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**EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY  
 IN THE CONTEXT OF UKRAINIAN CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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**Yevheniia Hobova. East-West dichotomy in the context of Ukrainian conflict resolution.** This article analyses the contrasting images of the West and the East in the conflict narrative in Ukraine: Where is the imaginary line that divides them? Which countries constitute the ‘East’ and which the ‘West’? and How does the Russia-Ukraine conflict affect the perceived division? This article is informed by Edward Said’s hypothesis of orientalism, specifically that Western knowledge of the Eastern world(s) carries a negative connotation. Testing this hypothesis on the materials of elite interviews conducted in Ukraine in 2017, the article ‘maps’ the image of the world from a Ukrainian point of view. It explores if an internalized ‘othering’ may be present within Ukraine’s borders due to the ongoing conflict in the East. The findings, however, disprove this assumption. Results show that there is a perceived sense of closeness between Ukraine and Eastern European countries due to historical and cultural ties as well as modern day partnership. Relations with Russia were perceived as ambiguous despite the armed conflict in the East and the annexation of Crimea. There is also no evidence for “othering of Eastern *vis-à-vis* Western regions inside Ukraine.

**Key words:** East-West dichotomy, Russia-Ukraine conflict, orientalism, imaginary geography.

**Євгенія Гобова. Дихотомія Схід-Захід у контексті вирішення українсько-російського конфлікту.** У цій статті проаналізовано протиставлені образи Заходу та Сходу у наративі конфлікту в Україні: Де пролягає межа між ними? Які країни складають “Схід”, а які - “Захід”? Яким чином конфлікт між Росією та Україною впливає на це уявне розділення? У статті розглядається гіпотеза орієнталізму Едварда Саїда, зокрема щодо негативних конотацій у західних знаннях про світ Сходу. Випробовуючи зазначену гіпотезу на матеріалі інтерв’ю з представниками українських еліт, що були проведені у 2017 році, стаття окреслює сприйняття світу з української точки зору. У статті аналізується ймовірна інтерналізація “інакшості” в межах України через тривалий конфлікт на Сході. Результати дослідження спростовують це припущення та, з іншого боку, вказують на відчуття зростаючої близькості України до країн Східної Європи завдяки історичним та культурним зв’язкам на рівні із сучасним партнерством. Відносини з Росією виглядають неоднозначними всупереч збройному конфлікту на Сході країни та анексії Кримського півострова. Також відсутні свідчення щодо “інакшості” східних та західних регіонів країни.

**Ключові слова:** дихотомія Схід-Захід, російсько-український конфлікт, орієнталізм, уявна географія.

**Евгения Гобова. Дихотомия Восток-Запад в контексте разрешения украинско-российского конфликта.** В данной статье проанализированы противопоставленные образы Запада и Востока в нарративе конфликта в Украине: Где проходит граница между ними? Какие страны составляют “Восток”, а какие - “Запад”? Каким образом конфликт между Россией и Украиной влияет на это воображаемое разделение? В статье рассматривается гипотеза ориентализма Эдварда Саида, в особенности относительно негативных коннотаций в западных знаниях о мире Востока. Верифицируя данную гипотезу на материале интервью представителей украинских элит, которые были записаны в 2017 году, статья очерчивает воображаемую карту мира с украинской точки зрения. В статье анализируется вероятная интернализация “инаковости” в границах Украины из-за длительного конфликта на востоке. Результаты исследования опровергают данное допущение и, с

другой стороны, указывают на ощущения растущей близости Украины со странами Восточной Европы ввиду исторических, культурных связей, а также современного партнерства. Отношения с Россией выглядят неоднозначными, несмотря на вооруженный конфликт на востоке Украины и аннексию Крымского полуострова. Также отсутствуют свидетельства относительно “инаковости” восточных или западных регионов страны.

**Ключевые слова:** дихотомия Восток-Запад, российско-украинский конфликт, ориентализм, воображаемая география.

## 1. Introduction

In the trying times of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is natural to expect that Ukraine will seek support from more powerful partners. However, the reaction of international partners to the conflict is increasingly unenthusiastic, despite most recent aggravations in the Azov Sea. A growing awareness of the so-called ‘Ukrainian fatigue’ among international partners invites Ukrainian decision- and policy-makers, as well as general public, to reflect on Ukraine’s own resources, self-support and self-reliance. Alongside the necessity to find an optimal course of development, these issues have become increasingly important as the conflict shows no end. One of the arguments surfacing in this debate is that the East-West division within Ukraine may become internalised and impact the relations within the country, in the present and in the future. As such, analysis of images and narratives on East vs. West within Ukraine may assist in informing and fine-tuning a dialogue in the country and help to seek out compromises and roadmaps for reintegration of the occupied territories. This analysis also asks if the notions of East and West influence how Ukraine sees its neighbours and the wider world. The ultimate aim of this paper is to identify the imaginary geography of Ukraine and trace Ukraine’s place on the mental map of the world within the coordinates from East to West and in the context of the ongoing conflict. This ‘mental mapping’ is argued to be instrumental in understanding images of external Others as well as images of Self.

The data are collected from the interviews of Ukrainian elites – decision-, policy- and opinion-makers – representing different policy fields including media, culture, politics, civil society and business. The semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian elites, conducted face-to-face by pre-trained researchers, were held in 2016-17 as a part of the Jean Monnet Network “Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine” (C<sup>3</sup>EU) led by the National Centre for Research of Europe, University of Canterbury (Christchurch, New Zealand) in cooperation with nine international partners (<https://jeanmonnet.nz/c3eu/>, see also Chaban and Zhabotynska 2018 in this Issue). In the analysis provided below, the respective references are "Media", "Culture", "Civil", and "Business" followed by a number of the interview, as it is registered in the C<sup>3</sup>EU data; for example, Civil5. The questionnaires for the interviews focused on the perceptions of the EU in the context of conflict and crisis in Ukraine. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian and Russian with responses transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. This paper uses quotations from the English version as a purely linguistic approach is not the goal in this case study. Due to Human Ethics regulations, all responses will remain fully anonymous, and only the cohort will be identified when the words are quoted.

While the questionnaire did not explicitly ask about “East vs. West” images, the interviewees often referenced and compared East *vis-à-vis* West, typically in order to highlight the differences between Ukraine and other actors. Following this empirical observation, this article sets to trace if there was a clear placement of Ukraine in these “mental mappings”. Where exactly is Ukraine’s place on the imaginary map of the world? Can the opposition “East vs. West” be explained by the influential theory of orientalism [Said, 1978]? The theory hypothesizes a negative connotation assigned by the West to the East. The article respectively explores if the narrative of unconquerable discrepancies between Ukraine’s East and West regions exist in the imagination of the Ukrainian movers and shakers. The article also aims to map the imaginary geography in terms of “East-West” divide outside the country’s borders.

The theoretical framework section describes the theories behind the research, sets the focus of studying Ukraine's vision of East, West and self. Said's orientalism and Huntington's clash of civilizations hypotheses inform the theoretical framework of this study. The analysis is also guided by a set of concepts developed by the scholars of Eastern Europe – Wolff [1994], Pittaway [2003], and Todorova [2009] among others – in highlighting the similarities and differences in the images of East vs. West in neighbouring countries. These theorisations are instrumental to explain the perceptions among Ukrainian elites (traced through the data collected from the interviews and discussed in detail in the Findings section). The images are categorized into two main frames of “outside Ukraine” and “inside Ukraine” with several sub-categories – a conceptual architecture that explicates an elaborate and complex mental mapping of the world by Ukrainian policy- and decision-makers. The Conclusions section outlines how the tested theories were partially disproved, showing that the East is not necessarily weak or exotic in Ukraine's elite perceptions, and that the East vs. West opposition within the country's borders is not internalized by the interviewed stakeholders.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks

According to the theory articulated by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* [1978], the pattern of dissecting the world into East and West has been present since the ancient times. One of the most influential works on the imaginary geography of the post-colonial world, Said's analysis had become the trend-setter. It invited a generation of scholars to launch into further investigation how the East is perceived by the West and *vice versa*. Receiving a fair share of criticism for its historical inaccuracies and author's personal bias, *Orientalism* nevertheless sparked an ongoing discussion that has only grown since the first edition of the book. This article is informed by Said's theory of 'strong West vs. weak East' -- as the result of inaccurate cultural representations. In his work, he claims that Orient not only was constructed by the West but also “has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” [Said, 1978: 13]. He also suggests that for centuries the Orient has been “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” [Said, 1978: 2]. Using Ukraine's experience, this paper explores how these claims have stood against time and the effects of globalization, if their viability has suffered over the last four decades.

Referencing a later work by Huntington -- the much debated *Clash of Civilizations* [1993] -- Ukraine may be described as one of the 'cleft countries' [Huntington, 1993: 30]. On the one hand, it belongs to the so-called Orthodox civilization. On the other, it has a large number of people who are identifying with a different, neighbouring civilization. In Ukraine's case, the “other” civilisation may be located in the Western regions of the country that are predominately Eastern Rite Catholic or Ukrainian Greek Catholic. It is also possible to speculate whether Ukraine is a Huntington's 'torn' country, i.e. a country that has made a drastic turn to change its civilizational path. Huntington [Huntington, 2013: 44] outlines three requirements for a country to redefine its civilizational identity in a major way: support of its own political and economic elites, approval of the public, and acceptance of the elites of the given civilization that a country is striving to join. So far, it is not clear if conflicted Ukraine can fully become a 'torn' country in Huntington's sense, with EU membership not being on the agenda and without a transparent response on that matter from the West. However, Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU may be seen as a sign of at least a beginning of the acknowledgement of Ukraine as a country that belongs with the Western civilization.

The image of the West and the Self in Ukraine have been scrutinized by scholars prior to Maidan and the following conflict [Gritsay & Nikolko, 2009; Tarasenko, & Ivanenko, 2004; Yavorska & Bogomolov 2010]. These works reported the emergence of the narrative of the 'desired yet distant' Europe and the importance of this narrative in the formulation of the national identity narrative in Ukraine. For Ukraine, Europe has been a desired and seemingly unreachable

destination for a long time, the perfect example to follow [Yavorska & Bogomolov, 2010: 86]. The image of Europe is mythological and mostly blended into the image of the West in general [Gritsay & Nikolko, 2009: 176].

Following the dramatic events on Maidan in 2013-14 and the later conflict in the East and annexation of Crimea, literature in the field debates the reasons underlying the Ukrainian crisis [Black *et al.*, 2016; Merry *et al.*, 2016]. While some researchers imply outside influence, including Russian propaganda, as one of the main causes [Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2018], others point out to internal origins of the problem. Importantly, the latter group of scholars often cites crucial cultural and historical differences between Eastern and Western regions in Ukraine [see e.g. Besier & Stokłosa, 2017]. This article questions whether there is ground to these assumptions and tests them empirically. In this, the article innovatively adds to the discussion on Ukraine's self-visions and identity in the post-Maidan period.

Studying the perceived differences between East and West is by no means a novelty among historians, sociologists, economists, etc. Attempts to define borders within Europe and debating their existence brings a new perspective on putting Ukraine on this "philosophical map". Norman Davies has set the precedent in the historical studies of shifting the focus from the predominantly Western-centered view of the European history and drawing more attention to the role of the Eastern and Central European countries in shaping the modern Europe [Davies, 2006]. He claims that the so-called East Europe is an inherent part of the Western civilization and should not be seen as subordinate. Mark Pittaway on the other hand goes even further, suggesting that both the internal and external borders of Europe are fluid [Pittaway, 2003] and cannot be defined. He also states that the "former socialist states are both part of outside Europe" [Pittaway, 2003: 156], which includes Ukraine as a region that previously was on the other side of the "iron curtain".

Using evidence from maps, travellers' memoirs and works of literature Wolff argues that the imaginary division between Eastern and Western Europe has been present since the Enlightenment and still determines not only the perception of the East as the "other" but the image of self in eastern countries. [Wolff, 1994; 16]. The complex and diverse Balkan region especially has been the focus of several studies in the context of new countries joining the EU [Bideleux & Jeffries, 1998; Petrovic, 2014; Todorova, 2009]. Ukraine's case, however, may bring an even more profound insight into the matter of these perceived divisions, especially at such a turbulent period of fighting the Russian aggression and striving to find support from its European partners, when finding its own place and stance is vital.

### 3. Findings

Among the first observations is that the imagined geographical positioning of Ukraine in general seems to be very often identified *vis-à-vis* Russia. This place on the map of the world is seen to be problematic, as it means for Ukraine difficulties in avoiding conflict in the present and securing a peaceful future. A media professional comments, "Ukraine has such a geographical position that places it between the EU and Russia, ... a very powerful country, both on the economic and political levels..." (Media7). This geographical position is seen by some to be a trap for Ukraine: 'You cannot escape Russia, of course. We are just surrounded' (Civil5), or '...we cannot get rid of geography, that is why Russia is important for us' (Civil9).

Yet, some see Ukraine on the move away from the East: 'We announced the [European] vector, we are leaving. We are still Europeans in our mentality and can not belong to the eastern regions, that want to swallow us, to return us' (Civil2). Others believe that being a country on the edge of two civilizations may be actually advantageous for Ukraine and the West. This presents Ukraine with an opportunity to play an important role on the international arena. One cultural elite compared Ukraine to a "stumbling block on the way of the eastern and southern and northern hordes" (Culture1). Another representative of the cultural circle stated:

Ukrainians are the “resource” for the EU as a civilized, cultural and educated workforce, especially for Eastern Europe - for Poland and Czech Republic. The thing is that Ukrainians have moved to Italy, France, Spain and Portugal earlier and this migration wave is at present moving towards Poland, Czech Republic, a bit less to Hungary. But still nobody denies the logistic importance of Ukraine (Culture7).

Perceptions of the notions “East” and “West” among the interviewed elites may be grouped into two main categories: ‘outside Ukraine’ and ‘inside Ukraine’.

### **3.1. Perceptions of the East: Outside perspective**

If we consider the “outside Ukraine” perspective, the imaginary geography of East *vs.* West does not necessarily correspond to the real world mapping conventions, where Europe and Asia are divided by the Ural Mountains. Instead, geopolitical and cultural issues guide the construction of the perceived borders in the imagination of our respondents. Ukraine’s struggle in general is “the issue of us quitting to be part of Asia and moving to Europe” (Media2).

The ‘East’ outside Ukraine has its own subdivisions in the eyes of Ukrainian elites: ‘Asia’, ‘Russia’, ‘Eastern Europe’ and ‘Eastern Partnership’ with the latter not a geographical, but a socio-political concept that is rather visible in the interviews.

The notion of ‘Asia’ of the ‘outside East’ is comprised in the imagination of Ukrainian policy- and decision-makers of China, Japan and Turkey, while other Asian actors are largely invisible (e.g. “Eastern countries, we’ll name China, and perhaps even others - Japan and the like” (Civil2); “I would say, East - I mean Japan, China and Singapore” (Politics6)).

The three visible actors are seen as rapidly developing countries that may potentially offer an alternative pattern of progress if Ukraine’s struggle to be accepted in Europe, or more generally ‘the West’, fails. A civil society representative, for example, argues that instead of relations with the EU, he would rather be talking about some closer relations with Turkey” (Civil4). A politician echoes, “Turkey is just one of the major players in the Black Sea region. ...It is clear that, maybe we need to establish or attempt to establish relations with China, because China is becoming a serious player...” (Politics3).

Russia is seen as one of the key representatives of the ‘outside East’. It is often described as one of the great powers, an influential actor in the region along with the EU and the US: (“[...] other serious subjects which are the USA, Russia” (Media1)). Unsurprisingly, its image is ambiguous -- it is both an enemy and a former significant partner. As one media elite argues ‘From the state policy perspective, they [Russia] are our enemies, but from the people’s perspective... we have a million of relatives there, here and there, and they cannot be our enemies.’ (Media3). Despite these connections, the path is seen to be changing for Ukraine: “previously, we tried to follow ... how it should be in Russia. At present, we try to follow the West.” (Culture9).

Another actor in the mental space of the ‘East’ is ‘Eastern Europe’. The interviewees often mentioned Eastern Europe as an important partner for Ukraine. It is typically represented by Poland and the three Baltic states. Consider a rather typical response by a civil society representative: “[They] are our partners on borders with Eastern Europe: it is Poland, the Baltic States, and partly Romania” (Civil9). These states are seen to have historical and cultural ties to Ukraine but at the same time belong to the ‘outside West’ represented by the EU. However, Eastern Europe is seen in a position not dissimilar to Ukraine - they belong to the West, but are not fully accepted there as its rightful members. This is despite having their status of EU member states. Moreover, this region is sometimes seen to be excluded from the very definition of Europe: “The reference of the notion “Europe” in most of its usage does not include the Eastern Europe, many parts. And [certainly] not Ukraine” (Civil5).

East European countries are also viewed as advocate for Ukraine in Europe (e.g. Poland as Ukraine’s advocate in the European Union (Business6)) and intermediaries between Ukraine and the West, a gateway of sort to the Western civilization. These countries are somehow perceived to

be on their own, not always abiding by the EU rules. In this case the placement of these countries on the imaginary map is particular - regions located to Ukraine's West are placed in the East and not just by the name, but by cultural proximity. Although the name itself is also seen as an issue. Business respondent comments, "I am very happy that they [young EU MSs like Poland and the Baltic States] are already named not "Eastern Europe", but "Northern Europe" -- what they actually are" (Business5).

Importantly, Ukraine is seen within the circle of the actors of "Eastern Europe". On the one hand, Ukraine's people are now a part of the societies in Eastern Europe: "Ukrainians are the "resource" for EU as a civilized, cultural and educated workforce, especially for Eastern Europe - for Poland and Czech Republic" (Culture7). On the other hand, Ukraine is an equal partner to Eastern European countries when it comes to security and defence matters: "[Ukraine is] in the military block of Eastern European countries, and, as a matter of fact, there is also an exchange of experience there. It is like a 'micro NATO', let's call it that" (Business8).

Another 'inverted' perspective surfaced in the imagining the 'Eastern Partnership'. It was discussed in the interviews as a tool that is supposed to bring Ukraine closer to the West, but at the same time puts it among the countries that are not yet accepted by the EU as verified partners. The Eastern Partnership in fact is seen as not facilitating the relations with the EU, but making them vaguer and unclear. It is even implied that the very reason for its creation was "that its member countries could never be accepted to the EU (Media7)". On the whole, 'Eastern Partnership' along with 'Eastern Europe' is seen to create a connection with the West: "the EU also had deep enough relationship with Ukraine within this Neighbourhood Policy, in the Eastern Partnership framework so it would not be acceptable for them to leave this game completely, well, to ignore the problem" (Civil4). Importantly, the EU's Eastern Partnership is seen as policy that is designed to make its member "not members, but close friends, close partners" (Politics7) and Europe continues to "co-work with countries, organizations, with institutions ... in other countries of Eastern Partnership" (Civil9). Yet, some respondents are less enthusiastic about the policy: "what is to be done with the East Partnership countries...(with) these six countries...[is] absolutely unclear" (Politics4).

### **3.2. Imagining East: Perspectives inside Ukraine**

Now, we are turning in our analysis to images of the space "inside Ukraine". Naturally, war-torn Eastern Ukraine has a high profile in the discussions about the Ukrainian crisis and the EU's involvement in the peacemaking process. One of the important observations here was that naming the conflict was problematic in itself for a number of interviewees. Some disagreed strongly with the usage of the term 'conflict': "Overall role of the EU in the war of Russia against Ukraine - and not a conflict! - Requires increased pressure on Russia and the rejection of double standards of the EU itself" (Culture2). Other descriptors were 'what we have now going on in the East' (Civil2), 'the events', 'problems' (Politics3), 'the war' (Media6), 'attacks of Russia' (Culture8), 'warfare or outbreaks' (Politics6). The situation in Ukraine's East is frequently mentioned alongside another geographical indicator – the Crimea, or just South in general.

Ambiguity of Russia's image reminds how Huntington used Ukraine-Russia conflict of 1991 over Crimea as an example of tensions within the same civilization: "Such conflicts, however, are likely to be less intense and less likely to expand than conflicts between civilizations. ...If civilization is what counts, however, the likelihood of violence between Ukrainians and Russians should be low. They are two Slavic, primarily Orthodox peoples who have had close relationships with each other for centuries" [Huntington, 1993: 38]. For some of the interviewees Russia is still a part of the same civilization as Ukraine, but current situation shows, that the conflict is not de-escalating, which may indicate that Ukraine is almost forced to become a "torn country" through this conflict.

To sum up, none of the perceptions of the East, inside and outside of the country, appear to support Said's orientalism theory. Apart from the perception of "Eastern Partnership", that is seen as ambiguous and sometimes negative, the rest of the images contradict the negative "othering" of the East. Still, Ukraine is a part of the Eastern Partnership which makes it a self-image to a degree.

### 3.3. Perceptions of West: Imagining “Outside West”

Diverse responses were observed when interviewees reflected on the concept of West. The West is general is frequently named as an important actor in the region. Yet, it is not seen as infallible and omnipotent. In the eyes of the elite respondents, it lacks integrity when it comes to dealing with external problems. Similarly to the notions of East, the perceptions of the West belong to two general groups: views of the ‘Outside West’ and ‘Western Ukraine’.

The former notion has turned out to be a much more complicated and diverse one. With the interviews designed to investigate the image of EU in Ukraine, the ‘outside West’ is seen to be comprised of the EU (often represented as “Europe” or separate EU countries, such as Germany and France), the USA, and sometimes NATO. The notion of the West, however, is typically associated with the USA, and only then with Europe: “the so-called West, metaphorical one, because we are talking about the EU and about America and Canada [...] The West is primarily America.” (Civil4). Importantly, the West is seen to possess “its own values which it tries to disseminate in Ukraine” (Civil 9).

One of the most typical visions of the ‘outside West’ was the one of an example for Ukraine to follow. The interviewees also felt that Ukrainians are supposed to belong to the Western society, but are not accepted by it yet because of the current state of events, and internal issues with corruption and slow reform implementation process. The ‘move’ towards the West is recognised in a paradoxical way – it is both inevitable yet seemingly fruitless at the same time. The West is believed to be not ready for Ukraine’s bureaucracy, poverty and territorial disputes. Nevertheless, many elites do not see other alternatives to Ukraine’s orientation towards the West:

That is a lot of things are inherent in Western civilization, which unfortunately we do not have, that either they were not here or they were destroyed in totalitarian conditions [...] It is becoming more and more attractive to all those territories to want to return, so that they would fought to return. Just like East Germans fought for a return to West Germany. And I do not see and do not want it any other way (Civil4)

Being an important actor, a supporter of Ukraine, the West is not seen to be willing to exert much power to help it or maintain its own interests nonetheless. Still, the interviewees understand the complexity of the situation and do not accuse the EU or the US – as the main representatives of the imagined West – of being neglectful. Still, there is a sentiment shared among elites that the West is not using sanctions or other measures against Russia to the full extent because that would disadvantage the West. These statements are often accompanied by reflections on the necessity of self-reliance and self-dependence, etc. Typical examples of such responses are below:

...the West could have achieved much more than with military force, because it is a tremendous economic power, and it could certainly ... find arguments both for Russia and China in order to persuade them to accept some compromise. ...the West has so many powerful cards that could be used, but for various reasons they are not ... used (Civil4)

At the same time, the West does not intervene, does not violate the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, but very significantly restricts its economic, political, and diplomatic abilities, because they (Russians) violate human rights. So the West remains holding the position, and the world, the civilized world remains holding the position that human rights are above all (Civil9)

### 3.4. Perceptions of West: Internal Perspectives

Considering the “internal to Ukraine” interpretation of the “West”, Western Ukraine is seen as a link between the country and the ‘outside West’, as well as a region that responds to the European influences more eagerly: “The western region, Western Ukraine is more responsive to the European

Union” (Culture1). This is the region which is seen to be well linked with the ‘Eastern European’ part of Europe: “in Western Ukraine a certain image of Poland has already been formed, and the relations are clear there, they, nevertheless, began to understand that the same things should be done in the east of Ukraine” (Culture4).

Western Ukraine is not mentioned as often as the East of Ukraine, which can be explained by the general context of the interviews that had specific questions about the conflict. It is mentioned only occasionally, either as a contrast to the East, or in a completely unrelated setting. A political interviewee argues, “we have a pro-European population, it mainly resides in Western and Central Ukraine, and certainly there are people who live under the pressure of Russian propaganda and that more are on the eastern Ukraine” (Politics7).

Since the focus of the interviews was on the conflict in the East of Ukraine, it is understandable that Western Ukraine was mentioned less frequently. Still, the interviews materials point to a particular framing of this regions of Ukraine. Unlike the East, it appears to be closer to Europe not only geographically, but in terms of common history. The region is seen to become a basis for cooperation and more involvement than with the countries of Central and Western Europe.

Some researchers of Ukrainian crisis point out to the discrepancies between its Western and Eastern regions as one of the underlying causes of the conflict [Black *et al.* 2016; Hahn 2017; Olchawa 2017]. Other speculate that it has been an issue even before the Orange Revolution of 2004 [Portnov2013: 241]. Comparing the perceptions of East vs. West within the country in the responses of interviews in our case does not support this premise. Only one of fifty interviewees, who also happens to be from the East of Ukraine, insisted on ‘Westerners’ being the ones to blame for the conflict in Donbass and justified the separatists’ actions with deeply rooted cultural differences: “many [in Eastern Ukraine] wanted federalization precisely for this reason, because they understood that this is a foreign culture for us, strange values for us, and that once they came to power by armed means, for us it was unacceptable” (Business1), at the same time rejecting Western values decisively: “I do not see a single value that we should have adapted and would be useful for us, not one.” (Business1). This point of view is not shared by other respondents. Moreover, some are rather sarcastic about these sorts of opinion:

for some parts of society, particularly under the influence of Russian propaganda, it can also have a different interpretation, namely that ‘that darned EU, darned West started the fire, we used to live so well, peacefully, amicably, had a loving relationship with Russia and suddenly here they spoiled it all’ (Civil4).

Regarding the image of the West in all of its variety, empirical findings seem to suggest that Ukraine is indeed a “cleft country”, yet not a “torn country”, as described by Huntigton. Without a clear approval from the imagined “outside West” in form of EU membership or substantial and decisive support in the conflict with Russia, Ukraine does not seem to be able to overcome the perceived limitations imposed by imaginary borders. At the same time, the vision of the West, embodied mostly by the EU, partially goes in line with Said’s “strong West” narrative. Nevertheless, the image of “strong Asia”, discussed earlier in this paper, makes the orientalism hypothesis inconclusive.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study traced the images of the East vs. West emerging in the interviews with Ukrainian elites about the image of the EU in the context of the ongoing conflict and crisis in Ukraine. Importantly, the questionnaire did not ask specific questions about the ‘imagined geography’ of Ukraine, and future studies may choose to focus on this research objective exclusively. This article presents an initial attempt to outline the mental map of the world along the East/West divisions in the eyes of Ukrainian people (in this case Ukrainian decision- and policy-makers). It is necessary to stress out

that both the notions of East and West are imaginary and their relations are complex and sometimes perplexing.

The results can be grouped into two levels: “external frames” and “internal frames”. The “external frame” includes the notions of “East” represented by Asia, Russia, Eastern Europe and Eastern Partnership. The image of Asia has a definitively positive connotation and this finding contradicts Said’s orientalism hypothesis. In addition, Russia – a country to the East of Ukraine -- has an ambiguous image, albeit with an inclination to negativity. This finding does not fully correspond to the image of the exotic and demonised “Other”, proposed by Said. The notion of “Eastern Europe”, on the other hand has mostly positive connotations and is, to an extent, a part of Ukraine’s self-image. The image of “Eastern Partnership” supports Said’s theory, featuring negative associations attached to the notion of the East. These are also partially a component of Ukraine’s self-image. The image of the “Outside West” is complex and does in part resonate with Said’s concept of the ‘strong West’, however from Ukraine’s perspective, the strength remains unrealized due to lack of stern action in dealing with the conflict.

The “internal frame” includes two main images - “East of Ukraine”, heavily associated with the conflict in the country, and “Western Ukraine”, seen being closer to Europe not just in a geographical manner. None of these notions is described either as better or worse, or stronger or weaker. While their images are contrasted to a minor extent, they are not seen as rivals or competitors.

The basic contours of the ‘imaginary map’ of Ukraine traced through the responses of Ukrainian elites partially dismiss Said’s orientalism maxim of ‘West is strong; East is weak’. In the eyes of the Ukrainian respondents, countries in the Far East were seen as models of economic growth and development in contrast to Europe’s slow but noticeable decline. Moreover, they were seen as a source of alternative models for Ukraine to follow, in case its European orientation does not work out.

The interviews were conducted during the period when the visa liberalisation regime for Ukraine had not been implemented yet. At that time, no-visas regime was believed to be unobtainable due to poor fulfilment of reforms on Ukraine’s side and reluctance on the EU’s side. The controversy surrounding the visa-free issue was viewed in the context of Ukraine’s relations with the EU, and more generally with the West. Indeed, it had a symbolic meaning of transcending the borders and getting closer to the West, or rather getting away from the East, and from being the ‘no man’s land’ between the two sides. From the elites’ point of view, the country is not yet a ‘torn’ country in Huntington’s sense, as it lacks the approval and acceptance from the symbolic West -- the EU continues to deny EU membership for Ukraine. But it is indeed seen as a ‘cleft’ country with the growing ties to the West, that are spreading further into Ukraine’s East.

The world in the East-West coordinates is not multipolar, but is stretched between two opposing, equally distant epicenters of power, namely the US and China. There is very little visibility to the notions of Center, North or South. These were hardly mentioned in the interviews, and if mentioned then exclusively in the “outside frame”. Notably, Russia seems to have “moved” to the East since the beginning of the conflict: previously it often used to be referred as “the Northern neighbour” of Ukraine, but the interviewees seem to be inclined to associate it with the East (partially supporting Said’s theory).

Notably, Ukraine is not the only country that is seen having a marginal status. Countries of Eastern Europe were seen to belong to the same group. While being Western in the definition by geography textbooks, they are not seen to be fully accepted by the West as an intimate part of it. Further research is needed for the perceptions of the imaginary geography of several most mentioned countries, such as Poland, Russia, China and the USA. They had a high visibility in the interviews even though they were not the main focus of them.

The fluidity of Europe’s ‘imaginary borders’ provides an opportunity for Ukraine to overcome the perceived differences and to use the historical and cultural ties as an advantage in building new

and more far-reaching connections with the EU. Both the current conflict in the East and common history with many Eastern and Central European countries create a potential for fostering even closer mutual relations. However, there is a danger of crossing even those imaginary lines and creating unnecessary tensions, which is more that possible if there are no palpable guidelines.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that the data gathered in the interviews demonstrated that the East-West dichotomy is not fully internalized in Ukraine. Despite some historical discrepancies, in the eyes of Ukrainian elites there is no innate perceived opposition between Eastern and Western regions of the country. This finding is of critical importance to Ukraine. Considering limited external influences, a peaceful dialogue within Ukraine is possible through accentuating common ideals and values.

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