foreign policy stance than Poroshenko's campaign. Survey data shows that Zelensky attracted support from people with both pro-Europe and 'alternative' foreign policy beliefs: a majority of Zelensky's voters in 2019 (52.6%) supported economic integration with the EU, and a large minority (29.3%) backed non-integration with either Europe or Russia. (Zelensky won very little support from citizens favoring integration with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union). With regard to the issue of security blocs, a majority of Zelensky voters favored neutrality (42.7%) over NATO membership (36.5%).<sup>2</sup> His foreign policy rhetoric, arguably, was relatively tuned into some of the alternative attitudes on foreign policy, in addition to the majority support for EU membership. Given the continued volatility in Ukraine's party system, new politicians and parties will likely emerge to attempt to aggregate (and shape) alternative attitudes on foreign policy while also representing majority views.

### **East versus West in Foreign Policy Attitudes**

Foreign policy attitudes that fall outside of an east – west dichotomy in Ukraine have received relatively little analytical attention. There are both epistemological and methodological reasons for this. First, a reliance on public opinion polling as opposed to other methods in order to observe political attitudes creates gaps in our knowledge. There is only so much we can infer from polling data. This paper employs opinion data to gain a representative picture of political attitudes in Ukraine, but it also shows how the way in which questions about foreign policy are framed by pollsters can obscure the existence of certain attitudes. Survey questions that allow, for example, only binary answers (Europe versus Russia) cover up opinions that embrace both countries as well as those that reject both countries. Moreover, surveys that include the answer “neither Europe nor Russia” cannot explain whether this is a residual category, made up of people who formerly supported a Eurasian vector.<sup>3</sup> Do certain answers represent an emotional protest, so to speak, or do respondents have in mind specific ideas about Ukraine's foreign policy? To begin to address these questions, I argue that we must listen to statements made by ordinary citizens. Focus group conversations, in which participants are asked their thoughts on foreign policy and other issues, provide not just nuance to what we already know about political attitudes, but also a chance to hear something new. Participant conversations with each other and participant responses to moderator's questions communicate peoples' interpretative narratives, convey emotional commitments, invoke personal and collective identities, make attributions and associations, and convey grievances. The next section of the paper discusses opinion data on foreign policy preferences and the framing of survey questions. The following section presents views and statements from focus group discussions.

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<sup>2</sup> Socio-Political Orientations of the Population of Ukraine, KIIS, 17-24 October 2020. [http://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20201011\\_soc-politic/polit\\_orient\\_oct%202020.pdf](http://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20201011_soc-politic/polit_orient_oct%202020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> According to experts at the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “...the majority of those who had previously hoped to join the union with Russia moved into the ranks of those who believe that Ukraine should join neither the European nor the Eurasian Union.” See: <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/european-integration-of-ukraine-the-dynamics-of-public-opinion>

## Analysis of Public Opinion Surveys on Foreign Policy

Many survey research firms frame the question of Ukraine's geopolitical orientation by offering respondents a binary choice: Europe or Eurasia. For example, a recent Razumkov poll in March 2021 asked "Do you think Ukraine needs to join the European Union?" A clear majority of 59% answered yes, while 26% answered no.<sup>4</sup> Reporting these results on its website, Razumkov states, "The share of those who believe that Ukraine needs to join the EU exceeds the share of those who hold the opposite view." But what is the "opposite view"? What does this framing of the question around joining the EU indicate about attitudes in Ukraine's macro regions? Respondents in the west, like in the past, strongly support EU membership (84%), whereas those in the east and south are split, with significant percentages of respondents opposing EU membership. In the east, 46% of respondents answered "It is not necessary to join the EU," slightly outnumbering the 38.5% who support joining. And in the south, nearly equal percentages oppose (42%) and support (41.5%) EU membership. Thus, Razumkov's framing of the survey question conveys the message that a significant portion of the population in the east and south oppose economic integration with Europe, but offers no information about the meaning of this opposition.

Similarly, polls by International Republican Institute (IRI)/Rating Group Ukraine offer respondents one of two options by asking: "If Ukraine was able to enter only one international economic union, which one of the following should it be?" and offering a choice set of European Union (56%), Customs Union with Russia (17%), and other (14%).<sup>5</sup> Here again, the aggregate data reveals majority support for European integration. Another question frames the issue of Ukraine's joining NATO in dichotomous terms by asking respondents whether they are for or against it. Results suggest that a majority (52%) backs NATO membership.<sup>6</sup> With regard to attitudes in Ukraine's four macro-regions, IRI's question framing produces an even starker picture of regional polarization than the Razumkov poll.<sup>7</sup>

Surveys by KIIS, on the other hand, have consistently offered respondents a third option in questions about geopolitical orientation. For example, a KIIS poll from October 2020, offers the response "non-integration with either the EU or the EEU" in answer to the question: "In what direction should Ukraine integrate?" Results differ markedly from Razumkov and IRI/Ratings Group: almost half of Ukraine's population—49%—supports joining the EU; a smaller percent (13.8%) backs joining the Russian-led EEU, and a significant minority (27%) support neither economic association.<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1. This formulation of the question provides additional

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<sup>4</sup> *Attitudes of citizens to Ukraine's accession to the European Union (March 2021)*, Razumkov Center. Available at:

<https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/stavlennia-gromadian-do-vstupu-ukrainy-do-yevropeiskogo-soiuzu-berezen-2021r>

<sup>5</sup> *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Ukraine*, IRI, December 13-29, 2019. [PowerPoint Presentation \(iri.org\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> With regard to NATO, the IRI/Ratings Group poll asks: "If a referendum was held today on Ukraine joining NATO, how would you vote?" with the choices "For Ukraine to join NATO (52%); "Against Ukraine joining NATO" (30%); and "would not vote"(3%).

<sup>7</sup> Though this result could also be due to the specific regions that each firm includes in the macro-regions. See p. 35 and p. 37 of the IRI report.

<sup>8</sup> *Socio-Political Orientations of the Population of Ukraine*, KIIS, 17-24 October 2020. [http://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20201011\\_soc-politic/polit\\_orient\\_oct%202020.pdf](http://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20201011_soc-politic/polit_orient_oct%202020.pdf)

information about the preferences of many respondents, rather than lumping them into an anti-EU category.

Similarly, on the question of Ukraine’s joining a regional security bloc, respondents are asked to choose one of three options: Ukraine should strive to join NATO, join the Russian-led CSTO, or be a neutral/non-aligned state. The KIIS results show, like the other firms’ surveys, that a plurality of Ukrainians (41%) back NATO membership. See Figure 2. But they also reveal two other important pieces of information: that the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is very unpopular—only 13% maintain that Ukraine should strive for membership in the CSTO with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and that a very large portion of respondents (37%) believe Ukraine should be a neutral or non-aligned state.

Figure 1

**В каком интеграционном направлении должна идти Украина?**  
**In what direction of integration should Ukraine go?**  
 (% среди всех респондентов)

100% в столбце	Ukraine as a whole	West	Center	South	East	Donbas
Neither the EU nor the Eurasian Economic Union.	27.0	18.9	28.1	29.3	32.0	35.0
Enter the EU	49.0	69.4	47.4	38.8	38.0	24.6
Join the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzia	13.8	5.2	9.1	23.7	22.1	31.5
Hard to say	9.6	5.9	14.8	7.7	7.2	7.5
Refuse to answer	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	1.4

Figure 2

**In your opinion, Ukraine should strive...**  
(% of all respondents)

100% в столбце	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East	Donbas
To be a neutral / non-aligned state	37.1	27.9	35.4	44.8	43.6	51.2
For membership in NATO	41.0	54.6	45.2	29.1	31.0	13.5
For Membership in the CSTO with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	13.0	7.3	10.1	18.4	18.2	27.6
Hard to say	8.5	10.0	8.9	7.1	7.3	6.8
Refuse to answer	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.8

What do the KIIS surveys indicate about change in attitudes over time? They have remained relatively stable since the early days of the crisis. Examining opinion on integration and NATO membership we observe a rise in support for the European vector after the crisis began, followed by only slight fluctuations during the past six years. Thus, before Maidan, in 2013, 43% of the population supported EU membership. After the tumult of 2014, support for the EU rose to between 45% and 53% from 2015 to 2020. See Figure 3.<sup>9</sup> It did not rise in a continuous, linear fashion during this period but varied from 2 to 10 percentage points higher than the 2014 percentage, a notable but not enormous increase in support for EU membership.

What has changed drastically since 2014 are attitudes toward the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), formerly known as the Customs Union. Support for the EEU tumbled from 35% in 2013 to 11% in 2015. Even though the 2013 survey includes respondents from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, whereas subsequent years only include respondents in non-occupied Donbas, as of 2020, only 13.8% of respondents backed the EEU. Moreover, trends over time show that even in the macro regions of the east, south and Donbas, attitudes have moved decisively away from economic integration with Russia and Eurasia.

Another striking trend is the increase in support for Ukraine’s non-integration with *either* the EU *or* the Russian-led EEU. Before Maidan, in 2013, only 9% of respondents favored “joining neither the European Union nor the Customs Union.” In 2020, 27% of respondents backed an independent course for Ukraine. Examining this category of “neither” responses over time, we observe that (as with support for EU) the value rose and fell over the range 22% to 30% from 2015-2020.

<sup>9</sup> Geopolitical Orientations of the Residents of Ukraine: February 2019. KIIS. Available at: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=827&t=3&page=4>

Figure 3 “Which Direction Should Ukraine’s Foreign Policy Take?”

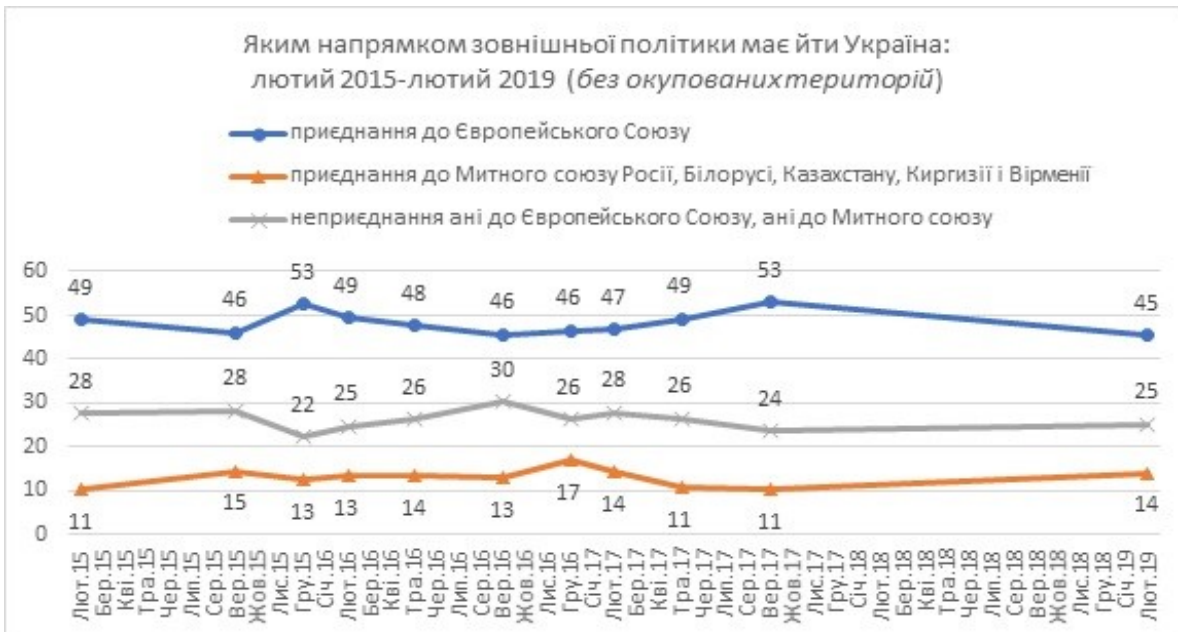


Figure 4 –Trends in the Population’s Preparedness for Ukraine to join NATO



According to the KIIS surveys, are opinions favoring the third path of non-integration and non-aligned status for Ukraine associated with the well-known regional divide between a pro-European west and putatively pro-Russian east? Examining Ukraine's five macro-regions,<sup>10</sup> we observe, first, that in all regions except Donbas, a plurality of respondents support Ukraine's joining the EU. Even in Donbas, the region most commonly identified as pro-Russian, a large minority (24.6%) back EU membership. However, there also exists significant opposition to Ukraine joining either the EU or the EEU in four of the five macro regions. The answer of "neither" attracts the next largest percentage of respondents after EU membership in four macro regions: the East (32%); the South (29.3%), the Center (28.1%) and the West (18.9%). See Figure 1. In Donbas, it attracts the largest amount of support (35%) compared to the EU or the EEU. Meanwhile, there is significantly higher support for integration with the Russia-led EEU in the regions generally considered pro-Russian: Donbas (31.5%), the East (22.1%) and the South (23.7%), as compared to the Center (9.1%) and the West (5.2%). But the fact remains that in the three supposedly pro-Russian regions, *there is consistently greater backing for Ukraine's non-integration than for the Eurasian Economic Union*. In sum, we observe a significant diversity of political attitudes concerning Ukraine's economic integration within each macro-region, especially in Donbas, the East and the South.

There is even higher support for Ukrainian neutrality when it comes to security alliances. Significant portions of the population in all five macro regions prefer that Ukraine remain non-aligned rather than join NATO or the Russian-led CSTO. Only in the West and the Center is NATO the most popular option, but even in these macro regions, large numbers of people back neutrality (27.9% and 35.4%, respectively). See Figure 2. In the East, South, and especially in Donbas, neutrality is the most preferred security option for Ukraine. (However, the Eurasian vector remains popular in Donbas, with nearly 28% of respondents supporting membership in the CSTO.) Thus, on the issue of Ukraine's membership in security blocs, we again observe highly varied attitudes within each region. However, in general, there is greater support in all regions for Ukraine's neutrality/non-aligned status in the sphere of security alliances than there is for non-integration in the sphere of economic relations.

This brief review of surveys carried out by three Ukrainian research firms indicates that large numbers of Ukrainians are attracted by a third path outside of the two poles of Russia versus the West. Thus, interpretations of foreign policy attitudes in Ukraine that proclaim a popular embrace of Europe obscure the diversity of opinions that exist within the country. Moreover, interpretations that repeat binary labels of a pro-European west and a pro-Russian east and south more accurately describe the western oblasts than the other macro-regions of Ukraine.

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<sup>10</sup> KIIS defines macroregions as follows: *West region* : Volyn, Transcarpathian, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Khmelnytsky, Chernivtsi regions; *Central region* : Kyiv, Kyiv, Vinnytsya, Zhytomyr, Kirovograd, Poltava, Sumy, Cherkasy, Chernihiv oblasts; *Southern region* : Nikolaev, Odessa, Kherson regions; *Eastern region* : Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia regions; *Donbas region*: Donetsk, Luhansk region (without temporarily occupied territories)



Most importantly, they do not distinguish the heterogeneity of opinions that exist throughout large parts of the country, missing the opportunity to identify and make sense of these diverse attitudes.

When conducting focus groups in Kharkiv, I heard many statements (in addition to those supporting European integration) backing Ukraine’s engagement with both Russia and Europe. These opinions are not present in the polling data at all. None of the research firms in Ukraine list the option of a multi-vector foreign policy among the choice set of answers presented to respondents in questions asking about foreign policy. Perhaps the term used to denote engagement with both poles—multi-vector—is tarnished within Ukraine due to its association with the Yanukovich presidency. However, an opinion survey commissioned by RAND Corporation and executed by KIIS in 2018 did ask about support for a multi-vector foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> The Rand survey framed two questions about regional economic integration and security blocs using general language rather than listing a choice between Europe or Eurasia. Its question on economic integration, for example, stated “In your opinion, what would be the best choice for your country’s future economic and political development.” It offered four answers, rather than two or three, including a multi-vector orientation: “equally close relations with both sides.” The survey also permitted respondents to volunteer their own answers. Results—for Ukraine as a whole—indicate that while a majority chose “join the European Union” (46.7%) and “join NATO” (43.5%), a significant minority chose “equally close relations with both sides” for the question on economic and political integration (26.6%), and “equally close relations with both organizations” for the NATO question (21.8%). See Figures 5 and 6. Smaller percentages volunteered the answers “not join any union” (10.2%) and “not join any organization” (16.2%). This framing survey provides more information about foreign policy attitudes, including the specific fact that more respondents prefer relations with both sides than with neither side. The results reveal that many Ukrainians who support engagement with Russia do not reject Europe. This suggests that considerable numbers of Ukrainians do not conceptualize Ukraine’s foreign policy in zero sum terms in the manner of many political and civic leaders.

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<sup>11</sup> Charap, Samuel, Shapiro, Jeremy, and Demus, Alyssa. *Rethinking the Regional Order for Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia*, Rand Corporation, 2018. Available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE297.html>

**Figure 5**

**Preferences About Economic and Political Integration Question**

Q: In your opinion, what would be the best choice for your country's future economic and political development?

Join Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia*	8.3%
Join European Union, led by the Western European countries	46.7%
Have equally close relations with both unions	26.6%
Not join any union**	10.2%
Don't know/no response	8.1%

\*\*Volunteered response

Rand Corporation/KIIS

**Figure 6**

**Preferences Regarding Security Blocs**

Question: In your opinion, what would be the best choice for your country to ensure its security? \*

Join Collective Security Treaty Organization, led by Russia	5.9%
Join NATO, led by the Western European countries and the U.S.	43.5%
Have equally close relations with both organizations	21.8%
Not join any organization/union**	16.2%
Don't know/no response	12.6%

\*\*Volunteered responses

## Focus Group Discussions on Ukraine's Foreign Policy

Because eastern Ukraine is home to a diversity of political attitudes related to foreign policy, the cities of Kharkiv and Dnipro constitute valuable sites to hear from a range of individuals in focus group discussions. Together with Olga Filippova, a Ukrainian sociologist at Kharkiv National University, I conducted five focus groups in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city in 2018. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 years old. Each group was organized according to occupational specialization. The five groups, with thirty participants in total, included: (1) teachers; (2) factory workers; (3) professionals in the IT sector; (4) small business entrepreneurs at the large outdoor retail and wholesale market Barabashova; and (5) Internally Displaced People (IDPs) who settled in Kharkiv after escaping armed conflict in Donbas. The following summer, I hired the Ukrainian firm KIIS to conduct three focus groups in the city of Dnipro on my behalf. Twenty people participated in total. The focus group instrument incorporated seven blocks of questions covering the following topics: General Problems in Ukraine; Economic Sphere; International Relations; Maidan; Identity; and Policy & Politics. The conversations and comments analyzed here were mainly, though not exclusively, made during the block of questions on International Relations.

The majority of focus group participants expressed attitudes favoring a European vector for Ukraine, especially with regard to economic integration. Several participants favored preserving relations with Russia and Eurasia, again especially with regard to trade and economic issues. But what I found the most unexpected and interesting was that many participants did not employ strict binary categories of pro-west/Europe versus pro-east/Russia in discussing foreign policy. Instead, many comments across multiple focus groups emphasized either a.) the utility of good relations with all sides, both Russia and Europe, or b.) the need for Ukraine to remain independent of the two geopolitical poles. Some of the people advocating engagement with both Europe and Russia were focused on pragmatic, economic concerns. Others felt a connection to Russian people who they differentiated from Russia's political leaders. Participants who wanted Ukraine to remain independent of Europe or Russia conveyed their position in a different way than those who favored a multi-vector policy. They tended to be more emotional about the subject, expressing resentment of encroachment on Ukrainian sovereignty by dominant regional powers. Others directed their animus toward Europe and Europeans who they viewed as exploitative and disrespectful toward Ukraine. These positions seem to align more closely with the current political program of the pro-Russian parties *Opposition Platform* and *Opposition Bloc* which advocate that Ukraine re-establish friendly relations with Russia while maintaining neutrality and non-bloc status.<sup>12</sup>

Another finding is the degree to which cultural identity and ancestry (whether ethnic, linguistic, or Soviet) was virtually absent from discussions about Ukraine's foreign policy. This was somewhat unexpected given the attention analysts have placed on cultural identities in eastern Ukraine to account for the region's geopolitical orientation toward Russia. Michael Gentile, for example, describes "irreconcilable geopolitical narratives" that divide east from west, and a pro-Russian narrative that finds "fertile ground in the Soviet cultural identity that

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<sup>12</sup> [https://zagittya.com.ua/page/mirnyj\\_plan/planlkoncepcija.html](https://zagittya.com.ua/page/mirnyj_plan/planlkoncepcija.html)  
[https://zagittya.com.ua/news/novosti/vypolnenie\\_minskih\\_soglashenij\\_1\\_edinstvennyj\\_put\\_k\\_miru.html](https://zagittya.com.ua/news/novosti/vypolnenie_minskih_soglashenij_1_edinstvennyj_put_k_miru.html)

persists in the [eastern] region...”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Gerard Toal maintains that the source of a shared orientation toward Russia in the east can be located in nostalgia for the Soviet Union or support the idea of the *Russkii mir*.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that this hypothesis most accurately describes the older generations who grew up during the Soviet era. In the focus groups, there was only a single participant—a middle-aged man in Kharkiv—who invoked his personal identity, heritage and cultural values when discussing political attitudes about foreign policy. I quote this participant at length because his comments were so atypical. When we asked the group about the policy of the Ukrainian government banning Russian-language social media sites (e.g. V kontakte), the man articulated his opposition:

Because we are all Slavic-oriented peoples, no matter how much some people protest, all of us have Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian roots, we are close here, all our parents.

He continues in this vein, mentioning that he resists integration with Europe:

And those people that say, yes, of course, undoubtedly everyone has their own opinion, but we need to orient ourselves to Europe....we need to orient ourselves without question. [sarcastically] But who made us? Our parents. And who were their ancestors? And their ancestors? There are orienting things.

Returning to the theme of banned social media, he makes clear that he sees Ukraine’s political authorities as those who would separate him from his own cultural origins:

What was the motivation of those who banned all of this? Of course those who came to power were oriented toward a Ukrainian orientation, yes, and why that was so is obvious. I think that it relates to one part of the plan of psychological pressure on Slavic-oriented people. (FG8 \_D; Kharkiv)

The stakes of Ukraine’s post-Maidan turn toward Europe seem very high for this participant. He groups together current domestic policy (banning v Kontakte) with foreign policy (integrating with Europe) and considers both a threat to his Slavic identity and core self. However, most other people, as can be observed in subsequent examples, did not connect Ukraine’s foreign policy orientation to identitarian or cultural motivations.

While some focus group participants were unable to articulate any thoughts at all on the subject of foreign policy and remained quiet, others thought deeply about how to understand Ukraine’s external relations. Most participants in the focus group of professionals in the field of Information Technology (IT), with its international contact to western firms and modern, discussed the subject of foreign policy thoughtfully. None referred to identities or cultural beliefs. Several approached the subject rationally and pragmatically. For example, when we directly asked whether Ukraine should join any blocs such as NATO or the European Union, a

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Gentile, 2015, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Toal, Gerard. 2017. *Near Abroad: Putin: the west, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*. New York City: Oxford University Press.

23 year old computer program explained that he remained uncertain about what NATO membership would entail:

This is too complicated a question for me. Even if we imagine that now we are joining NATO, what actions will follow from the NATO side? Would it send troops to Ukraine right away to get back the territories? I do not know. Would it be the status quo, but with small guarantees? Actually, I do not know the answer to this question. (FG8- P4)

Another IT specialist, a 37 year-old man and technical director of an IT company, agreed that “we are not specialists on this question and that is a problem,” then explained that he became very interested in the issue, read primary source documents in German and English about it and changed his stance from neutrality to favoring European integration and NATO membership.

If I were asked the same question 10 years ago, even 8 years ago, I would be neutral, but now I will definitely answer this question. Yes, we must join NATO. Why? Because we were *not* a part of NATO, as a result, we paid for this with the war on our territory, captured territories, annexed Crimea.... So if we don't want to lose any more territory....we need the support of those people who share our values. And NATO in this case, is the only organization that can help us solve this issue.” (FG8-5, Kharkiv)

Others agreed that membership in a powerful military alliance would help Ukraine resist Russian aggression:

S: We need friends.

MODERATOR: Friends from where?

S: NATO, EU, those who can help with armed weapons. That's why there's no other way. Or we can be like North Korea, have an army but the people are in poverty. That may soon be waiting for us, if we won't be in the bloc. (FG8 \_ IT; Kharkiv)

The claim that NATO membership could have protected Ukraine from Russian encroachment and aggression was echoed by participants in other focus groups.

### **Ukraine should engage with both sides**

Viewing Ukraine's foreign policy through a pragmatic lens, most participants in the focus group of IT workers agreed that both sets of countries are useful. In this interpretation of the situation, Ukraine was embedded in [trade and exchange] relationship with Russia and these relationships have continued even after EuroMaidan and the crisis. One participant, who was pro-EU and also pro-NATO, articulated this position:

Ukraine is agricultural and it should develop this sector but not just so that it exports raw materials, but finished products....Ukraine can sell its bread to... European countries and if we didn't have a conflict in the east, to Russia. Ukraine can sell anywhere, wherever there is demand for our products. Information technologies and agriculture are the two main parts of Ukraine's

economy that it should focus on developing.

He also pointed out that Ukraine's authorities continue to benefit from Russia and are therefore hypocritical:

We ask from our European partners, (United States and European Union) to impose sanctions on our Eastern partner. At the same time, for some reason, we are not in a hurry to impose these sanctions....I can explain this with the idea that this situation is beneficial to certain people, including those who are in power. These sanctions are not beneficial for them because it is profitable for them to trade with the Russian Federation.... If we simply look at what goods we have on the shelves of our stores, we can see that they include Russian goods. That is, therefore, the European vector is external to us, but in fact it is not clear which direction to take. It reminds me of the fable about the the swan, the crab, and the pike. One of them pulls [the load] in one direction; another pulls [the load] in another direction. And again we are in a state of uncertainty.” (FG8-IT, P5)

Another IT specialist, a 27 year old systems administrator with a graduate degree, also advocated that Ukraine trade with all sides:

“Ukraine's position is very profitable in this sense because we are located right on the border between Europe and Asia, and next to the huge country of Russia with its large economy....I don't really care who I sell my product to—I could send it to Australia and anywhere else. That is, we now have information technology, we have logistics, there are very complex schemes for the delivery of goods. Everything is possible and you can work with absolutely any country as long as you have something to offer.” (FG8-IT, P6)

But when it came to Ukraine's security and politics rather than economic relationships—a subject he claimed not to be interested in and did not like discussing (labeling it “very complicated”)—his comments suggested that Ukraine's neutrality, though it may be desirable, was impossible “precisely because, in my opinion, there are no choices in the current situation.” He continues:

To only say, ‘I'm sorry, we maintain neutrality, we just stand here and watch What you are doing at our territory’ – this will not work. In any case, you have to make a choice....the fact that Ukraine will not occupy any leading position in any of these blocs [means] it will most likely be forced to obey the rules that will be imposed by other stronger states in the block...a smaller state would not have the most favorable position in relation to the large ones. I think we can agree on this...[Is it] necessary or not necessary [to enter into a bloc]? Probably not necessary; ideally, it would probably be cool to maintain our neutrality. But I think in the current situation, it will be necessary to make a choice. (FG8-IT, P6)

Thus, for this individual, Ukraine should maintain economic relations with both sides, but a security relationship with Europe, even though neutrality would be his most preferred position.

Similarly, an individual in one of the Dnipro focus groups also supported engagement with both Europe and Russia, but only with regard to trade relations.

I believe you can trade with anyone, but only trade. You can even trade with Russia, but only on the level of selling something. Because that is also currency. But in political terms, the Western model is better. Because they are making slow reforms in the market sphere. (P1-V, Dnipro-B)

In another focus group I conducted in Kharkiv, participants did not discuss foreign policy in grand geo-political terms and did not maintain consistent set of attitudes clustered at either end of the Europe versus Russia dichotomy. This group consisted of small businesspeople and laborers who work at the *Barabashova Rynok*, an enormous bazaar selling retail and wholesale goods that attracts customers and sellers from both Russia and Ukraine. Participants reported that since the crisis in Ukraine began, their business has suffered drastically due to the interruption in relationships with suppliers in Russia, an increase in customs taxes, and the decline in customers from Russia making the trip across the border to purchase inexpensive goods. For these people, it makes sense for Ukraine to have continued good trade relations with Russia over integration with the EU. There was much agreement on this issue and they reiterated this point numerous times throughout the conversation. Yet, at the same time, several of them stated clearly that they were supportive of the Ukrainian government's goal to integrate with Europe.

#### **Ukraine should engage with all states, including Russia and Europe – security**

Some people supported the position that Ukraine should align with all states, including Russia, but stipulated that alignment should only occur after the war in Donbas ends. For several participants, the war seemed a temporary disaster, caused in large part by Putin: “VVP has lost his mind” said one woman, an IDP originally from Donetsk. Once the war ends, she stated, Ukraine can have a multi-vector foreign policy. She explained that she voted for Poroshenko thinking that he would be like Kuchma: “friends with both sides.” She elaborated, “I was opposed to this Russian invasion. I wanted them to come to an agreement. I was hoping for his (Poroshenko's) kind of diplomacy, his experience, that we would agree with the Russians.” (FG5-1 IDP)

Another woman, also an IDP, does not use the word multi-vector but explains her sympathy for both Europe and Russia, but again, only after the war ends. She explains her sympathy for European values by referencing the fact that she is a vegan due to ethical issues. She then explains that she just learned that Denmark plans to close all fur farms by 2024, something she approved of—and that meanwhile, the Ukrainian city of Zhytomyr is planning to open a mink farm. Her emotional commitments indicate she is siding with Europe over Ukraine. A few moments later she described her thoughts about Russia, explaining that she hated the Russians for the first six months of the war, but subsequently wondered why. “We are the same and this (Russian) person has nothing to do with what is happening. ....we cannot confuse people with Putin. He's just one dictator.” She concludes, “We need to end the war and be friends with Russia. (FG5-5 IDP)

#### **Ukraine's foreign policy should be remain independent**

Several participants expressed the idea that Ukraine should chart an unaligned course in its foreign relations; independent of both Europe and Russia. Sometimes focus group participants

uttered an emotionally charged statement, a plea if sorts, for Ukraine to be independent of other states. A 32 year old woman who owned a beauty salon answered the moderator's question about whether Ukraine should form alliances, or join blocs with either the West or East or be a non-bloc country by lamenting: "When will we become that country? When will other countries be guided by us?? Why do we need to be guided all the time; why are we always trying to get something from another country?" (FG5-IDP)

Others took a less emotional and more pragmatic view of the question of non-aligned status, rooting their point of view in a concern with developing Ukraine's economy and foreign economic relations. The following exchange between the moderator and two different participants in the Barabashova bazaar focus group captures this focus on economy, combined with emotional resentment about Ukraine being told what to do, (in this case, by Europe, which can also be read as anti-European position. Yet the speaker clearly states that Ukraine should be neutral and have a multi-vector foreign policy:

MODERATOR: What should be Ukraine's foreign policy orientation? Europe? Russia? Multi-vector?

F: It should be its own...For this [IMF] tranche of 1 billion we are dictated political conditions, with whom we should be friends, what kind of internal policy to pursue...[the speaker opposes this.] That is why I think that the key moment is for Ukraine to have, as you said, its own foreign policy.

MODERATOR: And what should it be? It should be multi-vector?

I: Toward all.

F: Definitely multi-vector. And neutrality. Switzerland.

MODERATOR: Neutrality?

F: Switzerland, yes.

M: Ukraine is very good, but in comparison with other countries, roughly speaking...we have ...yes, cheap labor...construction-- we can win on this.

MODERATOR: Due to what?

M: ...some kind of production.

MODERATOR: By manufacturing new products?

M: Yes, some kind of manufacturing, yes. Maybe some furniture, for example. If we use the model of other countries, we would produce here to sell abroad...(FG6\_B; Kharkiv)

Another participant, when discussing NATO membership, articulated an analogous point—that Ukraine should remain independent, but not because it was a powerful state but because it was a weak one. One 27 year old woman, a developer in the IT industry, supported "maintaining neutrality" due to Ukraine's relative size and power among NATO member states:

...it always seemed to me that it was best to maintain neutrality. The bad part of Ukraine being a part of any block is that we are a party that is weaker than others.... well, from many perspectives. ...So a country like Ukraine will most likely be used as a resource.... For example, one of these problems is ecology. There is the Chernobyl zone in Ukraine, which is being discussed as a place for other countries to bring their waste. As a citizen of Ukraine, I really do not like this idea, because the territory of our country will be polluted. And now there are a number of such problems that will follow due to the fact that we will be a part of such block.



(FG8-P1, Kharkiv)

For other participants who expressed anti-European integration views, a commonly heard complaint was discomfort with Ukraine taking loans from Europe. "If you take loans, you do not produce anything, you do not actually work, you are not making anything decent to sell. Then probably, at some point, you will be bankrupt. (FG5-IDP 6)

One comment sharply explains how taking loans forces is linked to European disparagement of Ukraine. Ukraine's status as a supplicant vis-à-vis Europe: "Ukraine reminds me of the person asking for alms, who asks "give me this, and this and that." While other countries say: "you are going to drink it all away." (P4, Dnipro-B). Participants also cited lack of respect toward Ukraine, not with regard to EU membership, but more generally as participants discussed Ukraine's new visa-free regime with the EU. One professional stated:

Visa-free travel, of course, is a nice thing in general...but it's not enough. It's just for tourism...The visa-free regime didn't do anything for Ukrainians, just economically. Concerning foreign policy, well no one from the government discusses the question of investment into the industry of Ukraine. There are investments in the Baltics, labor is a bit cheaper there; western capital is spread out, and it functions there. Why not in Ukraine?

He continues, emphasizing how Ukraine is treated:

Yes, it's a bit degrading, but we would be earning at least something. Now we don't earn anything, we just live off credit and that's it.... So we don't make anything and don't export anything. It's a very important question to make political relations with some businesses, not to just take money, but specifically to invest it into industry. (FG8 V\_ IT ; Kharkiv)

This participant clearly prioritizes pragmatic considerations and also makes clear his feeling that Ukraine is being treated unequally compared to other European (post-Soviet?) states. Similarly, in one particular focus group in Dnipro, attitudes toward Europe appeared highly ambivalent. When asked directly about Ukraine's foreign policy and relations with Europe, participants said relations were "suitable" and "good." But when they were pressed on their attitudes toward the visa-free regime, most participants did not consider it an achievement: "Europe looks down on Ukraine. It doesn't know where it is located"; "Europe doesn't trust us"; and Europe views Ukraine as "cheap slave labor" (Dnipro-B) One member of this group, a man in his twenties, elaborated on his disdain for the visa-free policy. He explained that the policy is superfluous for him because he doesn't have the money to go there or to obtain a biometric passport:

It's only 20-30 euros that they saved us, and all the other costs of going remain the same. The fact that they have opened this [visa-free regime] minus 20-30 euros is irrelevant to me. I flew to Poland on the visa-free regime and everything was exactly the same....

At another point in the discussion with this group, after several participants had finished explaining that they thought that Maidan was not a real grassroots phenomenon but a pretext for Poroshenko to come to power, they told the moderator that they supported Maidan's "demand" for integration with the EU in response to the moderator's direct question. (Dnipro-B) Thus, this group in particular demonstrated ambivalence in the way that they thought about Europe and Ukraine's relationship with Europe. (Dnipro-B)

With regard to foreign policy, focus group conversations reveal highly diverse set of attitudes. While some individuals maintained pro-Russia or pro-European position, many others did not—advocating instead that Ukraine either cultivate trade and good relations with all states (including both Russia and Europe) or that Ukraine remain independent of these two powerful poles. The comments show that many people take a very pragmatic approach to understanding Ukraine's foreign policy as fundamentally tied to issues of trade and Ukraine's economic development. Others see the question of joining the western security alliance as an existential one for Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

Discussion about popular opinion in Ukraine tends to rely on binaries to describe Ukrainian political opinion. The language we use—*split, divided, halves, polarization*—much like the color-coded maps purportedly depicting the preferences or identities of the country's electorate used to depict election results tends to reify the idea that there are two groups of voters with diametrically opposed opinions. As a shortcut, large swathes of people are labeled pro-Russia or pro-European. Certain opinion poll questions achieve the same effect by asking voters to choose between two alternatives with regard to Ukraine's foreign policy, especially European integration versus Russia. Other polling questions reveal a differentiated set of opinions on foreign policy, both within and across Ukraine's macro-regions. The analysis of opinion data and focus group conversations in this study reveal that a substantial (albeit not a majority) portion of Ukraine's population maintain alternative attitudes about foreign policy in Ukraine. These citizens do not perceive Ukraine to be the object of a grand geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, suggesting a disconnect from the dominant understandings of Ukrainian political elites.