

# **“What should we have to say about it?”**

## **Veteran and IDP Perspectives on Peace in Eastern Ukraine**

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Eight years after the Russian intervention and outbreak of violent conflict in Donbas, Ukrainians are increasingly divided over how to resolve it and which trade-offs they are willing to accept to achieve peace. This study focuses on the attitudes of two stakeholder groups that have been severely impacted by the conflict and whose support will be crucial for sustainable peace: veterans of the Donbas conflict and internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in eastern Ukraine. Currently, both groups feel that they do not have a say in any potential conflict resolution, and have developed at times opposing attitudes on what a resolution should entail. Given this divided picture, any long-term prospect for peace will require strengthening social ties between conflict-affected populations in eastern Ukraine.

The research for this study was conducted, and the text drafted and finalized, prior to February 21, 2022 – meaning before Russia’s “recognition of independence” of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, and before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

The findings described and explained below are the product of a specific context, namely that of eastern Ukraine in 2021. Still, some of them remain valid despite the changed circumstances. Once the current active phase of the war ends, the issues highlighted by this study will likely only have gained in significance and importance, and so will the relevance of addressing them effectively in the particulars of the given situation.



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# Executive Summary

The violent separatism and Russian intervention in Donbas in eastern Ukraine since 2014 has claimed over 14,000 lives and evolved into a protracted conflict that faces the constant potential of renewed escalation. Existing frameworks for its resolution – the Minsk agreements – have yielded no peaceful results and remain fiercely contested. Eight years since its outbreak, Ukrainians are increasingly divided over how to resolve the conflict and what trade-offs they are willing to accept for peace.

This study focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of two stakeholder groups that will be crucial in the event of a reintegration of the non-government controlled territories of Donbas: veterans of the Donbas conflict and internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in eastern Ukraine (Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporyzhia, and the government-controlled Luhansk and Donetsk regions). Through surveys and interviews conducted between August and November 2021, this report finds a disillusioned population in Ukraine’s government-controlled east.

Those who describe themselves as strongly conflict-affected have developed at times diametrically opposing positions when it comes to resolving the conflict or discussing any kind of compromise. The general population, IDPs and veterans alike currently feel they have no agency to participate in political life. This representation gap is reinforced by a civil society that seems disconnected from the rest of the population.

A loss of agency is also the predominant sentiment regarding conflict resolution: as existing negotiation formats systematically exclude bottom-up voices, the peace process remains impenetrable to most. In this complex environment, the ongoing conflict fuels mutual mistrust, in particular between veterans and IDPs, whose experiences of the conflict have led them to draw at times opposing conclusions and outlooks on how to best resolve it.

IDPs have a surprisingly homogenous attitude on the future of Donbas. The majority of them – sometimes a large majority at that – are willing to agree to substantial compromises in order to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Concern for their relatives in the non-government controlled parts of Donbas fuels this willingness. IDPs therefore strongly oppose military action or freezing the conflict. As many in today’s Ukraine are unaware of the IDPs’ political agenda, the potentially traumatic experience of displacement remains underestimated.

Societal and international stakeholders alike commonly see veterans as veto players who will not agree to a compromise and will spoil any efforts toward peace. This assessment fails to recognize the full complexities of veteran perspectives. While there is a clear majority against Minsk-style compromises among veterans in eastern Ukraine, they are strongly divided on other issues. These include preferences for the return of non-government controlled areas by militarily means and attitudes toward those residing there. There is thus no “singular” veteran perspective. Rather, opinions depend on personal experiences and circumstances.

Given this divided picture, any long-term prospect for reintegration will require strengthening social ties between conflict-affected populations in eastern Ukraine,

including the government-controlled areas of Donbas. Thus, it is in the Ukrainian government's interest to mitigate polarization and meet the demand for political participation and representation among those most affected by the conflict in eastern Ukraine. To this end, it should strengthen the Verkhovna Rada's role and better engage those citizens demanding immediate peace. Prioritizing social cohesion in eastern Ukraine is crucial, regardless of the current prospects for conflict resolution. International actors who fund dialogue programs need to ensure that they target and reach a diverse set of voices.

# Introduction

The violent separatism and Russian intervention in Donbas in eastern Ukraine since 2014 has claimed over 14,000 lives<sup>1</sup> and has evolved into a protracted conflict. At the time of writing, the conflict has the potential for renewed, large-scale escalation. Existing frameworks for resolution have not yielded a peaceful result and are more contested than ever.

Characteristic of the current stalemate are fundamentally opposing views over the nature of the conflict, its causes, and thus the political changes necessary to resolve it and eventually reintegrate the non-government controlled areas (NGCA) into Ukraine. As Russia is refusing to acknowledge its role in the ongoing conflict and tensions remain high, a peaceful settlement remains elusive. Meanwhile, inside Ukraine, “public discourse is increasingly polarized about how to reintegrate the non-government controlled areas and what kind of peace deal would be acceptable or desirable.”<sup>2</sup>

Inner-Ukrainian perspectives on the future of Donbas are the focus of this report. In particular, the perspectives of two conflict-affected populations residing in government-controlled eastern Ukraine: veterans of the Donbas conflict and those internally displaced as a consequence of the conflict. We investigate their views on peace, the “red lines” they draw in considering trade-offs to resolve the conflict, and whether they feel capable of influencing the future of Donbas.

## Strengthening Social Ties Is Crucial to Ukraine’s Resilience

There are multiple layers to the conflict in Donbas. A sustainable conflict resolution will remain elusive without any political movement in Moscow, over which Kyiv has little influence. However, it certainly possesses the agency to nurture the societal base inside Ukraine that will benefit sustainable peace efforts once there is momentum for a political solution. This base is currently fragmented and increasingly polarized, particularly over conflict resolution.

Many Ukrainians reject the terms of the existing framework for conflict resolution – the Minsk agreements – which national and international stakeholders alike deem unfavorable to Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The question what, if any, trade-offs and compromises to make

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- 1 International Crisis Group, “Conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas: A Visual Explainer,” accessed January 8, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer>.
  - 2 Marina Nagai, Iryna Eihelson, and Maxim Ieligulashvili, “Donbas conflict: Taking stock of peacebuilding,” International Alert, August 2020, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Ukraine-Donbas-Conflict-EN-2021.pdf>.
  - 3 Volodymyr Vasylenko, “The West must not force a Russian ‘peace’ on Ukraine,” Atlantic Council, August 15, 2021, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-must-not-force-a-russian-peace-on-ukraine>. Duncan Allan, “The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia’s War in Eastern Ukraine,” Chatham House, May 22, 2020, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine>.

to achieve peace risks dividing the population. Strengthening societal ties between these opposing factions must be a priority to render Ukraine more resilient to Russian destabilization and to lay the groundwork for long-term peace.<sup>4</sup>

Those most affected by the conflict play an important role in mending fragmented societal ties:<sup>5</sup> a comprehensive body of literature has proven that peace agreements lead to a more stable peace in the long term if they are inclusive.<sup>6</sup> “Inclusivity” can refer to politically marginalized groups, as well as those who participated in the conflict.<sup>7</sup> We therefore examine the attitudes of two of the most impacted groups: internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have fled the NGCA, which make up around 1.5 million people; and veterans of the Donbas conflict, who total at least 400,000.<sup>8</sup> The analysis focuses on the geographical areas closest to the conflict, Ukraine’s five eastern regions: Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporyzhia, and (government-controlled) Donetsk and Luhansk.

The goal of this report is to provide an in-depth analysis of the perspectives of IDPs and veterans in eastern Ukraine regarding the future of Donbas. Ukraine “did not choose this fight,”<sup>9</sup> but its choices will shape its eventual resolution. Grassroots peacebuilding efforts across the contact line between non-government (NGCA) and government-controlled areas (GCA) in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are still ongoing. This research aims to inform such dialogue programs with a differentiated picture of stakeholder groups on the Ukrainian government-controlled side of the contact line. For this purpose, we conducted interviews and surveys among veterans, IDPs and the general population in eastern Ukraine (excluding the NGCA) between August and November 2021.

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4 As outlined by the New Europe Center, “Scenarios for Settlement of the Conflict Around Donbas,” 2020, accessed January 8, 2022, [http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Scenarios-Donbas\\_eng.pdf](http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Scenarios-Donbas_eng.pdf).

5 According to UNHCR Ukraine’s Protection Cluster, the reintegration of IDPs and veterans is a precondition for reconciliation and peacebuilding in Ukraine. Protection Cluster Ukraine, “Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Ukraine,” UNHCR, May 2018, [https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2018/05/Peacebuilding-And-Reconciliation\\_Guidance-Note\\_Final-ENG-1.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2018/05/Peacebuilding-And-Reconciliation_Guidance-Note_Final-ENG-1.pdf).

6 Zahiba Yousuf, “Navigating inclusion in peace transitions,” Conciliation Resources, May 2018, accessed January 2, 2022, [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Navigating\\_inclusion\\_in\\_peace\\_transitions\\_beyond\\_elite\\_bargains\\_Accord\\_Spotlight.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Navigating_inclusion_in_peace_transitions_beyond_elite_bargains_Accord_Spotlight.pdf). Desirée Nilsson, “Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace,” *International Interactions* 38, no. 2 (2012): pp.243–266, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03050629.2012.659139>.

7 Andreas Hirblinger and Dana Landau, “Frauen an den Verhandlungstisch? Ja, aber nicht als Pflichtübung” (Women at the negotiating table? Yes, but not as a forced exercise), PeaceLab, May 4, 2020, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/05/frauen-an-den-verhandlungstisch-ja-aber-nicht-als-pflichtuebung>.

8 As of March 2021, 1,461,770 people were registered as IDPs. UNHCR, “Registration of Internal Displacement,” accessed January 6, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/resources/idp-dashboard>. These include IDPs from Crimea. Not all those who were internally displaced are registered as such (see Section 3B). There is no official figure for the total number of veterans. The Ministry of Veteran Affairs spoke of 400,000 veterans in 2020, a number that has presumably risen since that time. See Julia Friedrich and Theresa Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas,” Global Public Policy Institute, May 10, 2021, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.gppi.net/2021/05/10/the-long-shadow-of-donbas>.

9 International Crisis Group, “‘Nobody Wants Us’: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine,” October 1, 2018, p.27, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/252-nobody-wants-us-pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-82,842>.



## The Deepening Rift Between Groups Is Fueled by Different Conflict Experiences

We find a complex and disillusioning situation in eastern Ukraine: fueled by the diversity of conflict experiences, there is a dangerously deepening rift among Ukrainians in the government-controlled east that must be addressed, regardless of any immediate hopes for peace. IDPs and veterans, as well as the general population situated in eastern Ukraine, all feel that they have no agency to participate in political life, let alone conflict resolution. The peace process is formally closed off to civil society actors and other popular voices. Existing peacebuilding initiatives operating at the grassroots level have no formal access to the process. The groups we surveyed also deeply mistrust one another. Those who describe themselves as very strongly or strongly affected by the conflict do not necessarily share similar opinions. Rather, they have stronger opinions and positions, which at times diametrically oppose each other when it comes to resolving the conflict or accepting any kind of trade-off to that end.

Our research shows that the way both Ukrainian policymakers and society perceive veterans and IDPs is characterized by assumptions that obscure the nuances necessary to understand these different voices. Veterans are often perceived as veto players who will not agree to any kind of compromise. Meanwhile, many consider IDPs as apolitical and, since they often have family and friends in the NGCA, some government actors see them an important communication channel with the two so-called “People’s Republics.”

Neither assumption sufficiently captures the full picture. For instance, while a majority of veterans in the country’s east certainly oppose concessions, many have very differentiated views of the population still residing in the NGCA and are divided on questions such as whether a military solution to the conflict is warranted. In contrast, IDPs take a very homogenous stand and have a clear agenda, which is to achieve peace at (almost) any price. Our research finds that this willingness to make trade-offs for peace among IDPs stems from a variety of factors, of which the desire to end hostilities for the safety of their family is likely the strongest.

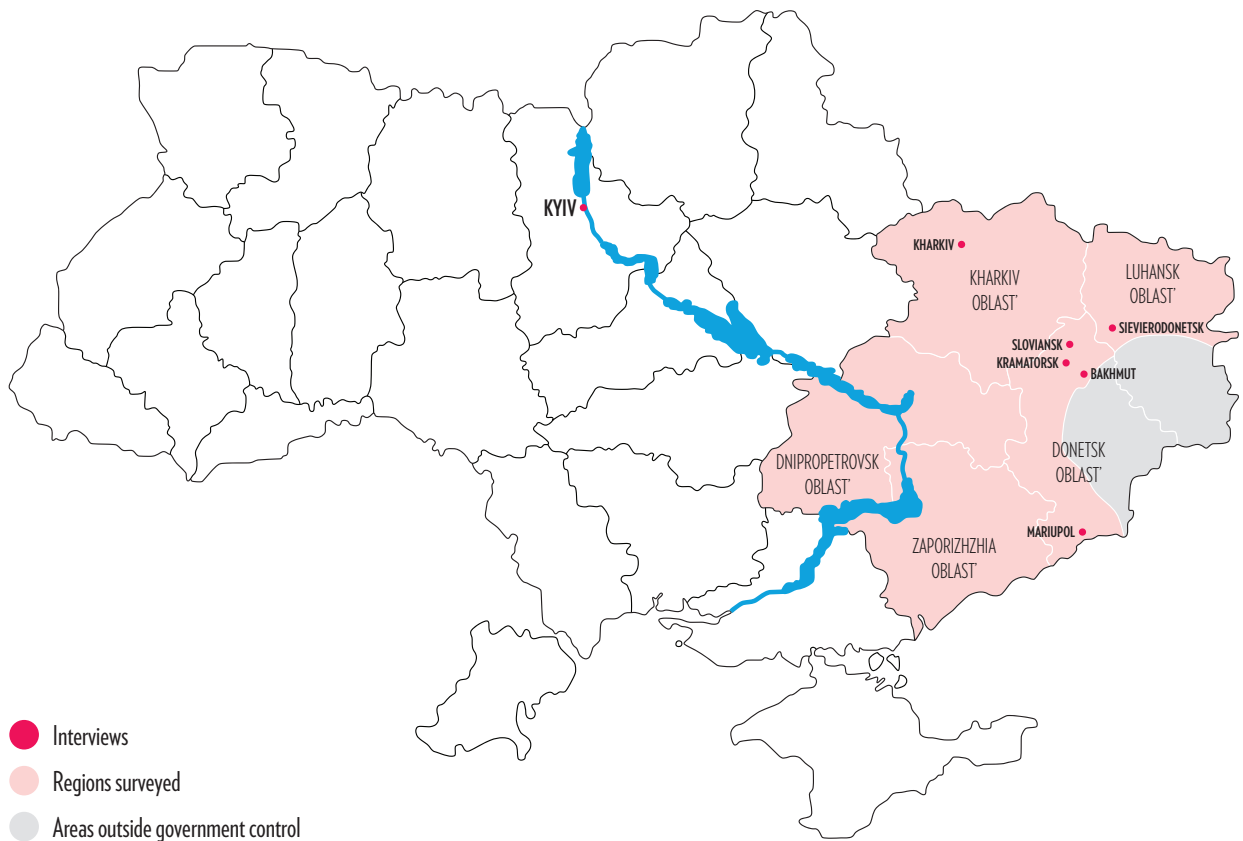
After explaining our methodology, we will look at the dynamics underlying the peace process based on a review of existing literature and background conversations (Section Two). We will then present and analyze the results of our surveys and interviews (Section Three) before concluding and outlining recommendations to Ukrainian and international stakeholders.

## Investigating IDP and Veteran Attitudes in Eastern Ukraine

We employed a mixed-method approach to understand the attitudes, red lines and opportunities for political participation of the two stakeholder groups and contrasted them with the general population residing in eastern Ukraine. We drew upon both qualitative interviews in the regions of Kharkiv and (government-controlled) Luhansk and Donetsk and, subsequently, a quantitative survey in the regions of Dnipropetrovsk,

Kharkiv, Zaporizhya, and (government-controlled) Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>10</sup> By conducting qualitative interviews with members of all groups in the initial phase, we were able to integrate the perspectives of the conflict-affected stakeholders into our survey design and options for answers.<sup>11</sup> We complemented interviews and surveys with a literature review and background conversations with international experts.

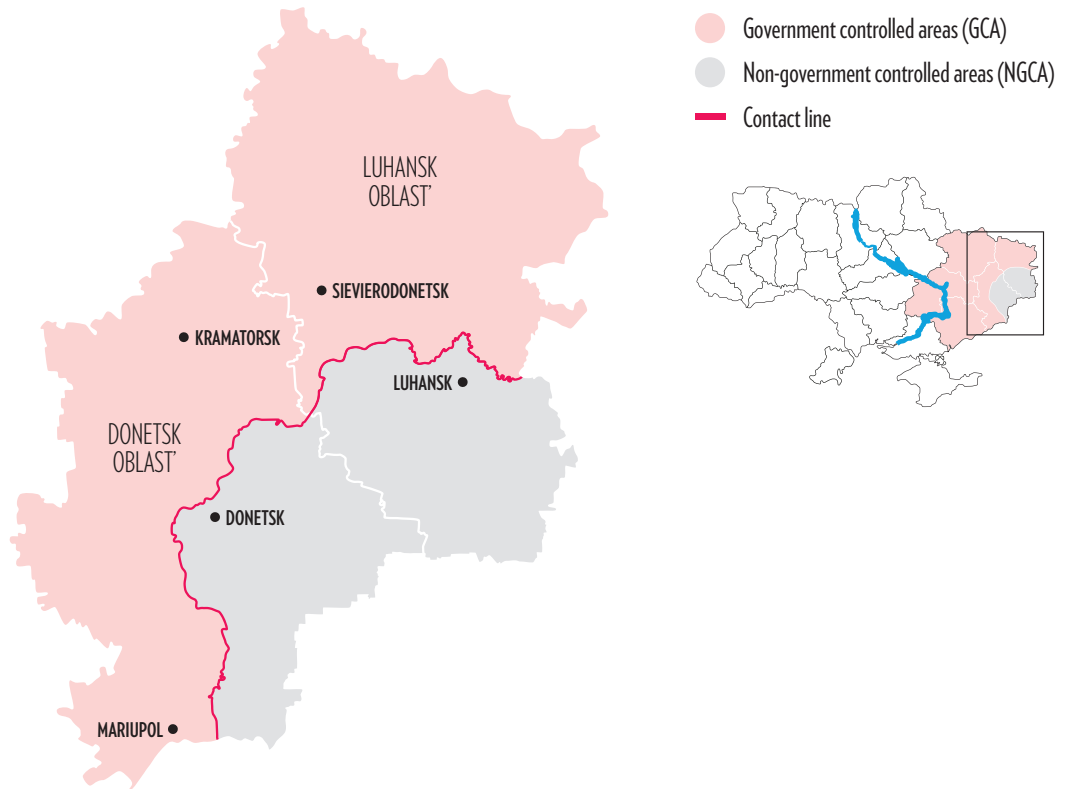
Figure 1: Regional Distribution of Interviews and Survey Regions



10 Since there are no official databases on IDPs and veterans registered in the regions, they had to be individually identified. The Dnipropetrovska and Zaporyzhska regions, which some count as part of eastern Ukraine, were included in the sample to ensure that it is representative, particularly of veterans.

11 Roger Mac Ginty and Pamina Firchow, “Everyday Peace Indicators: Capturing local voices through surveys,” *Shared Space*, (November 2014): pp.33–39, <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/Shared%20Space%202018%20Everyday-Peace-Indicators-Capturing-local-voices-through-surveys.pdf>.

Figure 2: Government and Non-Government Areas of Eastern Ukraine



Between August and November 2021, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with 31 members of relevant stakeholder groups in Kharkiv, Sievierodonetsk, Sloviansk, and Kramatorsk, as well as remotely in Bakhmut, Mariupol and Kyiv.<sup>12</sup> We aimed to create a diverse pool of interviewees in terms of regional and socio-economic background, gender and individual roles in the conflict. A local partner with in-depth knowledge and working experience on the conflict in Donbas supported us in identifying interviewees, translating and analyzing the findings. We used a snowball technique to identify interviewees. Since we mostly spoke to individuals that were engaged in supporting their local community, our sample is biased toward this politically active margin, many of whom were activists during the Euromaidan in 2014, whereas ordinary citizens constituted the minority of interviewees.

We designed the quantitative, representative survey to balance this dynamic. The Kyiv-based Razumkov Centre's Sociological Services surveyed the general population residing in the Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, and (government-controlled)

12 We conducted 29 semi-structured interviews, two of them with paired interviewees. Our interview sample was composed of 14 women and 17 men and included veterans (all of them also displaced from the NGCA); IDPs; local and senior government officials from the Ministries of Veteran Affairs and for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories; Ukrainian members of parliament; activists and staff of civil society organizations; "locals" of towns in the GCA; researchers; and staff of international NGOs. We also held 17 background conversations with international officials, Ukrainian government officials and international experts.

Donetsk and Luhansk regions with the help of Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) and reached 1,020 respondents in total.<sup>13</sup> To attain representative samples of IDPs and veterans residing in the same regions, the Razumkov Centre used a face-to-face method. It reached 401 veterans of the Donbas conflict<sup>14</sup> and 420 IDPs.<sup>15</sup> The gender distribution in the veteran and IDP samples overall corresponds to the proportions of registered male and female veterans<sup>16</sup> and IDPs.<sup>17</sup> The survey was designed to be representative for eastern Ukraine as a whole. Conclusions about individual oblasts can thus not be made, as there is a significant variation in regional distribution between the three samples, partly related to differences in the regional distribution of stakeholder groups according to official data.<sup>18</sup> The Razumkov Centre conducted the survey between October and November 2021. To increase the comparability of our data, the survey included 27 closed questions and 7 demographic indicators.

The most important limitation to our research is that for practical, logistical and safety reasons, it was not possible to conduct field research in the non-government controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Further, while designed as representative surveys, collecting evidence on the attitudes and experiences of people affected by conflict remains a challenge. Both social desirability bias<sup>19</sup> and psychological trauma can affect the accuracy of individual responses.<sup>20</sup> Interviewees pointed out that civilians and IDPs can be particularly hesitant to speak their mind freely – to foreigners – for fear of retaliation. Given the volatile security situation, civilians might fear that any statement could be used against them in the event of a renewed separatist takeover. IDPs are often scared for their families that still lives in the NGCA. Despite our guarantee of anonymity for interviewees, these challenging circumstances should be kept in mind.

Nevertheless, through the triangulation of quantitative survey data with the results of qualitative interviews, we are confident to have uncovered new empirical insights that allow us to draw generalizable, yet sufficiently contextualized conclusions.

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- 13 The Razumkov Centre conducted the survey among the general population between October 20 and 26. The sample featured 44.7 percent men and 55.3 percent women, and had the following regional distribution: Dnipropetrovska – 33.5 percent, Donetska – 16.3 percent, Zaporyzhska – 17.3 percent, Luhanska – 6.7 percent, Kharkivska – 27.4 percent. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 3.2 percent with a probability of 0.95.
- 14 The Razumkov Centre conducted the survey among veterans between November 1 and 29. The sample featured 92.8 percent men and 7.2 percent women. It had the following regional distribution: Dnipropetrovska – 22.4 percent; Donetska – 21.7 percent; Zaporyzhska – 20.4 percent; Luhanska – 6.2 percent; Kharkivska – 29.2 percent.
- 15 The Razumkov Centre conducted the survey among IDPs between November 1 and 21. The IDP sample included 36.8 percent men and 63.2 percent women. They were distributed across regions as follows: Dnipropetrovska – 4.8 percent; Donetska – 47.6 percent; Zaporyzhskia – 5 percent; Luhanska – 25.5 percent; Kharkivska – 17.1 percent.
- 16 “According to official MoVA [Ministry of Veteran Affairs] data, the percentage of veterans that are female is 4%.” See IREX, “Veterans’ Reintegration Survey Methodology,” July 14, 2021, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/1%20Veterans%E2%80%99%20Reintegration%20Survey%20Methodology.pdf>.
- 17 As per UNHCR, 58.56 percent of registered IDPs are women and 41.44 percent are men.
- 18 The IDP sample largely corresponds to the distribution of IDPs in eastern Ukraine according to UNHCR, “Registration of Internal Displacement.”
- 19 Kristine Eck, “Survey Research in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies,” in *Understanding Peace Research*, eds. Kristine Hoglund and Magnus Oberg, London: Routledge, 2011, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203828557-19/survey-research-conflict-post-conflict-societies-kristine-eck>.
- 20 Ivonne Küsters, *Narrative Interviews*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2009.

# Background

## A Closed-Off and Contested Peace Process Disconnects Ukrainians From Conflict Resolution

Analysts describe at least three dimensions to the conflict in Donbas: a geopolitical confrontation between Russia and “the West,” a violent struggle between Russia and Ukraine over Ukraine’s sovereignty, and an inner-Ukrainian dispute over Ukraine’s identity and future political course.<sup>21</sup> These different levels of conflict interact and simultaneously impede the resolution of one another. This section addresses the three most central issues to the key challenges discussed in this report: First, a near ubiquitous contestation of the Minsk agreements within Ukraine, which renders any discussion of “compromise” deeply unpopular. Second, Russia’s denial of its own role in the conflict and insistence that Ukraine should negotiate with the separatists, which makes any broader inclusion of bottom-up voices in the peace process impossible. Third, and deriving from the first two, the impression given by the Ukrainian government that large-scale demonstrations that favor hardline voices and do not represent the full spectrum of opinions are the only remaining way to influence the peace process.

### **The Minsk Agreements: Deeply Unpopular but Currently Without Alternative**

Despite being the most comprehensive efforts toward a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Donbas, the Minsk agreements, signed in September 2014 and February 2015, remain deeply contested in Ukraine among both Ukrainian policy circles and the general public.<sup>22</sup> Some have long considered them to be already, or at least nearly, dead.<sup>23</sup>

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21 John O’Loughlin, Gwendolyn Sasse, Gerard Toal, and Kristin M. Bakke, “A new survey of the Ukraine-Russia conflict finds deeply divided views in the contested Donbas region,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/12/new-survey-ukraine-russia-conflict-finds-deeply-divided-views-contested-donbas-region>.

22 All provisions of the Minsk agreements included in this 2021 poll are opposed by at least 50 percent of the Ukrainian population. Ilka Kucheriv Democratic Initiative Foundation, “From Paris to Geneva,” 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://dif.org.ua/uploads/pdf/132804204260c508b02114a6.06800185.pdf>.

23 Michael Kimmage and Bruno L  t  , “Is the Minsk Process for Eastern Ukraine Dead or Deadlocked?” German Marshall Fund, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/minsk-process-eastern-ukraine-dead-or-deadlocked>.



## The Minsk Agreements

The leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine – the so-called “Normandy Four” – signed the first agreements of Minsk (also known as the Minsk Protocol or Minsk I) on 5 September 2014, and a “package of measures for the implementation of the Minsk agreements” (also known as Minsk II) on 12 February 2015.

The terms of Minsk I include the federalization of Ukraine, a special status law for Donbas, amnesty for those involved in the separatist actions, and early local elections – stipulations that have all remained highly controversial.<sup>24</sup> Minsk II details the terms of Minsk I, outlining, among other issues, that the “special status” for certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions entails the right of linguistic self-determination, the right to create local militias and the possibility for deepened cooperation between these areas and Russia.

Commentators almost unanimously conclude that full compliance with Minsk favors Russia’s political interests,<sup>25</sup> partly because Russia’s military intervention backed Ukraine into a corner when signing both agreements.<sup>26</sup> The Ukrainian government and large portions of the population consider the agreements to be a major infringement on their sovereignty, endangering Ukraine’s political future.

Those opposing the Minsk agreements in Ukraine fear that the full implementation of their terms would, by way of federalization, enshrine a Russian veto into the country’s constitution. This provokes the additional assessment that an unsatisfied Russia will demand more from Ukraine, even if it were to implement the Minsk agreements.<sup>27</sup>

This dispute of the Minsk agreements makes it near impossible, politically, to implement them. Ukraine has thus moved away from their implementation, both rhetorically and in practice.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile Russia, satisfied with the stipulations of the

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24 Sabine Fischer, “The Donbas Conflict,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, April 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2019RP05\\_fhs.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2019RP05_fhs.pdf).

25 Vasylenko, “The West must not force a Russian ‘peace’ on Ukraine” and Allan, “The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia’s War in Eastern Ukraine.

26 Viacheslav Shramovych, “Ukraine’s deadliest day: The battle of Ilovaisk, August 2014,” BBC, August 29, 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49426724>; Forensic Architecture, “The battle of Ilovaisk,” *Forensic Architecture*, last update unknown, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-battle-of-ilovaisk>; Oksana Grytsenko, “Thousands of Russian soldiers fought at Ilovaisk, around a hundred were killed,” *Kyiv Post*, April 6, 2018, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.kyivpost.com/thousands-russian-soldiers-fought-ilovaisk-around-hundred-killed>.

27 Daniel Szeligowski, “Minsk Deals Will Never Bring Peace to Ukraine,” CEPA, November 24, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://cepa.org/minsk-deals-will-never-bring-peace-to-ukraine>.

28 Andrian Prokip, “Implementing the Minsk Agreements Would Pose a Russian Trojan Horse for Ukraine, but There Is a Third Way,” Wilson Center, December 7, 2021, accessed January 4, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/implementing-minsk-agreements-would-pose-russian-trojan-horse-ukraine-there-third-way>.

agreements, maintains that it will not sign any other agreement. Russia is increasingly impatient with the Ukrainian government for not implementing the agreements, while Moscow simultaneously continues to violate the terms of the agreements itself by not withdrawing heavy weaponry from eastern Ukraine,<sup>29</sup> not to mention the continued presence of foreign (Russian) belligerents<sup>30</sup> and the distribution of Russian passports to people residing in the NGCA.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, ceasefire violations continue on a daily basis<sup>32</sup> and the conflict's future remains utterly uncertain at the time of writing.<sup>33</sup>

A Ukrainian government official told us that “you cannot trade peace: it either is or it is not.”<sup>34</sup> This accurately describes widespread feelings in Ukraine toward making compromises or trade-offs.<sup>35</sup> Both the path to conflict resolution and the status quo risk leaving Ukraine at a disadvantage, as the prolonged conflict also serves the Russian goal of maintaining influence in the region and across Ukraine. Thus, while Minsk has certainly proven the most comprehensive and developed peace effort yet, its insufficiencies and problems have contributed to maintaining the violent status quo.

## Access to Formal Negotiations Is Uneven

A major challenge to the peace process is the Russian government's official denial, in spite of ample evidence, of its involvement in the armed conflict in Donbas. Russian military equipment, “volunteers,” private military companies, and regular units have been and remain decisive for the continuation of the armed conflict,<sup>36</sup> and Russia's support for the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk “People's Republics” (DPR and LPR) is essential for their survival.<sup>37</sup> Russia's denial makes any existing conflict resolution process a trying

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29 According to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission's “Trends and observation” reports for 2021, the “armed formations” account for over 78 percent of withdrawal violations, and in the period from January to March 2021, as much as 95 percent. OSCE, “Trends and observations,” Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/9/485372.pdf>; April–June 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/2/495778.pdf>; and July–September 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/2/504538.pdf>.

30 Tom Parfitt, “Smartphones banned for Russian soldiers over spying fears,” *The Times*, February 20, 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-soldiers-face-smartphone-ban-over-spying-fears-s6lb327zq>.

31 Fabian Burkhardt, “Russia's ‘Passportization’ of the Donbas,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, August 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C41>.

32 See the daily reports by the Special Monitoring Mission: OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine>.

33 Paul Kirby, “Is Russia preparing to invade Ukraine? And other questions,” *BBC*, January 10, 2022, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589>.

34 Interview with Ukrainian government official, Kyiv, September 2021.

35 See, for example, Ilka Kucheriv Democratic Initiative Foundation, “From Paris to Geneva.”

36 Among other sources, see: Conflict Armament Research, “Weapons of the War in Ukraine,” November 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-war-in-ukraine>; Forensic Architecture, “The battle of Ilovask.” Several Russian officials, including the president, have publicly admitted some form of involvement in the conflict. Shaun Walker, “Putin admits Russian military presence in Ukraine for first time,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2015, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/17/vladimir-putin-admits-russian-military-presence-ukraine>; Peter Dickinson, “Putin's Ukraine War: Russian MP recalls efforts to push civil war myth,” Atlantic Council, November 2, 2021, accessed January 04, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-ukraine-war-russian-mp-recalls-efforts-to-push-civil-war-myth>.

37 Konstantin Skorkin, “Merge and Rule: What's In Store for the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics,” March 16, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/84089>.

endeavor with little chance of success. Ukrainian negotiators accurately suspect that Russia and the NGCA use confidence-building measures based on reciprocity such as disengagement and ceasefires “to establish a form of equivalency between Kyiv and [so-called DPR and LPR].”<sup>38</sup> This leads to a situation in which portions of the Ukrainian public equate any step in the direction of peace with a step toward recognizing the NGCA, and thus a win for Russia.<sup>39</sup> For all of these reasons, established negotiation formats are in a deadlock.



## Negotiation Formats

Since the onset of the conflict in 2014, conflict resolution has been discussed in the **Normandy format**, bringing together France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine for high-level, political negotiations. The format has not met since 2019 and discussions to bring in other stakeholders, including the United Kingdom and the United States, are revived at the time of writing.<sup>40</sup>

**The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG)** was set up in 2014 as an additional conflict management mechanism.<sup>41</sup> It is chaired by the OSCE. Representatives from Ukraine and Russia, as well as from the so-called DPR and LPR (though not as official delegations)<sup>42</sup> meet approximately every two weeks in the TCG’s four working groups on security, political, economic, and humanitarian issues.<sup>43</sup> While they undoubtedly serve as a regular point of contact between the conflict parties, the TCG’s working groups have barely yielded any results.<sup>44</sup>

## Past Attempts to Include Civil Society Voices Backfired

Anything that can better connect the TCG to the grievances of people living in the conflict zone – and alleviate the conflict’s impact on them – is highly controversial, and such initiatives repeatedly fail for political reasons. For instance, in March 2020, a plan to add a “consultative council” – a platform to include civilian perspectives without

38 International Crisis Group, “Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement,” August 3, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/260-peace-ukraine-ii-new-approach-disengagement>.

39 Marina Nagai, Iryna Eihelson, and Maxim Ieligulashvili, “Donbas Conflict: Taking stock of peacebuilding.”

40 Natalie Tocci, “Europe is missing in action on Ukraine – it doesn’t have to be,” January 11, 2022, accessed January 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-ukraine-us-russia-diplomacy-normandy-format>.

41 Anna Hess Sargsyan, “Unpacking Complexity in the Ukraine Peace Process,” ETH Zürich, April 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse243-EN.pdf>.

42 “The WG discussion rounds are the only format where representatives of Kyiv and the NGCAs communicate with each other directly.” In Anna Hess Sargsyan, “Unpacking Complexity in the Ukraine Peace Process.”

43 Fischer, “The Donbas Conflict.”

44 Ibid.



any formal influence over negotiations – to the TCG sparked heated debate. The plan proposed that ten representatives from Ukraine and ten representatives from the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk republics directly interact. This led to a public outcry within Ukraine and from international experts.<sup>45</sup> The main criticism was that direct talks with people from the NGCA, even on an unofficial level within a consultative body, would be a recognition of the so-called DPR and LPR’s claim to statehood. The Ukrainian government did not sign the proposal.<sup>46</sup>

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**“You cannot trade peace: it either is or it is not.”**

– Ukrainian Government Official, Kyiv

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At times, the TCG seems more like a political charade than a serious effort at conflict management. After the establishment of the advisory council failed, the Ukrainian government creatively included two IDPs in their delegation in June 2020 as a way of representing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions from a Ukrainian perspective.<sup>47</sup> Russia exploited this inclusion of conflict-affected voices by inviting to its TCG delegation Maya Pirogova – the former head of the so-called DPR’s information ministry who was convicted of terrorism by a Ukrainian court in 2018.<sup>48</sup> Once she joined the virtual (due to COVID-19) negotiation room, the Ukrainian delegation immediately left in protest. First the political working group and later, when Pirogova switched to their group, the humanitarian working group, were unable to meet for several months. Now, according to international actors familiar with the process, the Ukrainian delegation is willing to speak as long as Pirogova’s camera is turned off.

Broader societal initiatives for peacebuilding face similar challenges and have yet to succeed. One poorly planned initiative was the “National Platform for Dialogue and Reconciliation” that Sergei Sivokho, then-adviser to Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council and a former actor, put forward in the fall of 2019. The goal of the initiative was a large-scale dialogue between civilians from both the GCA and

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45 Peter Dickinson, “Ukraine agrees to dialogue with Russian-led republics,” Atlantic Council, March 14, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-agrees-to-dialogue-with-russian-led-republics>; Vladimir Socor, “Kyiv Finds an Alibi to Step Back From Kozak-Yermak Plan on Donbas,” The Jamestown Foundation, March 26, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/kyiv-finds-an-alibi-to-step-back-from-kozak-yermak-plan-on-donbas>.

46 Socor, “Kyiv Finds an Alibi to Step Back From Kozak-Yermak Plan on Donbas.”

47 *Ukrainska Pravda*, “Ofis prezidenta zaprosiv u TKG zhurnalistiv iz Donbasu” (The president’s office invited journalists from Donbas to the TCG), June 9, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2020/06/9/7254935>.

48 Evgeniya Lutsenko, “Ukraina vyshla iz peregovorov v politicheskoy podgrupe v TKG iz-za «eksperta» ot boyevikov – Kravchuk” (Ukraine withdrew from talks in the political subgroup in the TCG because of the “expert” from the militants – Kravchuk), *Hromadske*, April 4, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://hromadske.ua/ru/posts/ukraina-vyshla-iz-peregovorov-v-politicheskoy-podgrupe-v-tkg-iz-za-eksperta-ot-boevikov-kravchuk>; Yuri Lapaiev, “Turning up the Conflict Dial: The Political Reasons Behind the Resumed Fighting in Donbas,” March 24, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/turning-up-the-conflict-dial-the-political-reasons-behind-the-resumed-fighting-in-donbas>.

the NGCA.<sup>49</sup> Critics lamented that the platform overly focused on the internal dimensions of the conflict in Ukraine, drawing attention away from Russia's role as an aggressor and conflict party. At the platform's launch, members of the Ukrainian far-right "National Corps," including veterans from the Azov Regiment,<sup>50</sup> disrupted a presentation, breaking a stand and pushing Sivokho to the ground.<sup>51</sup> Fifteen people were arrested and Sivokho lost his post as adviser later the same month.<sup>52</sup> One takeaway from this incident was that any national forum to discuss the future of Donbas requires careful preparation and clearly stated intentions and limitations.<sup>53</sup>

## Red Lines Are Proclaimed From the Streets

There is also no formal mechanism to ensure the participation of civil society in high-level political negotiations in the Normandy format. However, during the last round of Normandy talks in 2019, protests erupted after the Ukrainian government accepted several stipulations to implement the Minsk agreements. For instance, Kyiv took part in confidence-building measures, such as a large prisoner exchange and an agreement on troop disengagement in Zolote and Petrivske on the contact line.<sup>54</sup> Ukrainian President Zelensky's actions to fulfill his campaign promise of "ending the war in Donbas" uncovered societal fault lines and political divisions regarding the future of Donbas.<sup>55</sup>

These fault lines became apparent when "an eclectic mix of opposition parties, civic activities, veterans of the war in Donbas, and several right-wing radical groups"<sup>56</sup>

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- 49 *Novoe Vremia*, "Platforma primireniya s Donbassom: chto izvestno o novoy initsiative Sergeya Sivokho i pochemu o ney sporyat" (Platform for reconciliation with Donbass: what is known about Sergei Sivokho's new initiative and why it is being debated), February 18, 2020, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://nv.ua/ukraine/politics/platforma-primireniya-s-donbassom-iniciativa-sivoho-novosti-ukrainy-50070855.html>.
- 50 The Azov Regiment was founded as a volunteer battalion in 2014 and quickly made a name for itself as a far-right movement. Azov formed a political party, "National Corps," in 2016. See Michael Colborne, "There's One Far-Right Movement That Hates the Kremlin," *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2019, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/17/theres-one-far-right-movement-that-hates-the-kremlin-azov-ukraine-biletsky-nouvelle-droite-venner>.
- 51 *Ukrainska Pravda*, "Veterany 'Azova' tolknuli Sivokho na pol i sorvali ego prezentatsiyu" (Veterans of 'Azov' pushed Sivokho to the floor and disrupted his presentation), March 12, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/03/12/7243324/>; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, "Ukrainian Nationalists Disrupt Peace Presentation On War In East," March 12, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-nationalists-disrupt-peace-presentation-on-war-in-east/30484359.html>.
- 52 *Ukrainska Pravda*, "Sivokho uvolili iz SNBO" (Sivokho was fired from the National Security and Defense Council), March 30, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/03/30/7245718/>. The platform now exists without official endorsement as a mostly unknown "social movement" under the direction of Sivokho. "Natsional'na Platforma Prymyreniya I Edinosti," accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.nppe.org.ua/en-gb>.
- 53 Yulia Tishchenko, "Kakoy dolzhna byt' natsional'naya dialogovaya platforma: vyvody istorii s Sivokho," (What a national dialogue platform should look like: conclusions of the Sivokho story), *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 20, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/columns/2020/03/20/7244333>.
- 54 International Crisis Group, "Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement."
- 55 Cécile Druey, Anna Hess, Julia Kaplan, and Valentina Cherevatenko, "The Minsk Process: Societal Perceptions and Narratives," in *OSCE Insights 2020*, ed. Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, (2020): pp.113–128, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783748922339-08/the-minsk-process-societal-perceptions-and-narratives?page=1>.
- 56 Orysia Lutsevych and Hannah Shelest, "Living with insecurity: Ukrainians at times of armed conflict and the pandemic," Heinrich Böll Stiftung, November 2020, p.18, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://ua.boell.org/index.php/en/2020/12/24/living-insecurity-ukrainians-times-armed-conflict-and-pandemic>.

organized a “No to Capitulation Movement”<sup>57</sup> prior to the Normandy meeting in December 2019. The movement brought together several thousand people in Kyiv who put forward “red lines” that the Ukrainian government should not cross in its negotiations. However, polling data show that only 20 percent of Ukrainians supported these protests, while 41 percent were opposed.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, one of the protesters’ crucial red lines was the so-called Steinmeier formula, a proposal on the sequencing of local elections, the special status law and full reintegration of the NGCA. However, polling data reveal that a two-thirds majority among the general Ukrainian population did not have an opinion on this proposal.<sup>59</sup>

In the end, President Zelensky’s attempt to settle the conflict failed much like all the other attempts before – for many reasons.<sup>60</sup> However, it appeared to protestors in Kyiv as though that they were the reason why “the Ukrainian official position [was] modified to make security measures ... a priority over the start of the political process for the post-conflict reintegration of Donbas.”<sup>61</sup> Considering that public pressure from far-right groups and veterans was a driving force behind the Ukrainian government’s decision to establish an economic blockade of the NGCA in 2017,<sup>62</sup> this leaves the impression that certain groups of society can impose red lines on the government<sup>63</sup> while others cannot. In any case, this situation shows that President Zelensky’s domestic audience is far from united on the desired course to end the Donbas conflict.<sup>64</sup>

## Negotiations Leave Little Space for Everyday Concerns of Those Most Affected by the Conflict

All of these instances demonstrate that Ukrainian politicians are walking a tightrope when it comes to Donbas reintegration policy. The inclusion of conflict-affected voices into formal negotiations has been nearly impossible, which undermines ways for Ukrainians to feel that they have any say in the future of Donbas. Large-scale demonstrations are seemingly the only way to make their voice heard. This is a great sign

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57 See more about the still existing “Anti-Capitulation Movement” at <https://rok.org.ua>.

58 Polling data also reveal that 22 percent knew only little about the demands of the protesters, and 10 percent did not even know that they were happening. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, “Stavlennia ukraintsiv do politykiv otsinka diial’nosti organiv vlady ta aktual’nykh podii” (Attitudes of Ukrainians to politicians, evaluation of government activities and current events), press release, October 14, 2019, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=898&page=1>.

59 Rating Group, “Attitudes of Ukrainians Towards the Occupied Territories Issue Solution,” October 2, 2019, accessed January 10, 2022, [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/otnoshenie\\_ukraincev\\_k\\_resheniyu\\_voprosa\\_okkupirovannyh\\_territoriy.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/otnoshenie_ukraincev_k_resheniyu_voprosa_okkupirovannyh_territoriy.html).

60 Taras Kuzio, “Peace Will Not Come to Europe’s War,” Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, 2019, accessed February 2, 2022, [https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working\\_paper\\_2019\\_14.pdf](https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/working_paper_2019_14.pdf).

61 Lutsevych and Shelest, “Living with insecurity: Ukrainians at times of armed conflict and the pandemic.”

62 Fischer, “The Donbas Conflict.”

63 While those in the front rows protesting “against capitulation” in 2019 were far-right radical groups, the central hardline stipulations of these demonstrations resonate with much larger portions of Ukrainian society than just this radical fringe. See, for example, Friedrich and Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas.”

64 Katharine Quinn-Judge, “Peace in Ukraine: A Promise Yet to Be Kept,” International Crisis Group, April 17, 2020, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/peace-ukraine-promise-yet-be-kept>.

of civic activism,<sup>65</sup> but it leaves little room for nuance – as a consequence, it privileges the loudest, most radical voices. Such voices do not represent the full spectrum of opinions on the conflict. Thus, the debate over conflict resolution “has mostly migrated to the kitchen tables,”<sup>66</sup> if it takes place at all.

In this extremely heated environment, it is up to the multiple localized peacebuilding initiatives to address everyday concerns and maintain cross-contact line (CCL) dialogue.<sup>67</sup> While these initiatives have been ongoing since the onset of the conflict, they are not directly connected to the formal peace processes. Instead, their results are contributed informally through the governments funding the initiatives.<sup>68</sup> This way, they cannot easily be captured by divisive narratives. At the same time, this approach contributes to the alienation of people from the peace process.

Our interviews and surveys confirmed that all of these constraints – a conflict management system whose basic provisions are deeply contested as well as negotiations that conflict-affected people can hardly access or influence – have an impact on the perspectives of veterans and IDPs residing in eastern Ukraine. These perspectives will be outlined and analyzed in the next section.

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65 Lutsevych and Shelest, “Living with insecurity: Ukrainians at times of armed conflict and the pandemic.”

66 Marina Nagai, Iryna Eihelson, and Maxim Ieligulashvili, “Donbas Conflict: Taking stock of peacebuilding.”

67 Examples of such dialogues include the Women’s Initiative for Peace in Donbas(s) (<https://www.owen-berlin.de/projekte/wipd.php>), the civil society platform CivilM+ (<https://civilmplus.org/en>), and dialogues on several tracks facilitated by the HD Centre (<https://www.hdcentre.org/activities/ukraine>).

68 Anonymous Author, “Small Steps Along the Contact Line: Local Approaches to Peace in Donbas,” PeaceLab, October 9, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://peacelab.blog/2020/10/small-steps-along-the-contact-line-local-approaches-to-peace-in-donbas>.

# Perspectives in Eastern Ukraine

## United in Alienation, Divided in Conflict Experiences

Both survey and interview results reveal that there is no “singular” eastern Ukrainian view on resolving the conflict in Donbas. Given that the region has consistently shown a stronger tendency toward compromise than other parts of Ukraine,<sup>69</sup> and has historically maintained closer ties to Russia,<sup>70</sup> it is tempting to categorize all attitudes in eastern Ukraine as one and the same, as done by commentators in the past.<sup>71</sup> However, research – including that done for this study – shows a wide variety of opinions and trends within eastern Ukraine.<sup>72</sup> Certain things unite the veterans, IDPs and locals that we surveyed, including a sense of pragmatism and the perception that Kyiv does not listen to their voices. However, there are clear dividing lines – particularly over whether to make concessions to achieve peace. There is also a strong sense of mistrust between groups. The same sense of conflict-affectedness translates at times into opposing conclusions on how to mitigate the conflict.

Our data thus portray a very disillusioned population in the country’s east. While Ukrainians who live further away from the contact line have more possibilities to maintain their daily routine, the conflict remains a daily fact of life and a source of danger and trauma to those most impacted due to geographical proximity, combat experience, displacement, or the presence of family in the NGCA. The current absence of a nation-wide debate on what would constitute peace and how far Ukraine should be willing to go to achieve it, coupled with a peace process that is impenetrable to society, contributes to a lost sense of agency. This section analyzes cross-group commonalities that emerged from the interviews and survey results, the specific outlooks of IDPs and veterans, and the dividing lines between them.

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69 See Ukraine-Analysen, “Die ukrainische Bevölkerung zum Donbass-Konflikt” (The Ukrainian population on the Donbas conflict), *Ukraine-Analysen*, N°161 (December 2015): pp.19–22, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.laender-analysen.de/ukraine/pdf/UkraineAnalysen161.pdf> and Ilka Kucheriv Democratic Initiative Foundation, “From Paris to Geneva.”

70 Fischer, “The Donbas Conflict.”

71 See Mykhaylo Shtekel, “Why war-torn east Ukraine votes for pro-Russian parties,” Atlantic Council, November 4, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-war-torn-east-ukraine-votes-for-pro-russian-parties>.

72 Silviya Nitsova, “Why the Difference? Donbas, Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk After Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 73, no.10 (2021): pp. 1832-1856, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2021.1912297>.

## 1 Shared Outlook: Participation and Pragmatism

Across all groups, there is a clear disconnect between people in eastern Ukraine and the local and central government. The (perceived) lack of opportunities to participate in the politics that govern them is not unique to eastern Ukrainians,<sup>73</sup> but coupled with the conflict, it creates a sense of hopelessness that is particularly palpable in the GCA of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which are more affected than the surrounding eastern Ukrainian regions. This is particularly true in the Luhansk region, which was a rural, structurally weak region even before 2014. The conflict has exacerbated this weakness and cut off Luhansk even more from the rest of Ukraine. “We are the most depressed region,” said one local we interviewed in the Luhansk region. All groups are united by a common belief that their participation in political life and the peace process is impossible. They can also agree on a limited amount of conflict-related issues, such as questions of reintegration, the Russian language and attitudes toward those residing in the NGCA.

### All Stakeholders Believe They Cannot Participate in Political Life

Among stakeholders, there exists at least an abstract wish to participate in politics. However, our interviews revealed little impetus among Ukrainians to get involved, stemming from the belief that nothing will change: “People are active in wishing they were active, but end up staying passive because they do not believe that their actions can influence anything.”<sup>74</sup> Many of our interviewees accorded this belief to a post-Soviet heritage that was not unique to the region, but particularly present there.

For instance, none of the groups we surveyed believe it possible to get involved in local politics if they wanted to do so, and across groups there is a high level of mistrust toward local authorities, and even more so toward central authorities.

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**“People are active in wishing they were active, but end up staying passive because they do not believe that their actions can influence anything.”**

– Civil Society Representative, Sloviansk

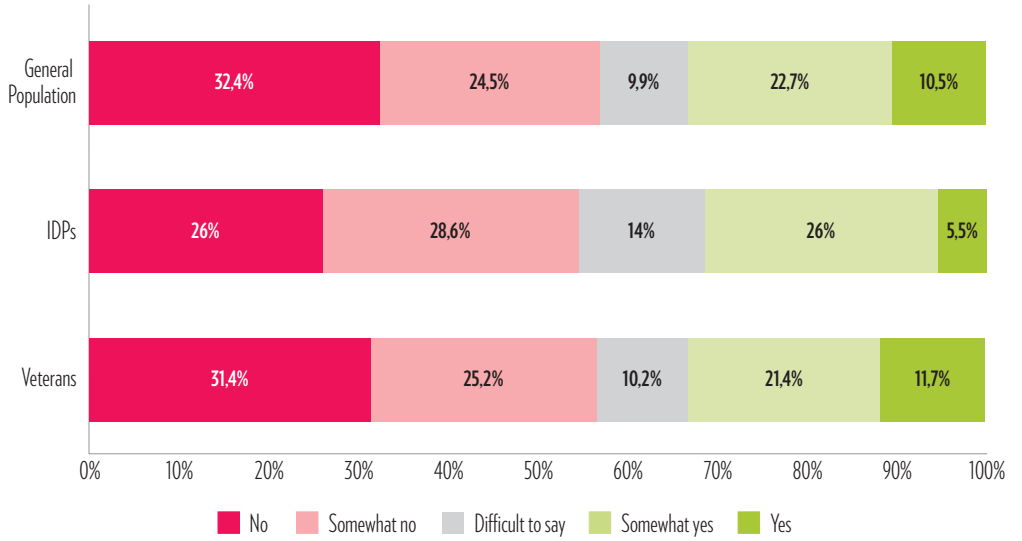
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73 Toma Istomina, “Survey shows Ukrainians’ fading trust in government,” *Kyiv Post*, February 22, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/survey-shows-ukrainians-fading-trust-in-government.html>.

74 Interview with a civil society representative, Sloviansk, August 2021.

**Figure 3: If someone in your town/city wants to be elected to the city council or work in the local administration, they can do so.**



**Figure 4: The government in Kyiv acts in the best interest of people like you.**

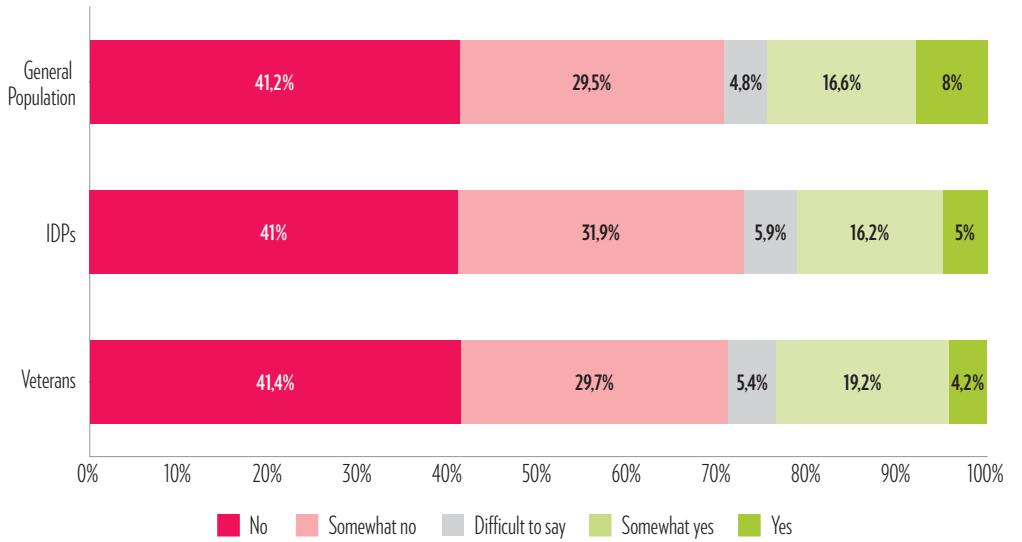
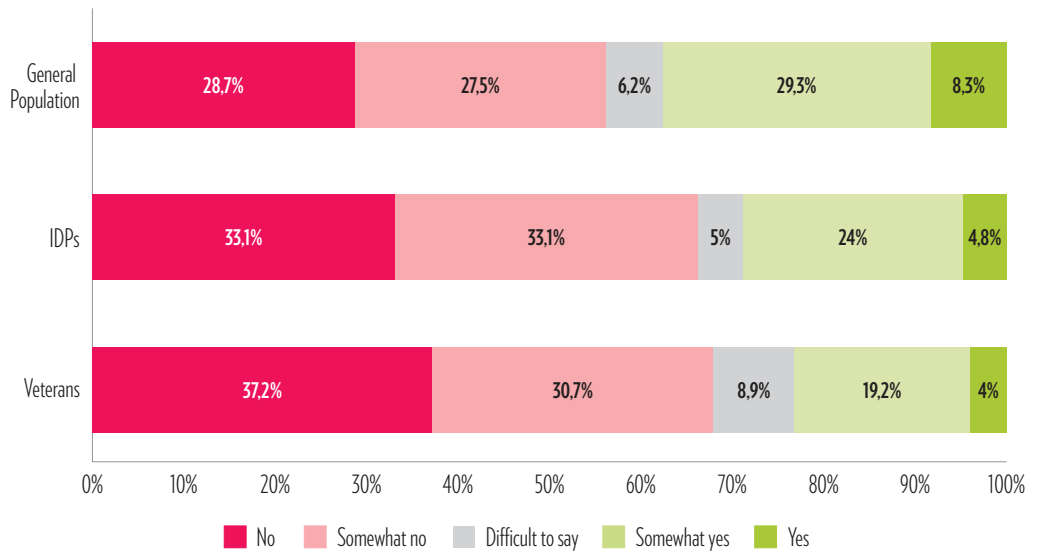


Figure 5: Your local government acts in the best interests of people like you.



The unanimity of answers across groups is striking. The Ukrainian government has recently launched initiatives to show its citizens that it acts in their interests: this includes, for example, the “Big Construction” – a large-scale infrastructure program all over the country.<sup>75</sup> However, Kyiv remains distant in people’s minds and hearts. Several stakeholders we interviewed emphasized the positive role that the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories (MinReTOT) plays in the region by organizing consultations and involving civil society actors,<sup>76</sup> but others stressed a remaining disconnect between the government’s strategy and efforts on the ground.<sup>77</sup>

This mistrust of the government and alienation from its decision-making processes is particularly visible in regards to conflict resolution: throughout the interviews and survey results, representatives from all groups felt that the Ukrainian government does not have a strategy for conflict resolution. Some of the activists interviewed stressed that this is understandable given Russia’s role in the conflict. When asked whether the government takes the opinion of the Donbas population into account, many people we interviewed did not know what to say, while the survey trends show the clear opinion across groups that this is not the case.

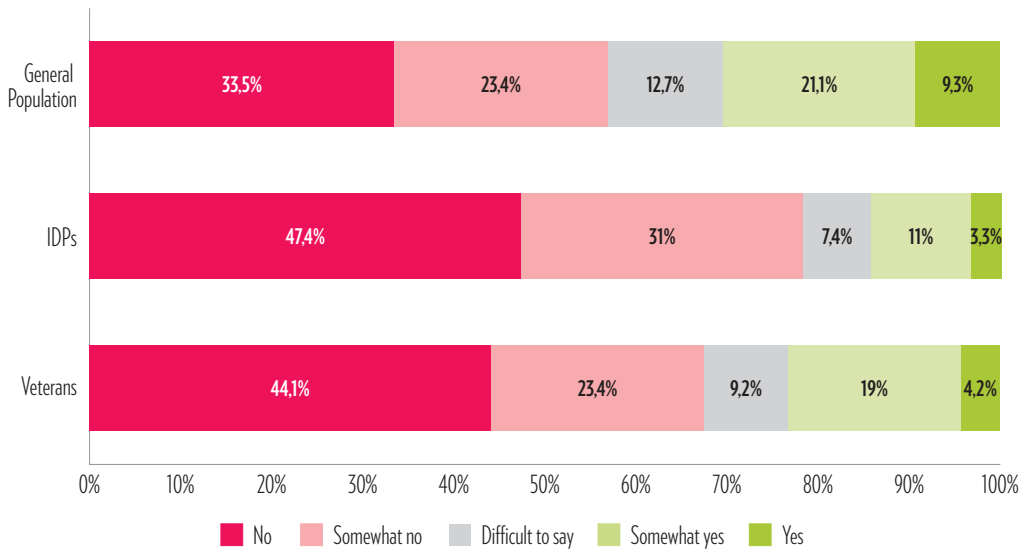
75 Alexander Query, “Big Construction project remains dominant topic in Ukrainian infrastructure,” *Kyiv Post*, June 2, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.kyivpost.com/business/big-construction-project-remains-dominant-topic-in-ukrainian-infrastructure.html>.

76 For example: interview with a civil society representative, Sloviansk, August 2021; interview with civil society representatives, Kramatorsk, August 2021; interview with an international organization, Kyiv, October 2021.

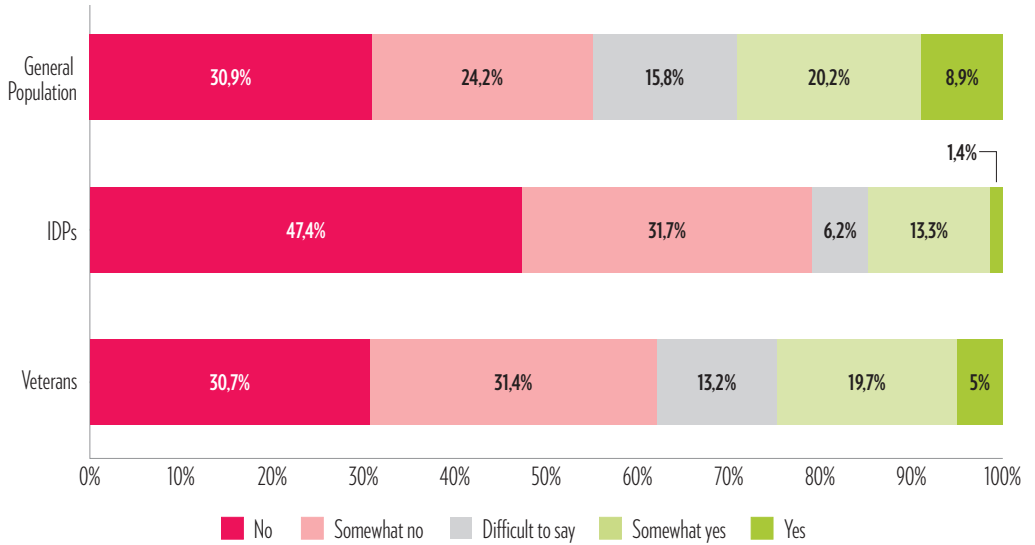
77 Interview with an expert, Kharkiv, August 2021.



**Figure 6: The Ukrainian Government has a strategy to solve the conflict in Donbas.**



**Figure 7: The Ukrainian Government listens to the people of Donbas in order to solve the conflict.**



## The Ongoing Conflict Reinforces Alienation

Ongoing violence and the conflict-ridden environment in the Donbas region are important factors in this predominant feeling of alienation. Casualties, both military and civilian, occur on an almost daily basis and the humanitarian situation close to the

contact line remains dire. Particularly in those settlements closest to the contact line, mental health concerns related to the war remain unaddressed, which influences the overall feeling of helplessness and loss of agency.<sup>78</sup>

The political situation can be challenging as well, notably in the several towns and cities in the GCA governed by a Civil-Military Administration (CMA). The central government introduced CMAs in 2014 and 2015 in several places close to the contact line to effectively organize governance amid the volatile security situation.<sup>79</sup> However, CMAs are not always the result of the conflict: In Sloviansk, for instance, a CMA was established as a means to resolve an electoral standoff between the mayor and the city council.<sup>80</sup> In this way, CMAs undermine democratic participation: some parts of the GCA governed by CMAs were not allowed to vote during the 2020 local elections.<sup>81</sup> Some speculate that this is because the central government did not want a win for pro-Russian forces over the ruling “Sluha Narodu” party.<sup>82</sup>

Areas of eastern Ukraine that are further away from the active conflict zone face secondary, more long-term problems related to the conflict. The destruction of economic ties to the former regional centers of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as to neighboring Russia, have a palpable impact on the government-controlled parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions and beyond.<sup>83</sup> Still, many of those living further from the line of contact have resorted to going about their daily lives.<sup>84</sup> Several interviewees in the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions told us that they had not thought about the questions of conflict resolution and reintegration in a long time – they mostly focused on their everyday lives, in part because of the pain, fear, sense of hopelessness, and, in some cases, trauma associated with questions regarding Donbas.

Many interviewees stressed that the predominant feelings in the GCA of the Donbas region were not only of agitation and polarization, but also of disengagement and disillusionment. A local from the Luhansk region, for instance, had been an activist during the time of the Euromaidan, but was deeply disillusioned when the changes they had hoped for did not occur. Civil society representatives stressed that many in the GCA of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions felt similarly: some were disillusioned with

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78 Evan Lawson, “Entering the grey-zone,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, [https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CIVIC\\_Ukraine\\_Report\\_Web.pdf](https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CIVIC_Ukraine_Report_Web.pdf).

79 Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “Mechanisms of work of civil-military administrations in Donbas: problems, perspectives,” June 15, 2016, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/mechanisms-of-work-of-civil-military-administrations-in-donbas-problems-perspectives>.

80 Interview with a civil society representative, Sloviansk, August 2021.

81 European Platform for Democratic Elections, “Decision to not hold local elections in certain constituencies of GCA Donetsk and Luhansk is a disenfranchisement of voters,” August 12, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/decision-to-not-hold-local-elections-in-certain-constituencies-of-gca-donetsk-and-luhansk-is-a-disenfranchisement-of-voters.html>.

82 Anonymous Author, “Small Steps Along the Contact Line: Local Approaches to Peace in Donbas.” A notable exception to this trend was the 2019 presidential election that President Zelensky won with a landslide in the eastern Ukrainian regions. Interview with an expert, Kharkiv, August 2021; and BBC, “Ukraine election: Comedian Zelensky wins presidency by landslide,” April 22, 2019, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48007487>.

83 Natalia Shapovalova and Balázs Jarábik, “How Eastern Ukraine Is Adapting and Surviving: The Case of Kharkiv,” Carnegie Europe, September 12, 2018, accessed January 10, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/09/12/how-eastern-ukraine-is-adapting-and-surviving-case-of-kharkiv-pub-77216>.

84 Clara Marchaud, “FPRI BMB Ukraine: Dispatch from Kharkiv,” *BNE Intellinews*, December 17, 2021, accessed January 5, 2022, <https://bne.eu/fpri-bmb-ukraine-dispatch-from-kharkiv-230448/?source=ukraine>.

Russia, realizing that it would not come to save them,<sup>85</sup> while others were disappointed with Kyiv.<sup>86</sup>

In this vein, some of our interviewees emphasized that civilians in Ukraine’s east, particularly in the GCA, stay “outside of politics,” and live “just by themselves,” distanced from political ongoings. Others, such as a deputy of the Verkhovna Rada from the Donbas region, stressed that “people are not passive, people are the same everywhere.” Rather, they claimed, people were shocked, still in disbelief about the war and the fact that Russia had turned into an aggressor.

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**“People are not passive, people are the same everywhere.”**

– Member of Parliament, Verkhovna Rada

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Survey results contradict the impression that the general population is simply passive, at least in eastern Ukraine at large. While the majority across all groups does not feel that it is possible to become involved in local politics and believes that neither the central nor the local government act in the interest of “people like you,” there are clear, sometimes contradicting political opinions.<sup>87</sup> Response rates for the answer option “difficult to say” range between 10 percent and 20 percent for almost all questions on conflict resolution and trade-offs, and are significantly lower for IDPs and veterans. Overall, this is lower than we expected based on the interview results and does not suggest the disengagement of an entire section of Ukrainian society.

The discrepancy between interview findings in conversations with civil society activists and the survey results suggests that stakeholders are not only alienated from governmental institutions but also, to a certain extent, from those activists that claim to speak for society’s interests. This reinforces the sense among the stakeholders surveyed that they are not being heard.

## All Groups Have a Pragmatic Outlook Toward Residents of the NGCA and Reintegration

Despite mutual mistrust and the clear dividing lines we observe in interviews and surveys, there are certain trends across all groups. Stand-out perspectives that unite, rather than divide, the surveyed groups include a differentiated outlook toward the NGCA, a preference for reintegration and a willingness to make a trade-off for peace regarding the Russian language. These views seem grounded in pragmatism rather

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, Sloviansk, August 2021.

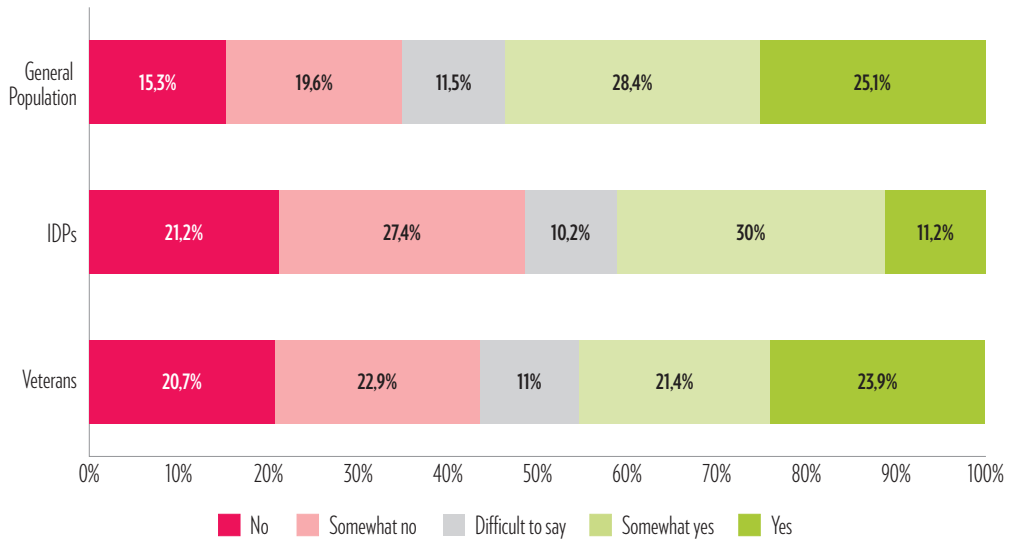
<sup>86</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Results for the Luhansk region are not representative; results for the Donetsk region do not show a contradicting trend.

than expressions of political preference, considering how much the opinions of these groups differ in other respects. Nevertheless, they are an important base of common understanding in an otherwise very polarized environment.

An initial similarity across groups is a common outlook on the population residing in the NGCA. Not everyone in Ukraine thinks kindly of those residing in the NGCA, as some view them as separatists, collaborators and staunch Russia-supporters.<sup>88</sup> The groups we interviewed often held more nuanced views, a trend reflected in the surveys. Due to regional proximity and remaining ties, many are still in touch with people in the NGCA and do not view the choice of whether to stay or go as always straightforward. The survey shows divided views: about half of each group believes people who live in the NGCA are doing so of their own free will and for ideological reasons; the other half of each group takes the opposing view.

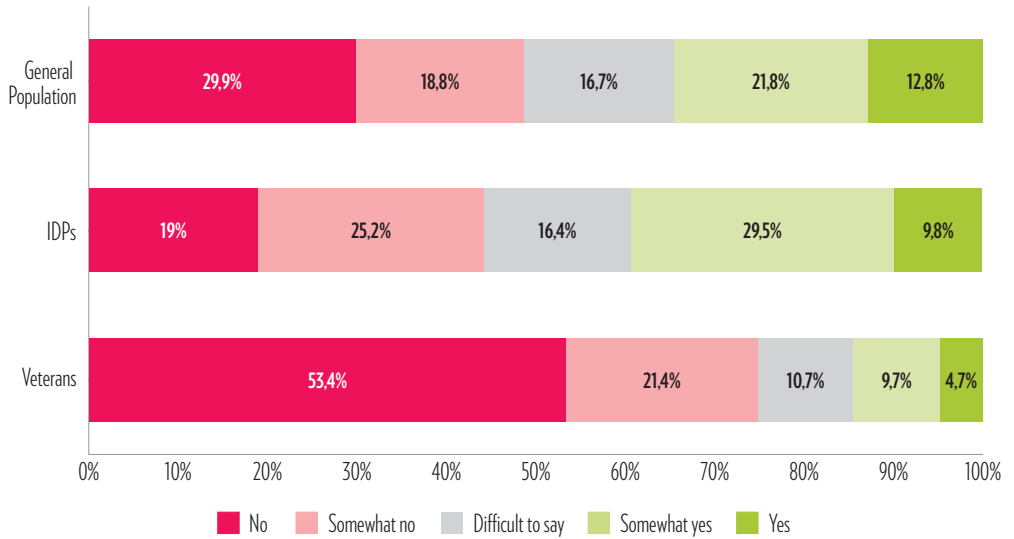
**Figure 8: People living in the NGCA stayed there for ideological reasons, and it was their personal choice.**



All groups – although to strongly varying degrees – also oppose an amnesty for those who fought alongside the separatists. The opposition to such an amnesty, which is a provision of the Minsk agreements, is one of the few instances when the diverging conflict experiences of the groups lead to a similar conclusion. The reintegration of the NGCA into Ukraine remains the most difficult question for all stakeholders. Interviewees expressed a lot of uncertainty about reintegration, notably in the short term. Survey results suggest that there is a commitment toward reintegration, although with exceptionally high response rates for the “difficult to say” answer option. These uncertain responses might be due in part to the question’s phrasing (reintegration as “the only right solution”). Respondents that clearly advocate a future for the NGCA outside of Ukraine are in a minority.

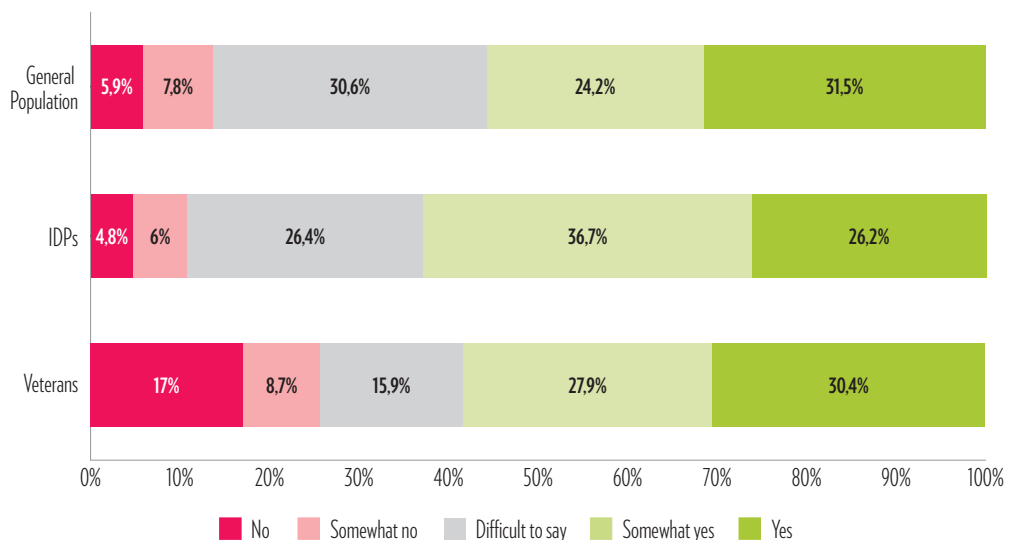
<sup>88</sup> International Crisis Group, “Nobody Wants Us.”

**Figure 9: To reach peace, people who live in the NGCA who fought for the separatists should receive amnesty.**



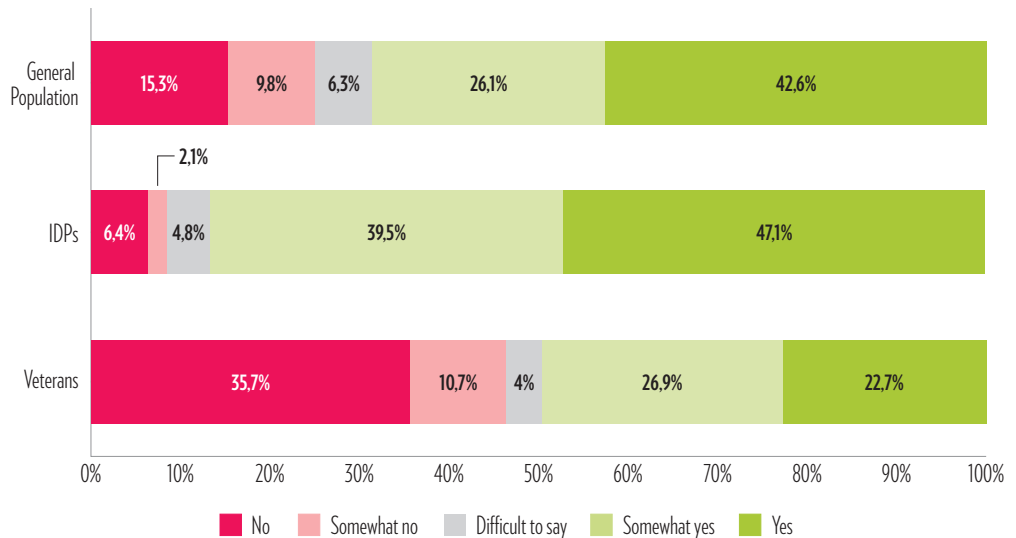
The hesitancy of one-third of respondents can be explained in part by the uncertainty of our interviewees: they were simply unsure how such a reintegration could occur. Interviewees were therefore almost unanimous in saying that the government should focus on winning hearts and minds in the government-controlled parts of Donbas and on developing Ukraine economically and politically for as long as access to the non-government-controlled areas of Donbas remains difficult and their reintegration unlikely. Some interviewees suggested building a wall that would protect Ukraine from military aggression and keep pro-Russian influences out for this purpose. The survey shows that this is not a majority opinion.

**Figure 10: The only correct solution to the conflict is the full reintegration of the NGCA.**



The sense of pragmatism prevalent in eastern Ukraine is displayed by a rather dispassionate relationship to the Russian language. The overwhelming majority of people that we spoke to (usually in Russian) liked that the government increasingly promoted the Ukrainian language, but had no further feelings about speaking Russian in their daily lives. They were rather a little offended by us bringing up the topic, saying that any controversy around language was mere Russian propaganda.

**Figure 11: To reach peace, the NGCA should be allowed to have Russian as a second official language.**



When it came to making Russian a second official language, some were visibly hesitant. Usually, this resulted out of the fear that this could form another pretext for Russia to further destabilize or intervene in Ukraine, since the “protection of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine” was the pretext Russia used to justify the annexation of Crimea.<sup>89</sup> The survey reveals that IDPs and the general population have clear preferences to make Russian a second official language as a compromise to settle the conflict, and, while divided, veterans are leaning toward this trade-off as well.

## 2 IDPs Are Tired of the Conflict and Worried for Their Families

There are over 1 million IDPs registered in the five eastern Ukrainian regions we analyze in this study – the largest proportion (72 percent) of the almost 1.5 million registered IDPs overall. Of all IDPs, 54 percent – or just under 800,000 people – are located in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> International Alert, “Russophone Identity in Ukraine,” March 2017, accessed on January 5, 2022, <https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Ukraine-Russophone-Identity-EN-2017.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> “Registration of Internal Placement,” UNHCR, November, 2021, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/resources/idp-dashboard>.

We should interpret these numbers with caution for numerous reasons. First, they include residents in the NGCA who are registered as IDPs in order to collect their pensions, which means the number of IDPs actually residing in the GCA is much lower.<sup>91</sup> Second, not all IDPs are registered as such (22.1 percent of our IDP survey sample, for instance, were not registered as IDPs). Third, the Ukrainian government registers children born to IDPs as internally displaced as well: this means the number of IDPs continues to rise even though internal migration from the NGCA to government-controlled Ukraine has more or less stopped.<sup>92</sup>

Organizations working with IDPs emphasized that people in this group had very diverse and individual reasons to flee from the NGCA<sup>93</sup> and identified their main concerns today as housing<sup>94</sup> and access to education, among others.<sup>95</sup> IDP organizing around these issues, according to the international actors working with them, is not sufficiently funded.<sup>96</sup> One IDP interviewee also emphasized the lack of institutional channels to get their messages heard within the Ukrainian government.<sup>97</sup> Ukrainian government actors, on their hand, consider IDPs to be one of the remaining communication channels to the NGCA, and thus an important actor in a possible reintegration.<sup>98</sup>

Political participation has been a long-term concern for IDPs, as their voting rights in local elections were only established in 2020.<sup>99</sup> While their formal rights have improved, interviews with IDPs showed that the sense that their concerns are neither expressed nor heard in political Kyiv remains. The MinReTOT is making an effort to learn from the Georgian experience, where government policy lacked answers to IDPs' everyday problems because, for over a decade, the return of IDPs to Abkhazia and South Ossetia was seen as the only acceptable solution. An international actor working with the ministry noted that they were making progress to avoid similar pitfalls, but stressed that channels of cooperation and support to IDPs were not sufficiently institutionalized.<sup>100</sup>

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91 For more information on pensioners and IDP registration, see United Nations Ukraine, "Pensions for IDPs and persons living in the areas not controlled by the Government in the east of Ukraine," UNHCR, January 2020, accessed February 1, 2022, [https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/03/Briefing-Note-on-Pensions\\_2020.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/03/Briefing-Note-on-Pensions_2020.pdf).

92 Interview with an international organization representative, Sloviansk, September 2021.

93 Interview with a civil society representative and IDP, Kharkiv, August 2021.

94 The question of housing is very complicated: many IDPs had private property in the NGCA, often inherited. It is currently very difficult and illegal to sell your house in the NGCA, not to mention that the property value has fallen significantly. This makes it difficult for IDPs to buy new property in government-controlled Ukraine, and the question of restitution will be very complicated to resolve in the event of a reintegration. For more on housing, see UNHCR, "IDPs' Housing Needs, Intentions and Opportunities: Dnipropetrovska, Zaporizka and Kharkivska Oblasts," April 1, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/r2p\\_idp\\_housing\\_mapping\\_report\\_eng.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/r2p_idp_housing_mapping_report_eng.pdf).

95 Interview with a civil society representative, Sievierodonetsk; Interview with a civil society representative, Kramatorsk, both August 2021.

96 Interview with an international organization, Kyiv, October 2021.

97 Interview with an IDP, Kharkiv, August 2021.

98 Interview with Ukrainian government officials, October 2021.

99 UNHCR, "New resolution on voting rights in Ukraine a key step towards guaranteeing the rights of displaced persons," June 16, 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/23099-new-resolution-on-voting-rights-in-ukraine-a-key-step-towards-guaranteeing-the-rights-of-displaced-persons.html>.

100 Interview with an international organization, Kyiv, October 2021.

IDP attitudes and perspectives are unexpectedly homogeneous, with a very large majority holding compromise-leaning opinions. Having family in the NGCA, the degree of conflict-affectedness and gender are important factors that correlate with this tendency.

## The Political Agenda of IDPs Is Misunderstood

The contrast between interviews with those working with IDPs and survey results among IDPs is particularly stark. While interviewees described IDPs as a very heterogeneous group, survey results show a remarkably strong homogeneity in their opinions – much more so than among veterans. This is surprising given that most of our interviewees, even those who work closely with IDPs, had not attributed any particular (political) opinion to this group.

While the practical needs of IDPs are a very real area of concern, it is misleading to conclude from this that IDPs do not also have a political agenda. They do, and this agenda is to achieve peace: “We think that peace is better than a good war,”<sup>101</sup> one IDP told us. Survey results show a very clear and consistent preference for compromise among IDPs, at times with very large majorities in favor or against a proposition. At least 60 percent are in favor of granting amnesty to those that worked in the NGCA administrations, allowing those from the NGCA to keep their Russian passports in the event of reintegration, and granting special status to the NGCA.

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**“We think that peace is better than a good war.”**

– IDP, Sloviansk

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We did not ask for respondent’s general political attitudes or party preference in our survey. Many of the positions expressed in the IDP survey reveal what our interviewees called “pro-Russian attitudes.” Some of the activists we interviewed were afraid that IDPs who were still in touch with friends or family in the NGCA would be less loyal to Ukraine and more susceptible to Russian propaganda. Based on both our survey results and interviews with IDPs, it is safe to conclude that their strong preference for compromises in order to achieve peace is not necessarily – or not only – a reflection of a particular ideological stance. While inevitably based on a conviction that peace with Russia is possible,<sup>102</sup> interviews suggest that this position is rather an expression of their desire for hostilities to end and for the safety of their relatives and close friends. This results in a willingness to strike whatever compromise is necessary to stop the fighting. A military solution or a freezing of the conflict are therefore non-starters for IDPs.

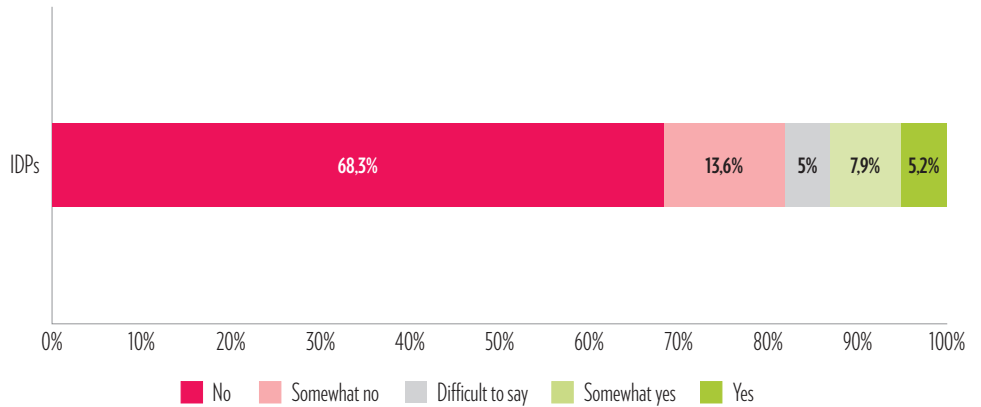
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101 Interview with an IDP, Sloviansk, August 2021.

102 Sixty-seven percent of IDPs surveyed were “somewhat” or fully “in agreement” with the statement that “negotiations with Russia can lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.”

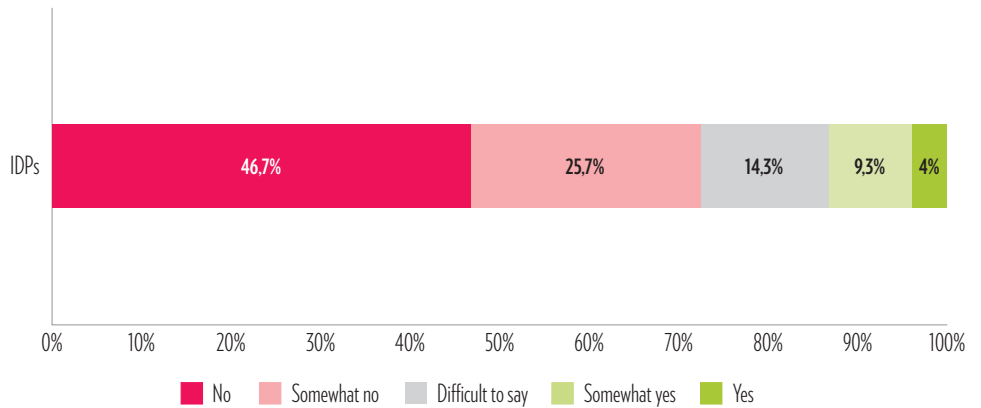


Figure 12: The Ukrainian Government should use military force to reintegrate the NGCA of Donbas.



One IDP we interviewed, whose views closely aligned with those expressed by a majority in the survey, called themselves a “radical pacifist:” they just wanted the fighting to stop and were afraid for their mother, who still lives in the NGCA. They wanted to know that their mother would be alright and to be able to see her without having to cross the contact line. Presumably, it is for similar reasons that a “frozen” conflict scenario, which would mean a preliminary end to hostilities but no normalization, is almost as unpopular among IDPs as a military solution.

Figure 13: Instead of negotiations or warfare, Ukraine should freeze the conflict indefinitely, as is the case in Transdnistria.



For the aforementioned reasons, it is inaccurate to reduce IDPs positions to being a byproduct of Russian propaganda, as done by some of our interviewees. However, it is also true that the “radical pacifist” position is not always an informed one. Some of its proponents were unaware or did not discuss ongoing political repression in the NGCA, even if their families lived there. Conversely, IDP interviewees who were acutely aware of the realities in the NGCA were less open to compromise. Many interviewees said that in their remaining contact across the line, people tried not to focus too much on political topics.

## Concern for Families in the NGCA Is a Strong Factor in Accepting Trade-Offs for Peace

For IDPs, conflict resolution is often a question of family reunification. Many still have relatives, often elderly parents, in the NGCA, and some IDPs stayed in the GCA rather than moving to other parts of Ukraine to be close to loved ones on the other side of the contact line. Some cross the line regularly to visit – and did so more regularly before COVID-19. Previous surveys have tried to measure the percentage of IDPs willing to return to the NGCA in the event of a reintegration, but found mixed results.<sup>103</sup> According to our interviewees, those willing to return constitute a minority, and one IDP stressed that those who could not establish themselves in government-controlled Ukraine – often because they no longer had the financial means – had already returned to the NGCA by now.<sup>104</sup>

**Figure 14: To reach peace, it is necessary to grant the NGCA more autonomy than other regions of Ukraine.**



Having family in the NGCA with whom one remains in contact increases the preference for compromise. It seems that for many IDPs, it is important to know that their families in the NGCA are safe and that they can be reunited with them eventually, even if the IDPs in question do not plan on, or are uncertain about, going back to the NGCA in the

103 International Organization for Migration, “National Monitoring System Report. On the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons,” June 2020, accessed January 4, 2022, [https://iom.org.ua/sites/default/files/nms\\_round\\_17\\_eng\\_web.pdf](https://iom.org.ua/sites/default/files/nms_round_17_eng_web.pdf).

104 Interview with an IDP, Kharkiv, August 2021.

event of a reintegration.<sup>105</sup> This ambiguity about an eventual return to their hometowns in the NGCA does not mean that conflict resolution is no longer a strong priority for IDPs.<sup>106</sup>

IDPs with families in the NGCA would have very high immediate gains from an end to hostilities and a reintegration. In the general population survey, being in touch with family and friends in the NGCA is a consistent (although small) factor in leaning toward some of the compromises needed for an implementation of the Minsk agreements. Conversely, IDPs without relatives or close friends in the NGCA, as well as those who are rarely or never in touch with people there, lean less toward compromise in the IDP survey.

Across groups in our survey, gender is the most consistent factor in taking a more compromising position: women lean more toward making concessions. IDPs are disproportionately female, as is our IDP sample, so this might also factor into IDPs' positions. There is also a tendency, albeit an incoherent one, that IDPs more often choose soft answers ("rather yes", "rather no") than strong answers, which is also a female pattern in our survey.

## The Potentially Traumatic Effects of Displacement Are Underestimated

Although the IDP sample indicates a large majority for many questions, it is clear that not all IDPs are alike: we also encountered some who had cut all ties and no longer wished to speak to their relatives and former friends in the NGCA, and considered them brainwashed and lost.<sup>107</sup> An IDP with family residing in the NGCA explained that a wall between the GCA and NGCA was their preferred solution because they were considered an enemy in the NGCA and an actual border regime would keep them safe. This is a minority opinion among IDPs in eastern Ukraine, but it shows that members of this group draw different conclusions from their personal experiences of the conflict.

Fear should not be underestimated as a factor when discussing IDPs' survey and interview results. Several interviewees working with them explained that, particularly among those IDPs residing in the GCA, anxiety was widespread – they feared that they would either endanger their family in the NGCA or themselves in the case of a separatist takeover. Our interviewees presumed that this negatively affected IDPs' wish to speak up and get involved in civic and political organizing.<sup>108</sup> It is therefore likely that IDPs are hesitant to discuss certain issues out of fear – both within families and with foreign researchers like us. Still, a lower proportion of "difficult to say" responses among IDPs than among the general population suggests that a majority of IDPs sampled had preferences and stated them.

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105 Interview with an IDP, Sloviansk, August 2021.

106 When asked to choose from a list "which of the following problems do you consider most important to you?," a relative majority of 35 percent of IDPs answered "housing" with "the war in Donbas" in second place (27.4 percent). When asked which of the problems was second most important to them, a relative majority of 33.3 percent chose the conflict.

107 Interview with an IDP, Kramatorsk, August 2021.

108 Interview with a civil society representative working with IDPs, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

The fact that approximately 75 percent of IDPs consider themselves strongly or very strongly affected by the conflict reveals the lasting impact of the displacement experience. Locals do not always seem to realize this, as many considered IDPs to be practically locals by now, focused on their “host” communities. This is an encouraging sign of integration, but it also shows that the potentially traumatic displacement experience is misunderstood and underestimated. While IDPs generally feel less discriminated against today than they did in the first years after displacement,<sup>109</sup> our interviewees were clear that “the IDP status brings more minuses than pluses.”<sup>110</sup>

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**“The IDP status brings more minuses than pluses.”**

– IDP, Sloviansk

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### **3 Veterans Reject Minsk-Style Compromises, but Present a Differentiated and Divided Picture**

There are over 400,000 veterans of the Donbas conflict registered in Ukraine, but this total does not represent the real number of veterans, as not all Ukrainian veterans are registered as such. Despite significant improvements made in capturing data on veterans, their regional distribution is still not publicly known. Ukrainian veterans are a heterogeneous group: many of them were civilians before the conflict, while others were trained military professionals. They came from an array of socio-economic backgrounds and had a variety of motivations for joining the fight in Donbas.<sup>111</sup>

A recently published study on the image of veterans in Ukrainian society reveals deep respect for their service and an overall positive image. However, it also indicates that most veterans feel that only a minority of civilians understand the challenges they face in reintegrating after their combat experience.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, there are increasing stereotypes against veterans, such as the image of unstable individuals who may be prone to aggression.<sup>113</sup> Given veterans’ role in the “anti-capitulation” movement, the majority of the interviewees and international actors we consulted expected veterans to be opposed to and potential spoilers of any peace effort. They also expected veterans to be unanimously in favor of a military solution to the conflict. One interviewee who

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109 Danish Refugee Council, “IDPs Integration,” 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, [https://drc.ngo/media/irvjfeo3/drc\\_report\\_meeting\\_2021.pdf](https://drc.ngo/media/irvjfeo3/drc_report_meeting_2021.pdf).

110 Interview with an IDP, Sloviansk, August 2021.

111 Friedrich and Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas.”

112 IREX, “Veteran Reintegration Program,” July 14, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/7%20Veteran%20Reintegration%20Experiences%2C%20Social%20Stigma%2C%20and%20Support%20Networks.pdf>.

113 Friedrich and Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas.”

worked with active-duty soldiers warned that veterans could take up arms against the government if the peace process were not to proceed as they desired.<sup>114</sup>

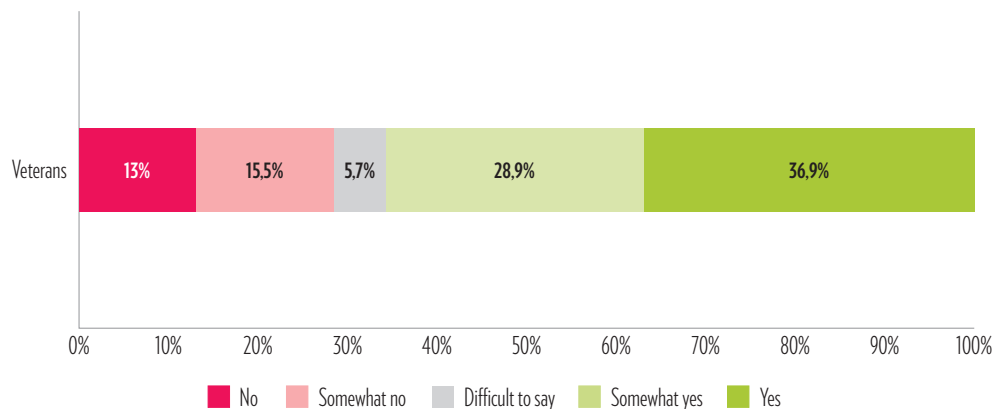
The perception that veterans categorically oppose all compromises fails to recognize a more complex reality. While a majority rejects Minsk-style compromises, the attitudes displayed by a majority of veterans do not correspond to those proclaimed by the “No to Capitulation” movement, and veteran attitudes differ more substantially than those of IDPs. Personal experiences of conflict shape veterans’ preferences, and not all of them have the capacity to get involved in shaping the conflict resolution process.

## Veterans Are Ambiguous About Political Participation

Given how vocal certain parts of the veteran community have been in proclaiming the red lines outlined in Section Two, and considering that the conflict is a clear priority for veterans,<sup>115</sup> it is surprising that the veterans in our survey responded more strongly against increasing their own influence in conflict resolution than IDPs did.

Veterans usually have closely-knit networks and more institutionalized channels to influence policy than, for instance, IDPs. Indeed, since 2014, many veterans have taken on influential positions, and political parties are interested in receiving veteran support to enhance their patriotic image.<sup>116</sup> “Their societal status has risen,” as one interviewee put it.<sup>117</sup>

**Figure 15: Those who have fought in the armed forces/volunteer battalions should have more say in resolving the conflict.**



114 Interview with a civil society representative, Kharkiv, August 2021.

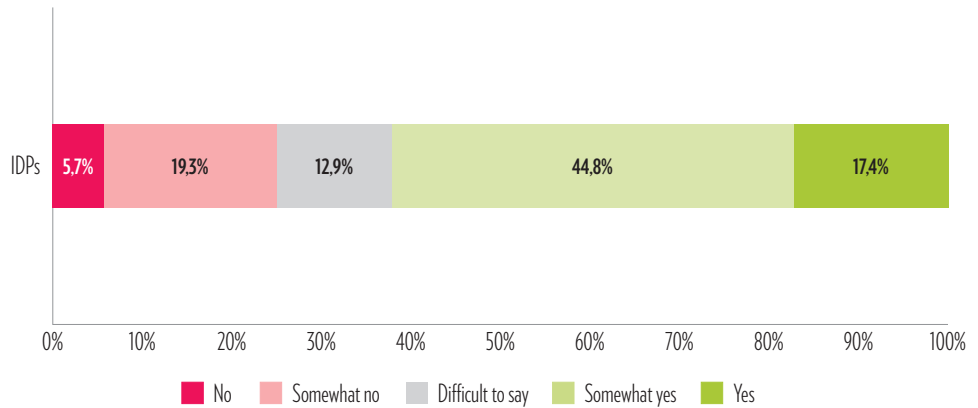
115 When asked to choose from a list “which of the following problems do you consider most important to you?,” a relative majority of 30.2 percent of veterans answered “the war in Donbas.”

116 Julia Friedrich, “Der lange Schatten des Donbas: Veteran:innen reintegrieren und sozialen Frieden fördern” (The Long Shadow of Donbas: Reintegrating Veterans and Fostering Social Cohesion), *Ukraine-Analysen*, N°257 (November 2021): pp.10–15, <https://www.laender-analysen.de/ukraine-analysen/257/der-lange-schatten-des-donbas>.

117 Interview with a civil society representative, Kharkiv, August 2021.

Against this backdrop, it is striking that survey results show almost no difference between veterans and other groups with respect to political involvement: veterans also feel that it is not possible to get involved in politics. Thus, even though veterans are perceived by national and international stakeholders as “veto players” who will vote against any compromise, and at least in theory have more possibility to act this way than others, not all veterans insist on this veto or feel empowered to influence the government’s policies toward the NGCA and conflict resolution.

**Figure 16: Those who were displaced because of the conflict should have more say in resolving the conflict.**



One reason for this is that ties in the veteran community appear weaker in eastern Ukraine than in other parts of the country. Multiple officials from the Ministry of Veteran Affairs (MoVA) underlined that veterans’ involvement in local politics could be stronger and that there was no coherent veteran movement in the east. They observed some divisions in the veteran community due to self-interested leaders, while the majority of veterans are still struggling to receive the government support they needed.<sup>118</sup>

**“Veterans’ societal status has risen.”**

– Civil Society Representative, Kharkiv

Interviews with veterans confirmed this ambiguity about their participation in the peace process. For instance, one veteran pointed out that if veterans were to be consulted in the peace process, they should do so as elected officials like everyone else.<sup>119</sup>

118 Interview with a government official, August 2021.

119 Interview with a veteran, Donetsk region, August 2021.

This could be related to the fact that not all veteran communities act in veterans' best interests – or that the same rules should apply to everyone. It might also indicate that not all veterans want to be reduced to this part of their identity.<sup>120</sup>

One veteran we interviewed was uncertain about whether it was even possible to get involved: “conflict resolution is world politics, what should one region have to say about it?”<sup>121</sup> The sense of powerlessness reflected in this statement goes to show that not all veterans are in a situation – physically or mentally – where they can or want to get involved. A MoVA official stated that some, but not all, veterans would want to take part in conflict resolution, and emphasized that they might be more preoccupied with finding a job, accessing social benefits and obtaining physical and mental support, among other priorities.<sup>122</sup>

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**“Conflict resolution is world politics, what should one region have to say about it?”**

– Veteran, Sievierodonetsk

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Our survey results only partly reflect this, as we find that veterans tend to have the strongest opinions (“definitely yes”, “definitely no”) overall and consistently held the lowest “difficult to say” response rates as compared to the two other groups. This mirrors gender trends, as men consistently vote with stronger opinions and are less in favor of compromise – and men make up over 90 percent of the veteran sample.<sup>123</sup>

## There Is No Singular Veteran Opinion on Military Action and the Reintegration of Donbas

The perception that veterans categorically reject compromise does not do justice to the complexity of veterans' opinions and experiences. Our interview partners, particularly those working in a military environment with active-duty soldiers in Donbas, expected veterans to see no viable options for compromise – resulting from the justification that “otherwise, what have we fought for?” – and no other solution to the conflict than to win back the NGCA militarily.<sup>124</sup> One interviewee working with active-duty soldiers said that military means were the only means veterans had at their disposal.

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120 Interview with a veteran, Berlin/Kyiv, August 2020.

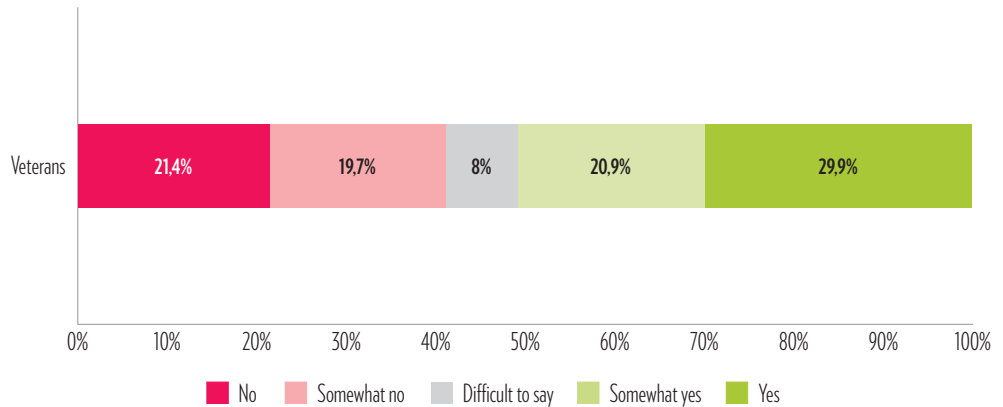
121 Interview with a veteran, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

122 Interview with a government official, August 2021.

123 The female veteran sample is too small to be representative and to verify this assumption.

124 Interview with a civil society representative, Kharkiv, August 2021; Interview with a civil society representative, Kramatorsk, August 2021.

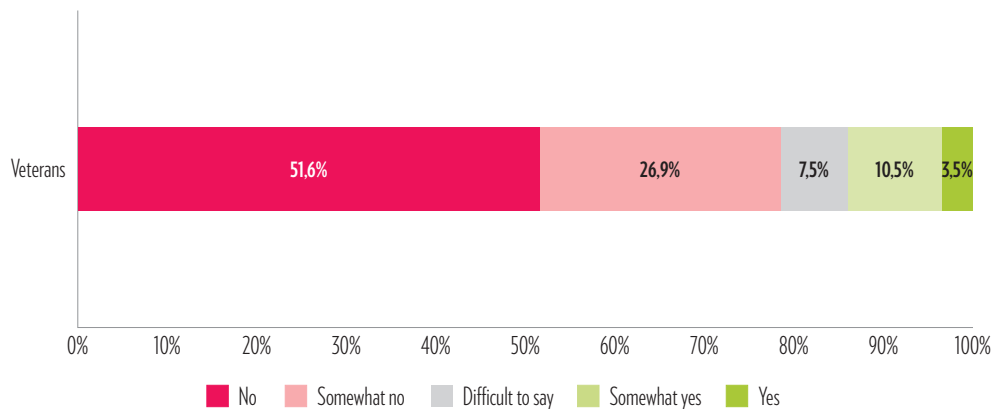
**Figure 17: The Ukrainian Government should use military force to reintegrate the NGCA of Donbas.**



The survey results show that these assumptions are over-simplifications: there is no unanimous support for a military solution. On the contrary, veterans are almost equally split in half on this question.

The stipulations made in the Minsk agreements, controversial for all the aforementioned reasons, are clearly not the trade-offs they are willing to make, for instance regarding a special status for the NGCA.

**Figure 18: To reach peace, the NGCA should have greater autonomy than other Ukrainian regions.**



However, this does not necessarily mean that there are no trade-offs veterans are willing to consider. For instance, when asked whether they agreed that a special status during a transition period was a necessary trade-off for peace, almost one-third of veterans were “somewhat” or fully “in agreement”.<sup>125</sup> Some of our conversations with veterans

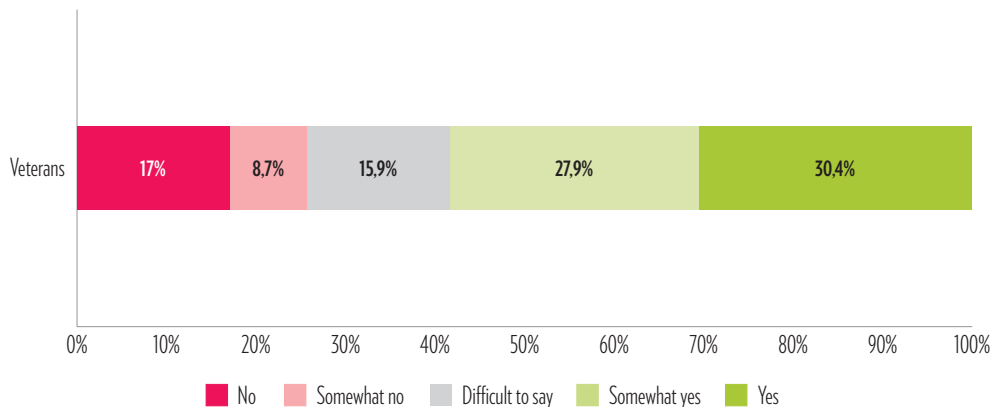
<sup>125</sup> The question read, “To get peace, it is necessary to grant NGCA more autonomy than other regions of Ukraine during a transition period, but afterwards they shouldn’t be different from other Ukrainian regions.” 62.1 percent of veterans “somewhat” or fully “disagreed”; 27.1 percent “somewhat” or fully “agreed.”



also reflected differentiated opinions. One veteran, for example, was indeed in favor of a military operation, but had no objection to a special status or amnesty for those in the separatist “armed formations” in lower-ranking positions.<sup>126</sup>

Importantly, in our survey, veterans are clearly in favor of the reintegration of the NGCA into Ukraine. This may be rooted in different rationales: for some veterans, this is a question of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and a point of principle. Others seemed to care more about the people than the territories: particularly veterans who were from the NGCA, or still have family there, had a rather pragmatic attitude and were understanding of some of the constraints that the other side is facing.

**Figure 19: The only correct solution to the conflict is the full reintegration of the NGCA.**



Our results show that government stakeholders should not take those proclaiming the most hardline stance as representative of a “singular” veteran perspective. Veterans do not have to be the principal peacebuilders, but not all of them will be potential spoilers of any peace effort.

## Personal Experiences Shape Veterans’ Stances Toward the Conflict

The surprising amount of variance among veterans is presumably rooted in personal experiences and conflict-affectedness. Personal experiences of the conflict play a decisive role in the attitudes of all groups, and this is true for veterans as well. One veteran we interviewed pointed out that the Russian-backed separatists often did not respect even the agreed-upon localized, temporary ceasefires for tasks like technical repairs, which led them to the conclusion that Russia was not to be trusted.<sup>127</sup>

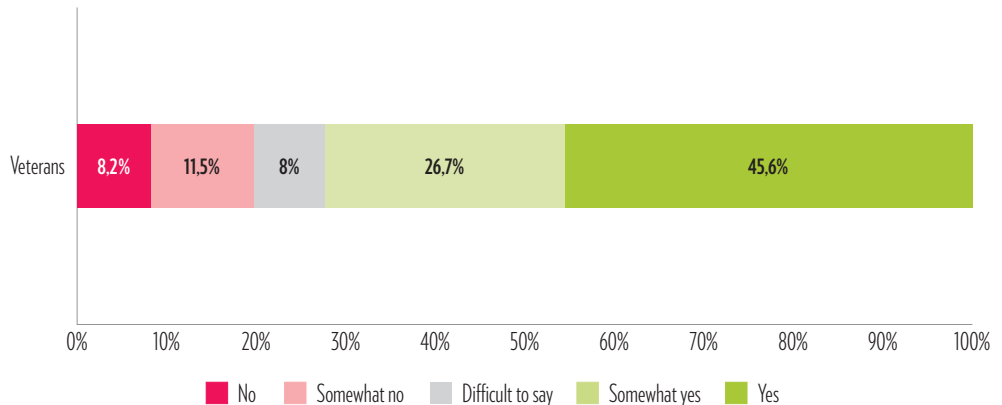
That same interviewee conveyed that the conflict had destroyed their life goals and plans for the future. This was not unlike the story of the “radical pacifist” IDP we interviewed. In contrast, however, this interviewee translated their sense of injustice

<sup>126</sup> Interview with a veteran, Kharkiv, August 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with a veteran, Donetsk region, September 2021.

into a desire for vengeance, which eventually became clear in the interview: “Honestly, I would raze the territories to the ground if I could.”<sup>128</sup> The 19.7 percent of veterans that disagreed with granting amnesty to the general public in the NGCA that did not work for the NGCA administrations or fight alongside the separatists may well think in a similar way.

**Figure 20: Those who did not fight against Ukraine or work in the NGCA’s administrations should not be punished.**



On a related note, we interviewed one civil society activist working with the Ukrainian military who was visibly enraged when we suggested that there had been a ceasefire in place between July 2020 and the beginning of 2021.<sup>129</sup> They later revealed that their son was currently on military duty at the contact line.

Survey trends mirror the fact that personal experiences deeply influence veterans’ attitudes: there is a slightly inconsistent tendency for veterans who say the conflict had no, little or moderate impact on them to be more open to concessions. In contrast to IDPs, being in touch with people in the NGCA only translates into a slight preference toward more compromise.

**“Honestly, I would raze the territories to the ground if I could.”**

– Veteran, Donetsk region

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia Escalates Its Proxy War in Eastern Ukraine,” The Jamestown Foundation, March 11, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-escalates-its-proxy-war-in-eastern-ukraine>.

Unlike IDPs, veterans do not necessarily stand to gain from reintegration, but could rather lose. Among other things, they may lose a sense of personal safety. Fear of retaliation by those residing in the NGCA plays a role here as well, which, for instance, makes it impossible for veterans who have relatives in the NGCA to visit them. This way, displacement and combat can be mutually reinforcing and potentially traumatizing experiences.

## 4 **Dividing Lines: Mistrust and Overlapping-but-Distinct Conflict Experiences**

The societal fault lines this research uncovers reflect the political divisions which have led to the current stalemate in negotiations.<sup>130</sup> On the one hand, the vast majority of IDPs, and a portion of the general population, are willing to agree to a variety of trade-offs – some of them as outlined by the Minsk agreements – to achieve peace. However, for most veterans and another portion of the general population, such trade-offs are out of the question.

Indeed, one of our most striking findings is that conflict-affectedness does not translate into one particular political opinion. Rather, those most affected by the conflict adopt stronger, more pronounced positions: either a radical desire for immediate peace or a decisive refusal of compromise.

The groups display diametrically opposing views of how to resolve the conflict. Underneath these attitudes lie social ties damaged by the conflict, with different groups eyeing each other with mistrust. Much of this is rooted in the political economy of the conflict and different conflict experiences, notably among veterans and IDPs.

### Diametrically Opposing Views on Conflict Resolution

The dividing lines we see between IDPs and veterans translate into at times opposing preferences. Two of the longest-standing points of contention regarding the peace process – i.e., whether there should be direct negotiations with separatist representatives, and whether a special status should be granted to the NGCA – reveal this dichotomy. The general population sits somewhere in between IDPs and veterans for both questions.

There is also a fundamental disagreement over whether negotiations with Russia can lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict: 67 percent of IDPs and 53.2 percent of the general public say they “somewhat” or fully “agree” with this idea, while 67.3 percent of veterans say they “somewhat” or fully “disagree.”

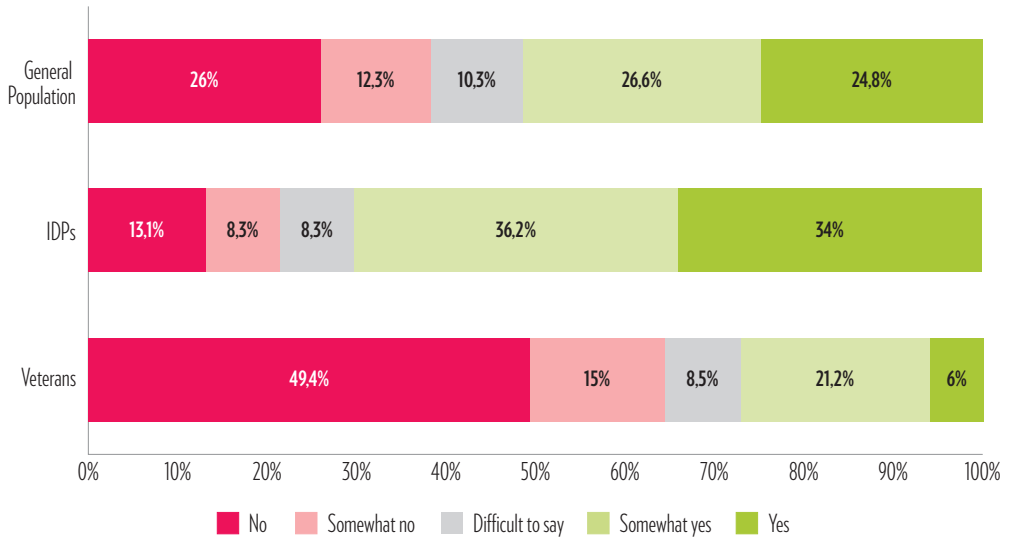
Our research shows that multilayered factors influence people’s preferences. Personal experience, gender, conflict-affectedness, and contact with people in the NGCA, as well as trust and attitudes toward Russia, play a decisive role in shaping opinions on conflict resolution. Ukraine faces very tough political choices, and there are no straightforward answers that can easily be categorized as “pro-Russian” or

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130 Druey, Hess, Kaplan, and Cherevatenko, “The Minsk Process: Societal Perceptions and Narratives.”

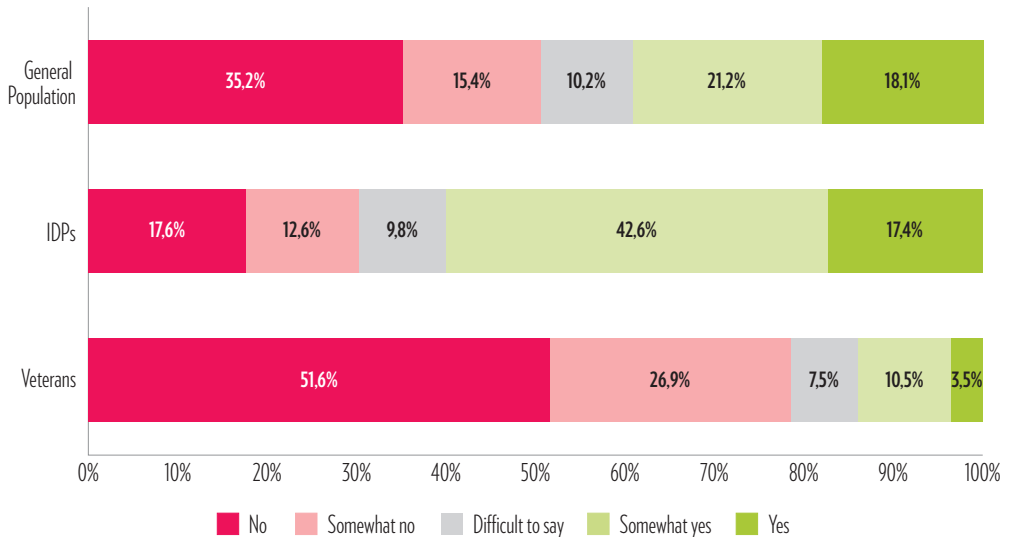
“pro-Ukrainian.” Drastic preferences in either direction certainly have ideological components, but they are the sum of these factors, not simply a product of Russian disinformation or radicalization.

Figure 21: Representatives of the NGCA should take part in the negotiations over Donbas.



Interview and survey results reveal a deeply disillusioned population that views each other with mistrust. Underneath an uneasy peace between these groups lies a social fabric that is deeply affected and divided by the ongoing conflict.

Figure 22: To reach peace, the NGCA should have greater autonomy than other Ukrainian regions.

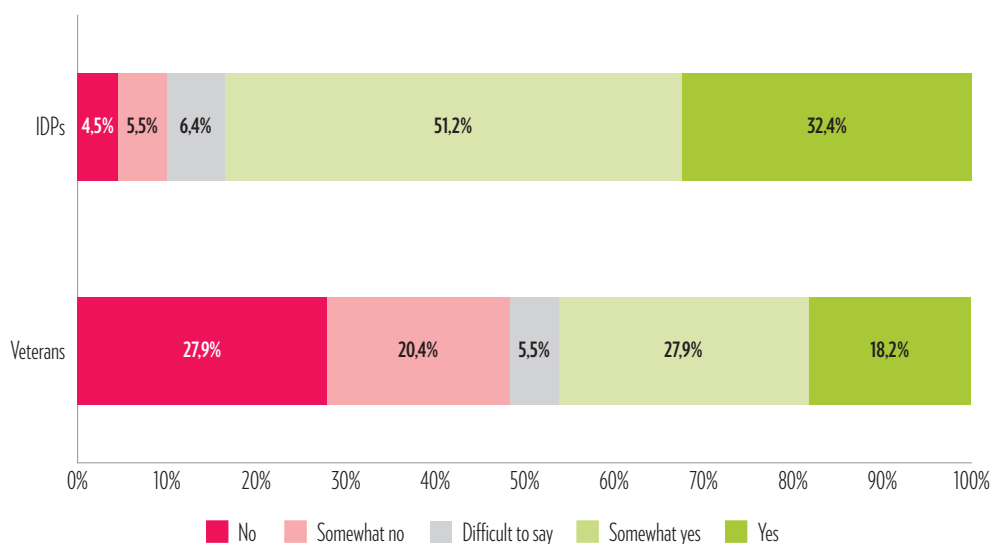


## Diverging Conflict Attitudes Show Mutual Mistrust

Ukrainians have learned to live with the conflict, but the physical and emotional wounds it has caused continue to affect many people and shape their outlook on any proposition for peace. We find a significant level of mutual mistrust between groups, rooted in the impression that the “other group” has not drawn the right lessons from the conflict. This is displayed by the views of IDPs, veterans and the general population on whether people from the other groups should have more influence in conflict resolution.

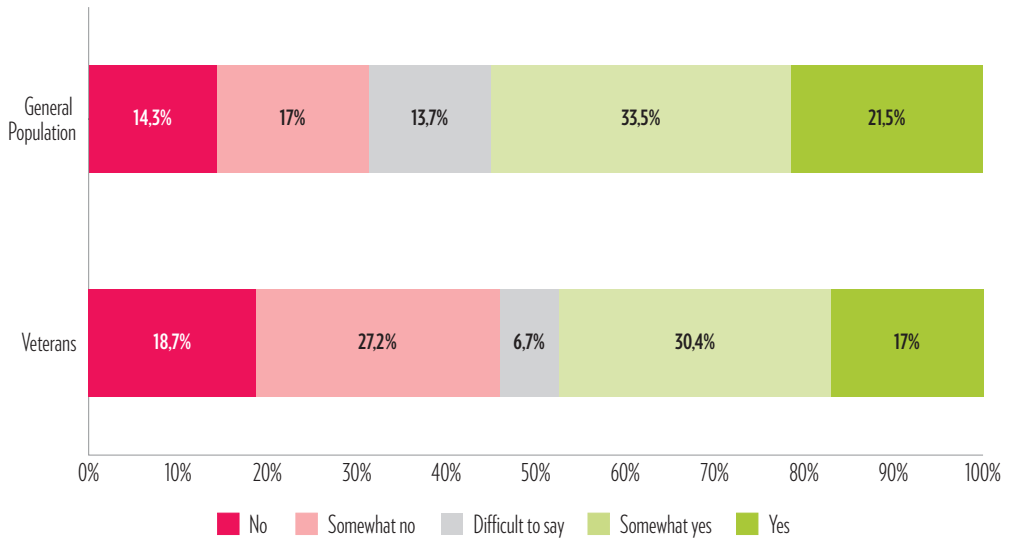
Coupled with our interviews, this reveals that many still consider the local population in eastern Ukraine – notably those in the GCA – to be potentially dangerous. Many are wary that people in eastern Ukraine do not sufficiently support the country’s pro-Western course and consider “regular” people a potential danger to the country’s pro-European future. When prompted, several civil society activists said that the people in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions should not have more influence in conflict resolution because of the dominating pro-Russian sentiment.

**Figure 23: Those who live in Donbas should have more say in resolving the conflict.**

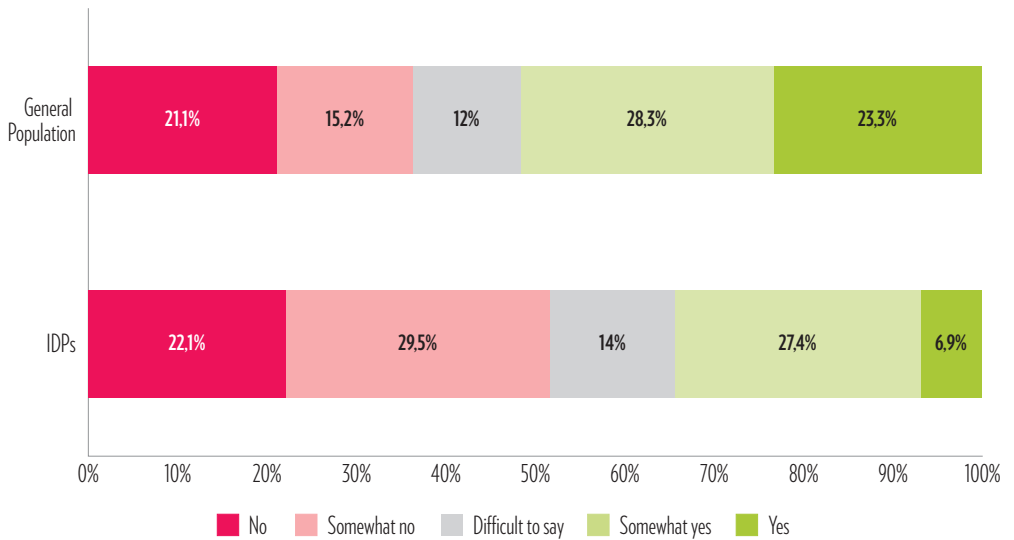


Those who are in touch with relatives in the NGCA face similar stereotypes. Some civil society activists we interviewed were worried that those with family in the NGCA would be indoctrinated by their relatives with propaganda spread in the NGCA. Others were more hopeful and suggested that by way of personal contact, particularly IDPs could convey real information about life in Ukraine to the NGCA. Being in touch with family in the NGCA is part of daily life for many in eastern Ukraine, but it is not normalized everywhere.

**Figure 24: Those who were displaced because of the conflict should have more say in resolving the conflict.**



**Figure 25: Those who have fought in the armed forces/volunteer battalions should have more say in resolving the conflict.**



## The Political Economy of Conflict Increases Envy of IDPs and Residents of the NGCA

The strong international presence and assistance, particularly aimed at humanitarian relief in areas close to the contact line, can contribute to alienation and resentment

within the population. Some international actors see the Ukrainian government's registration of newborn children of IDPs as internally displaced as an attempt to ensure the conflict remains on the international agenda and support is maintained.<sup>131</sup> One interviewee in the Kharkiv region considered young people from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as “spoiled” and ungrateful because they were used to taking part in international programs and receiving a certain standard of accommodation.<sup>132</sup>

People directed similar sentiments at the population in the NGCA. For instance, several interviewees stressed that a program for young people in the NGCA to study in government-controlled Ukraine was a good sign of engagement with those residing there, but some also resented that these young people would be prioritized over those from government-controlled Ukraine. Attitudes toward those living in the NGCA but registered as IDPs in the GCA are less than friendly – one interviewee called them “tourists”<sup>133</sup> – because, among other reasons, they still collect social services from the Ukrainian government even though they live in the NGCA.<sup>134</sup> This begs the question of how Ukrainians will feel about the billions that will have to be spent on rebuilding Donbas in the event of a reintegration.<sup>135</sup>

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**“I have not lost what IDPs have lost, but I have also had to live through many things.”**

– Local, Sievierodonetsk

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This dynamic is also present between the general population and IDPs. A local in the Luhansk region involved in youth organizing was convinced that some IDPs were “parasites” since they “did not make an effort themselves” and allegedly refused aid that they considered not up to standard. “I have not lost what they have lost, but I have also had to live through many things,”<sup>136</sup> as the local put it, upset at the many grant opportunities specifically for IDPs. A representative of another organization working with IDPs emphasized that some displaced people were very passive and lethargic, or lazy, expecting this organization to provide services for them.<sup>137</sup> One IDP made an unprompted effort in our conversation to refute these accusations by emphasizing how well they had integrated and noted that they were not dependent on government aid.<sup>138</sup>

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131 Interview with an international organization, Sloviansk, August 2021.

132 Interview with a local activist, Kharkiv, August 2021.

133 Interview with civil society representatives, Kramatorsk, August 2021.

134 Interview with a veteran, Donetsk region, September 2021.

135 As one civil society representative put it: “Reintegration will be very difficult if people from the NGCA receive privileges.” Interview with a civil society representative, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

136 Interview with a local, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

137 Interview with civil society representatives, Kramatorsk, August 2021.

138 Interview with an IDP, Sievierodonetsk, August 2021.

## Relations Between Veterans and the General Population Are Strained but Improving

The relationship between veterans and the general population is not straightforward. In eastern Ukraine, particularly in areas close to the contact line, massive Russian disinformation campaigns against the Ukrainian military – portraying them as fascists who cannot be trusted – have undermined trust in the armed forces and, by extension, veterans.<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, we find higher levels of opposition to veterans’ increased influence in conflict resolution among those in the general population sample who either feel strongly affected by the conflict or have family in the NGCA.

For their part, veterans feel more alienated in eastern Ukraine than in other parts of the country,<sup>140</sup> and some in the east consider themselves to be surrounded by people with a “pro-Russian” attitude.<sup>141</sup> The fact that a majority of veterans do not want the Donbas population to have a larger say in conflict resolution reflects this perception.

However, relations might be improving: one interviewee emphasized that the strong mutual hostilities between civilians and veterans in the early years of the conflict seem to have ceased, or at least have been neutralized by now.<sup>142</sup> Also, the fact that a majority of the general population in eastern Ukraine want veterans to have more of a voice in conflict resolution speaks for a heightened level of trust.

## Overlapping-but-Distinct Experiences in Conflict Divide IDPs and Veterans

The outlook for relations between IDPs and veterans is bleaker. “There is a lot of hurt between these two groups [IDPs and veterans],”<sup>143</sup> one interviewee told us. As mentioned above, their views on conflict resolution and the trade-offs they are open to strongly diverge. One factor that complicates their relationship is their experience in the conflict. Not all IDPs had positive experiences of the Ukrainian armed forces during the war, and one IDP we interviewed resented veterans for “getting paid for waging war.”<sup>144</sup> IDPs are often envious that veterans have a stronger lobby and more direct influence on policies that concern them.<sup>145</sup> Veterans, on the other hand, emphasize the uniqueness of their experience in the conflict.<sup>146</sup>

One contributing factor to their tense relationship is the aforementioned underestimation of the impact of the displacement experience. The proportion of veterans who identify as “very strongly affected by conflict” is only 34 percent, compared to over 50 percent of IDPs – yet, the societal perceptions we encountered in interviews with civil society stakeholders were much more in tuned to the potential trauma experienced by veterans than IDPs.

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139 Lawson, “Entering the grey-zone.”

140 Interview with a local government representative, August 2021.

141 Interview with a veteran, Donetsk region, September 2021.

142 Interview with a civil society representative, Sloviansk, August 2021.

143 Interview with an expert, Kharkiv, August 2021.

144 Interview with an IDP, Sloviansk, August 2021.

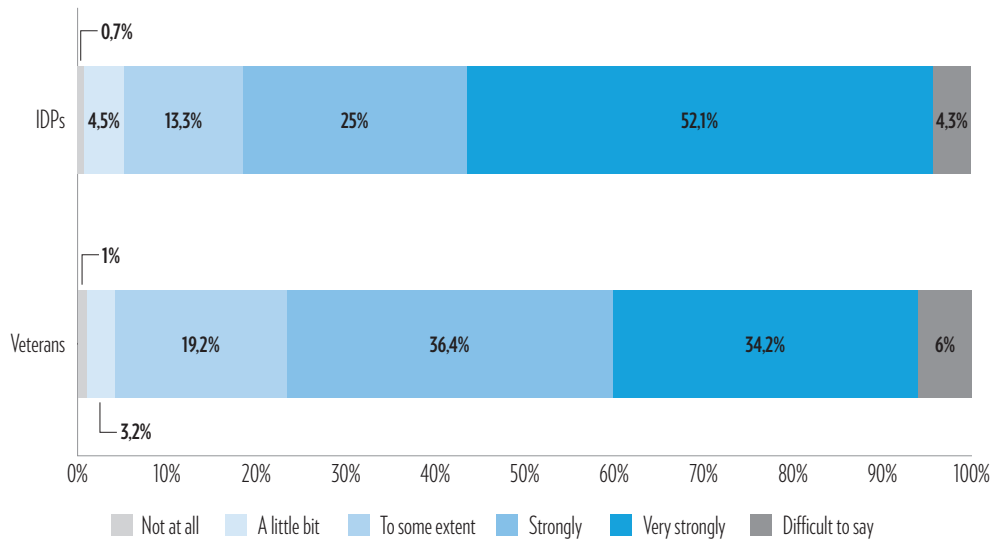
145 Interview with a civil society representative and IDP, Kharkiv, and an interview with a civil society representative, Sievierodonetsk, both August 2021.

146 Friedrich and Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas.”



Interestingly, veterans who originate from the NGCA – and are thus both displaced and veterans – are not perceived as an individual group. Instead, it seems that they are simply considered veterans, not IDPs. We do not have a representative sample of this group in our survey, but the impression from our interviews is that, with exceptions, these veterans tend to have more moderate views and a greater desire to engage with the NGCA.

**Figure 26: How strongly has the Donbas conflict impacted your life?**



Overall, our survey and interview results reveal clearly distinguishable groups whose different conflict experiences translate into hardened – and opposing – positions toward its resolution. An alienation of the eastern region from the rest of the country and a sense of hopelessness prevail, particularly in the GCA. Mending these societal ties both within the GCA and, in the event of a reintegration, with the NGCA will take decades. As a civil society representatives told us: “There will be people who will never find peace with this.”<sup>147</sup>

**“There will be people who will never find peace with this.”**

– Civil Society Representative, Kramatorsk

<sup>147</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, Kramatorsk, August 2021.

# Conclusion

Our research shows that veterans, IDPs and residents of eastern Ukraine have distinct attitudes and agendas regarding the future of Donbas. Without a way of voicing these concerns and discussing diverging viewpoints as part of a larger societal debate, their grievances remain unaddressed.

Considering that these groups will carry the future of Donbas, investing into social cohesion is a crucial precondition to any eventual reintegration. To do so, Ukraine will need to engage in a public debate about the painful choices it faces in Donbas. The failed initiative for a ‘National Platform for Dialogue and Reconciliation’ in 2020 shows that this requires time and careful preparation.

Russia’s intervention in Donbas started this conflict, and there can be no resolution without an end to Moscow’s intervention at both the military and political level. However, it is wishful thinking to conclude from this that all would simply go back to the way it was in 2014 and societal fault lines would disappear if only Russia left. Rather, leaving societal divisions unaddressed can create the potential for renewed conflict and thus obstruct efforts for peaceful long-term reintegration.<sup>148</sup>

Perhaps because they were talking to German researchers, many interviewees compared the current situation in Ukraine to the divided Germany that reunited after the Berlin Wall fell. They hoped that a similar reunification process would someday take place in Donbas. Unfortunately, the extremely violent battles in 2014 and 2015, the complete erosion of trust toward other citizens and targeted disinformation campaigns all make these hopes very unrealistic. Rebuilding Donbas and the reconciliation of the people living in these regions will take an enormous amount of time and resources.

While it cannot force Moscow to budge, the Ukrainian government has an obligation to its people on both sides of the contact line. Although it has limited access to the NGCA (which should not keep Ukraine from engaging with citizens there), Kyiv certainly has the agency to show its citizens in the GCA that it is committed to improving their safety and security. Importantly, this means recognizing that the human security interests of citizens in the region might differ from the national security interests of the Ukrainian government.

To this end, the Ukrainian government can show IDPs, locals and veterans alike that their voices are heard. Our sometimes starkly contrasting interview and survey results suggest that both the Ukrainian government and civil society actors should listen more closely and better engage with these stakeholders’ perspectives, even if they do not share these views.

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148 As, for example, the lingering risk of re-escalation in the countries of former Yugoslavia due to persistence of many of the underlying structural causes of the conflict shows: Deutschlandfunk, “Serbien und Kosovo/ Schwere Spannungen an der Grenze” (Serbia and Kosovo: Severe tensions at the border), September 28, 2021, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/serbien-und-kosovo-schwere-spannungen-an-der-grenze-100.html>.

# Annex

Survey conducted by Razumkov Center between September and November 2021.  
All answers are displayed in percentage.

Which of the following problems do you consider most important to you? Second most important? Third most important?	General Population (1020 respondents)			IDPs (420 respondents)			Veterans (401 respondents)		
	#1	#2	#3	#1	#2	#3	#1	#2	#3
Housing	5	3.5	4.4	35	11.2	6.7	11.2	9.2	11.2
Corruption	19	18.9	18.7	4.8	6.9	13.3	23.2	20.4	14.7
Social Services	19.1	18.2	18	12.1	14.3	15.2	13.5	14	18
Unemployment	7.5	12.1	13.1	9	13.8	12.9	7.7	7.7	11.2
War in Donbas	18.5	24.6	23.3	27.4	33.3	21.4	30.2	27.2	16
Covid-19	29.1	20	17.4	10.5	19.8	28.6	9.5	15.7	19.2
Difficult to Say	1.8	2.7	5.2	1.2	0.7	1.9	4.7	5.7	9.7

	No	Somewhat no	Difficult to say	Somewhat yes	Yes
<b>If someone in your town/city wants to be elected to the city council or work in the local administration, they can do so.</b>					
General Population	32.4	24.5	9.9	22.7	10.5
IDPs	26.0	28.6	14.0	26.0	5.5
Veterans	31.4	25.2	10.2	21.4	11.7
<b>The Ukrainian government has a strategy to solve the conflict in Donbas.</b>					
General Population	33.5	23.4	12.7	21.1	9.3
IDPs	47.4	31.0	7.4	11.0	3.3
Veterans	44.1	23.4	9.2	19.0	4.2
<b>The Ukrainian government listens to the people of Donbas in order to solve the conflict.</b>					
General Population	30.9	24.2	15.8	20.2	8.9
IDPs	47.4	31.7	6.2	13.3	1.4
Veterans	30.7	31.4	13.2	19.7	5.0

	No	Somewhat no	Difficult to say	Somewhat yes	Yes
<b>The government in Kyiv acts in the best interests of people like you.</b>					
General Population	41.2	29.5	4.8	16.6	8.0
IDPs	41.0	31.9	5.9	16.2	5.0
Veterans	41.4	29.7	5.4	19.2	4.2
<b>Your local government acts in the best interests of people like you.</b>					
General Population	28.7	27.5	6.2	29.3	8.3
IDPs	33.1	33.1	5.0	24.0	4.8
Veterans	37.2	30.7	8.9	19.2	4.0
<b>Those who have fought in the armed forces/volunteer battalions should have more say in resolving the conflict.</b>					
General Population	21.1	15.2	12.0	28.3	23.3
IDPs	22.1	29.5	14.0	27.4	6.9
Veterans	13.0	15.5	5.7	28.9	36.9
<b>Those who were displaced because of the conflict should have more say in resolving the conflict.</b>					
General Population	14.3	17.0	13.7	33.5	21.5
IDPs	5.7	19.3	12.9	44.8	17.4
Veterans	18.7	27.2	6.7	30.4	17.0
<b>Those who live in Donbas should have more say in resolving the conflict.</b>					
General Population	10.2	10.0	11.8	39.5	28.5
IDPs	4.5	5.5	6.4	51.2	32.4
Veterans	27.9	20.4	5.5	27.9	18.2
<b>The only correct solution to the conflict is the full reintegration of the NGCA.</b>					
General Population	5.9	7.8	30.6	24.2	31.5
IDPs	4.8	6.0	26.4	36.7	26.2
Veterans	17.0	8.7	15.9	27.9	30.4
<b>The Ukrainian Government should use military force to reintegrate the NGCA of Donbas.</b>					
General Population	52.2	23.1	5.1	10.5	9.0
IDPs	68.3	13.6	5.0	7.9	5.2
Veterans	21.4	19.7	8.0	20.9	29.9
<b>Negotiations with Russia can lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.</b>					
General Population	25.70	15.30	5.90	26.30	26.90
IDPs	15.50	11.90	5.70	36.00	31.00
Veterans	47.6	19.7	7.70	16.0	9.0

	No	Somewhat no	Difficult to say	Somewhat yes	Yes
<b>Representatives of the NGCA should take part in the negotiations over Donbas.</b>					
General Population	26.0	12.3	10.3	26.6	24.8
IDPs	13.1	8.3	8.3	36.2	34.0
Veterans	49.4	15.0	8.5	21.2	6.0
<b>Instead of negotiations or warfare, Ukraine should freeze the conflict indefinitely, as is the case in Transnistria, for instance.</b>					
General Population	35.3	21.3	12.7	19.2	11.6
IDPs	46.7	25.7	14.3	9.3	4.0
Veterans	43.6	22.9	11.7	15.0	6.7
<b>People living in the NGCA stayed there for ideological reasons, and it was their personal choice.</b>					
General Population	15.3	19.6	11.5	28.4	25.1
IDPs	21.2	27.4	10.2	30.0	11.2
Veterans	20.7	22.9	11.0	21.4	23.9
<b>The question of Crimea must be part of any solution to the conflict in Donbas.</b>					
General Population	20.0	19.0	15.3	20.3	25.3
IDPs	23.8	29.5	12.1	21.7	12.9
Veterans	16.5	22.2	6.7	19.2	35.4
<b>To reach peace, people who live in the NGCA who fought for the separatists should receive amnesty.</b>					
General Population	29.9	18.8	16.7	21.8	12.8
IDPs	19.0	25.2	16.4	29.5	9.8
Veterans	53.4	21.4	10.7	9.7	4.7
<b>To reach peace, people who worked in the NGCA administrations should receive amnesty.</b>					
General Population	19.3	15.2	17.2	28.7	19.6
IDPs	11.0	8.3	11.9	33.1	35.7
Veterans	41.4	24.4	10.9	16.0	7.2
<b>Those who did not fight against Ukraine or work in the NGCA's administrations should not be punished.</b>					
General Population	4.0	5.3	6.4	25.8	58.5
IDPs	1.2	3.1	3.6	29.8	62.4
Veterans	8.2	11.5	8.0	26.7	45.6
<b>To reach peace, people from the NGCA who have received a Russian passport should be allowed to keep it after reintegration.</b>					
General Population	28.1	14.2	17.0	19.9	20.8
IDPs	18.1	8.3	8.8	34.5	30.2
Veterans	52.1	17.7	8.2	13.2	8.7

	No	Somewhat no	Difficult to say	Somewhat yes	Yes	
<b>To reach peace, the NGCA should be allowed to have Russian as a second official language.</b>						
General Population	15.3	9.8	6.3	26.1	42.6	
IDPs	6.4	2.1	4.8	39.5	47.1	
Veterans	35.7	10.7	4.0	26.9	22.7	
<b>To reach peace, it is necessary to grant the NGCA more autonomy than other regions of Ukraine.</b>						
General Population	35.2	15.4	10.2	21.2	18.1	
IDPs	17.6	12.6	9.8	42.6	17.4	
Veterans	51.6	26.9	7.5	10.5	3.5	
<b>To reach peace, there should be a transition period during which the NGCA has more extensive autonomy - but in the end, it should be treated the same as other Ukrainian regions.</b>						
General Population	24.0	12.7	12.6	27.2	23.6	
IDPs	10.5	11.9	9.8	46.2	21.7	
Veterans	44.1	18.0	9.9	20.4	7.5	
	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>A little bit</b>	<b>To some extent</b>	<b>Strongly</b>	<b>Very strongly</b>	<b>Difficult to say</b>
<b>How strongly has the Donbas conflict impacted your life?</b>						
General Population	13.5	16.4	36.6	21.3	10.2	2.0
IDPs	0.7	4.5	13.3	25.0	52.1	4.3
Veterans	1.0	3.2	19.2	36.4	34.2	6.0

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