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DONBAS CRISIS KEY ACTORS:
NARRATIVES AND PERCEPTIONS IN THE INTERVIEWS
OF UKRAINIAN ELITES

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Viktor Velivchenko. Donbas crisis key actors: narratives and perceptions in the interviews of Ukrainian elites. This article examines real events, their perceptions and narratives concerned with the key actors in the Donbas crisis – Ukraine, the EU/EU member states, Russia and the USA. Perceptions and narratives are traced in the texts of interviews with Ukrainian policy- and decision-makers from political, business, cultural, and civic cohorts (40 respondents). The elites were interviewed in the winter of 2016 within the framework of the Jean Monnet Network "Crisis, conflict and critical diplomacy: EU perceptions in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine" (C³EU), supported by Earsmus+ program of the European Commission. Informed by the strategic narrative theory [Miskimmon *et al*. 2013], the article undertakes a qualitative content analysis of the interview texts, explicating elite perceptions of the crisis in Donbas. The results spell the need for a more nuanced understanding of Ukraine's perceptions of key actors in the ongoing conflict as well as the origin of these perceptions. Arguably, such understanding may benefit the EU's critical diplomacy towards Ukraine and add a valuable insight to the constructive dialogue between Ukraine and the EU.

Keywords: political image, strategic narrative, content analysis, EU perceptions, Ukraine, crisis in Donbas.

Віктор Велівченко. Ключові суб'єкти кризи на Донбасі: наративи та сприйняття в інтерв'ю українських еліт. У статті надано аналіз реальних подій, їхнього сприйняття та відповідних наративів, пов'язаних із ключовими суб'єктами кризи на Донбасі – Україною, ЄС/країнами ЄС, Росією та США. Сприйняття виводиться з текстів інтерв'ю українців, які визначають напрями діяльності та ухвалюють рішення в політиці, бізнесі, культурній та громадській сфкрах (40 респондентів). Представники цих українських еліт були проінтервйовані взимку 2016 року в межах проекту «Криза, конфлікт та критична дипломатія: сприйняття ЄС в Україні та Ізраїлі/Палестина» (C³EU) за підтримки програми Еразмус+, наданої Європейською комісією. Спираючись на теорію стратегічного наративу [Miskimmon et al. 2013], стаття надає контент-аналіз текстів інтерв'ю, що віддзеркалюють сприйняття кризи на Донбасі представниками українських еліт. Результати аналізу свідчать про необхідність більш детального розуміння того, як сприймаються ключові суб'єкти, задіяні у конфлікті на Донбасі, а також причин такого сприйняття. За припущенням, розуміння природи сприйняття зазначених ключових політичних сил може принести користь критичній дипломатії ЄС щодо України та надати цінну інформацію, яка сприятиме конструктивному діалогу між Україною та ЄС.

Ключові слова: політичний образ, стратегічні наративи, контент-аналіз, сприйняття ЄС, Україна, криза на Донбасі.

Виктор Веливченко: Ключевые субъекты кризиса на Донбассе: нарративы и восприятия в интервью украинских элит. В статье дан анализ реальных событий, их восприятия и соответствующих нарративов, связанных с ключевыми субъектами кризиса на Донбассе – Украиной, ЕС/странами ЕС, Россией и США. Восприятия выводится из текстов интервью украинцев, которые определяют направления деятельности и принимают решения в политике, бизнесе, культурной и общественной сферах (40 респондентов). Все интервью были проведены зимой 2016 года в рамках

проекта «Кризис, конфликт и критическая дипломатия: восприятие ЕС в Украине и Израиле/Палестина» (C³EU) при поддержке программы Эразмус+, предоставляемой Европейской комиссией. Опираясь на теорию стратегического нарратива [Miskimmon et al. 2013], статья предлагает контент-анализ текстов интервью, которые отражают восприятие кризиса на Донбассе представителями украинских элит. Результаты анализа свидетельствуют о необходимости более детального понимания того, как воспринимаются ключевые субъекты, задействованные в конфликте на Донбассе, а также причин такого восприятия. Предположительно, понимание природы восприятия упомянутых политических сил может быть полезным для критической дипломатии ЕС относительно Украины и предоставить ценную информацию, которая будет способствовать конструктивному диалогу между Украиной и ЕС.

Ключевые слова: политические образы, стратегические нарративы, контент-анализ, восприятие ЕС, Украина, кризис на Донбассе.

1. Introduction

The ongoing war in eastern Ukraine highlights the crisis of the global system of international security and invites a study of Ukrainians' perceptions of the key actors – Ukraine, the European Union (EU) /EU member states and Russia – in resolving the crisis. This crisis began in April 2014, after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in February–March 2014. Since then, for more than four years now, the armed conflict has been ongoing in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine (collectively called the 'Donbas') – two regions that border on the Russian Federation.

The main focus of this article is on Ukrainian policy- and decision-makers' perceptions of the main actors in the Donbas conflict. The analysis aims to answer the following questions: Who are the key actors in the Donbas crisis as perceived by Ukrainian elites? How are these actors perceived? And more specifically, how is the EU and its role in the crisis resolution perceived in Ukraine? and Is the EU's role different from that of other key actors? This article argues that the perceptions of the EU as Ukraine's partner are dented due to the EU's limited understating of the current situation in Ukraine and its needs effected by the conflict. Arguably, the understanding of Ukraine's perceptions of key actors in the ongoing conflict and the origin of these perceptions is crucial for the EU's successful critical diplomacy towards Ukraine as well as a constructive dialogue between Ukraine and the EU. The conceptual framework of this study integrates theoretical perspectives from the field of political science and cognitive linguistics, providing us with tools to trace and interpret the narratives. We analyze the responses of 40 Ukrainian elite representatives to the questions on the EU and its role in Donbas crisis resolution, which provide a sufficient database for content-analysis and generalization. This study contributes to the theorization of contribution to narratology in general, and strategic narratology in particular.

The article begins with a brief historical overview of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that started in 2014, featuring its major events and actors – from the protests in Kyiv at the end of 2013 up till the present-day stalemate. In the following section, the study describes the emergence of narratives and strategic narratives and their role in shaping our world, identity and perceptions. The article elaborates on the necessity of analyzing Ukrainian elites' perceptions of the EU in the resolution of Ukraine crisis and details the objective to assess the range and flow of narratives among Ukrainian policy- and decision-makers. With perceptions argued to feed into the narratives of reception, this analysis helps build better understanding between the EU and Ukraine. After a brief introduction of the research data and the method of analysis, the article turns to empirical findings. At the end, the study draws conclusions on Ukraine elites' perceptions of the EU in the Donbas crisis and argues a set of key issues that shape EU perceptions.

2. Contextualizing the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Donbas crisis

The Donbas drama followed the events in the end of 2013, when Viktor Yanukovych, the then President of Ukraine, forwent to put his signature under Ukraine's Association Agreement (including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) (AA/DCFTA) with the EU. Instead,

Yanukovych decided to accept a counter-offer from Russia to invest USD 15 billiards [Reuters 2013] into Ukraine's external debt without any clear public explanation of this charity move.

The AA/DCFTA was meant to be signed between the EU and four Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It had spurred serious concerns in Russia whose leadership felt it was losing influence on these post-Soviet countries. Russian elites were aware of the high chances of Ukraine to sign the AA/DCFTA and considered this step as a threat: this agreement would lead Ukraine to closer ties with the EU and further broaden its cooperation with NATO. These moves were seen as an encroachment on Russia's influence in the shared neighborhood (a number of states that lie between the EU and Russia known to the EU as its "eastern neighborhood" and to Russia as its "near abroad" [Smith 2015].

Russia has had very close ties with Ukraine. Ukraine is the largest and the most developed economy among the three countries of the "shared neighborhood" with a distinct geopolitical importance to Russia. Ukraine is also a special case in Russia's security strategy as well as in the historical and national identity discourses. A broader vision by "President Putin is to re-establish as much influence over the former Soviet space as possible" [Alcaro 2015:13]. Unsurprisingly, Ukraine's aspiration to move closer to the European orbit of action has been received with suspicion. Current Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov considers the Eastern Partnership to be an attempt to extend the EU's sphere of influence [Pop 2009]. In this light, Ukraine's decision to join the NATO Alliance was perhaps the most sensitive for Russia. Deputy Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko once said, "Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for pan-European security" [Reuters 2008].

Yanukovych's refusal to sign the AA/DCFTA resulted in the mass anti-government protests in Kyiv and then spread throughout Ukraine. The Kyiv Maidan (which started as a peaceful protest by students) had escalated to violent fights with shootings in early 2014. More than hundred people were killed on Maidan and their deaths contributed to the escalation of the crisis. The EU-supported mediation between the protestors and Yanukovych in February 2014 involved the EU as well as German, French and Polish officials. They brokered the deal with the Ukrainian government that envisaged early (extraordinary) elections in May 2014 and prescribed the much anticipated changes to Ukrainian constitution to take place in the autumn of the same year.

Yanukovich fled to Russia in February 2014 and the interim pro-European government led by Oleksandr Turchynov and Arseniy Yatsenyuk came to power. Yet, political stability did not eventuate. The destabilized country ended with the conflict on its hands, with Eastern Ukraine affected the most. Following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation, Ukraine has encountered the raise of separatist movements in the east and the creation of the separatist entities (the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics). Russian government has exerted significant pressure on the new government in Kyiv to discourage it from siding with the West against Moscow. For example, Gazprom, the Russian energy company, sharply raised its price for natural gas. President Putin said he would intervene to protect Russian speakers anywhere in Ukraine, if Ukrainian nationalists threaten them [*The New York Times* April 1, 2014]. Commentators around the world noted that Russia was aiming to create a dysfunctional Ukraine, "and the economic avenue is just as promising as the military route, although the two are likely to proceed in tandem" [Wilson 2015]. According to Mearsheimer [2014], Moscow "provided advisers, arms and diplomatic support to the separatists in eastern Ukraine". Moreover, Russian government "has amassed a large army on the Ukrainian border to the east, threatening to invade if the Ukrainian government cracked down on the rebels". The confrontation with the Donbas separatists turned violent once the Ukrainian authorities started to restore control in the country. This has led to the involvement of both Ukrainian army and volunteers (freelance fighters). Scholars and commentators argue that Russian involvement in the Donbas has included the provision of leadership, financing, ammunition, heavy weapons, supplies and, in some cases, regular units of the Russian army to support armed separatism against the Ukrainian government ([Robinson 2016];

[Pifer 2017]; [Matveeva 2016]). The US is quite clear on Russian participation in the conflict. As Kurt Volker, the former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and present-day U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine, admits, "Russia has forces in eastern Ukraine and it needs to pull them out" [Financial Times 2017]. Even the Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking at his Annual News Conference, admitted the presence of "people dealing with tasks… in the military sphere" in Donbas (Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference, 17 December 2015).

The war in Donbas inflicted huge social and economic damages. Almost 8,000 civilians and over 2,000 army servicemen were killed, and up to 1.4 mln became IDPs (Internally Displaced People) [Sanders, 2015]. During 2013-15, Ukraine's GDP dropped by 15% [The Economist 2017]. According to the "black book" [Kremlin's Black Book 2015], the war has cost Ukraine "20 percent of its economic potential, including its forecast revenues and foreign exchange earnings". But despite the above mentioned hardships, Ukraine did manage to improve and enlarge its armed forces substantially. Ukrainian army was transformed from the 6,000 combat-ready troops available in mid-2014 [The Ukrainian Week 2014] to a skillful, battle-hardened army of 250,000 [Peterson 2018] that managed to stabilize the front line. However, the local fighting still continues in Donbas, despite the signed agreements in Minsk (September 2014 and February 2015).

Russia's ongoing support to the break-away region of Donbas means that the conflict is not close to resolution. The key element that guarantees survival to DNR and LNR is the open border with Russia – a section around 400 km long. This section is used for the regular transfer of funds, financial and military support and personnel [Piechal 2015]. While Moscow denies its involvement in the Donbas crisis, this position has little credibility in the West. Western powers – including the EU and the US – have introduced a package of sanctions to mitigate aggression and show political support to Kyiv. Some economic effects of the sanctions did take place, yet the Western sanctions have not triggered any change in Russia's policies towards Ukraine (including a stop to the intervention in eastern Ukraine and the return of Crimea). For some commentators, the results of the sanctions have been rather disappointing so far (and a revision of the annexation of Crimea is completely unrealistic) [Havlik et al. 2014].

A new threat to Ukraine's stability emerges with Russia's hostile actions in the Azov Sea in 2018. These actions aim to secure Russia's full control over the Kerch Strait in order to establish a land corridor and link the Eastern parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions with the Crimean Peninsula occupied by Russia. Russia's actions also appear to put pressure on Ukrainian commercial shipping and trade activity in the Black Sea area and the Sea of Azov. By constructing the bridge between Crimea and mainland Russia in 2018 [Troianovski 2018], the Kremlin has obtained a chance to harass Ukrainian vessels and negatively impact Ukraine's shipping to and from Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk. In particular, the Russians are practicing systematic and long-term searches of Ukrainian crews and cargoes, thus causing thousands-dollar losses for Ukrainian shipping companies and ports [The Economist 2018].

So far, the EU has been reluctant to contribute extensively to the protection of Ukraine's territorial integrity by military means (Despite the absence of military support, the EU provides unwavering support to Ukraine's independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty, and it has launched many initiatives to support the development of Ukraine's economy, governance, civil society, and connectivity [EEAS].). According to Depmpsey [2015], "Europeans' unwillingness to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity is due not only to the reluctance of most EU governments to provide Ukraine with weapons <…> this unwillingness also stems from the fact that most European governments do not believe Ukraine's territorial integrity matters that much to their own security".

And while this argument makes sense at a certain level, it also may send a message that in the eyes of many EU states territorial integrity of Ukraine concerns only Ukraine and has nothing to do with the security of the Eastern European region. "For most Europeans, the war in Ukraine does not threaten their values" [Dempsey, 2015]. However, the ongoing crisis in Donbas has already put into

question the Helsinki Final Act signed in 1975, the document that affirmed the fundamental principle of inviolable post-World War II frontiers [Helsinki Final Act, 1975].

Since the collapse of the USSR, the EU has used its neighborhood policy mechanisms to diffuse its normative visions (argued by Manners to be characteristic of the "Normative Power Europe" [Manners 2002]). According to Manners, among the core EU's norms are peace, democracy, human rights, liberty and rule of law. However, the multiple (economic, migration, security and political) crises in the EU have started 'denting' the image of the EU in Ukraine [C3EU 2015-2018; EUNPACK 2018], including images of its normative identity. Ukraine's own long-term political and economic crises on the one hand, and the EU modest successes in solving the ongoing crisis in Eastern Ukraine on the other, are also behind the evolution of EU perceptions in Ukraine to the negative. This intensifying trend may contribute to a less enthusiastic attitude of Ukrainians towards 'European choice' and potential integration, as well as impact burgeoning relations of Ukraine with the EU.

This study adds to literature on the conflict in Ukraine (see Mearsheimer [2014]; Tsygankov [2015]; Smith [Smith 2015]; Yost [Yost 2015]; Yurgens [2015]; Strasheim [2016] and many others) and a growing body of research on EU perceptions in Ukraine (e.g. Elgström [2018]; Elgström [2015]; and others). The article focuses on the perceptions of the EU and other key actors in the Donbas crisis resolution viewed through the prism of narratives. Theoretical grounds and empirical findings are elaborated in the following sections.

3.   Theoretical framework: a Strategic Narratives approach and EU perceptions

In its study of Ukrainian elite perceptions of key actors in the Donbas crisis, this article engages with a new theory in international relations research – strategic narrative theory [Miskimmon *et al*. 2013]. A novel theorization in IR, it deals with meaning circulation, information flows, and communication in external relations. Importantly, this theory uses the notion of narrative, which is not a new one. According to Gerald Prince, narratives are the "representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence" [Prince 1982: 1]. Kenneth Burke [1974)] stated that each narrative is formed through five obligatory interrelated components: characters or agents, a setting, environment or scene, a conflict or action, tools and behavior actors use to address it, and a resolution. In semiotics, narrative is, as Roland Barthes [1977] puts it, "prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed among different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances" [Barthes 1977].

In linguistics, a narrative is viewed as a major vehicle of human thought. Narrative is "blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation", or "world imagination" [Herman 2011]. It is a kind of information processing strategy characterized by an overall causal frame, the general plot, which is itself composed of a frequently tangled hierarchy of nested plots and subplots" [Argyros 1992: 662]. Reflecting personal experiences and meaning, narratives facilitate placing personal experience within broader institutional and social contexts. As such, narratives may play a dual role. Internally, they help hold members within a social community together, providing a sense of shared identity. Externally, narratives convey the nation's image to outside audiences.

For many scholars, identity is a central issue in any narratives. The notion of identity in this case incorporates national identity, collective identity, and self-esteem. Actors give meaning to themselves and others through narratives (for theorization of the relation between Self and Other that informs this Special Issue see Introduction [Chaban and Zhabotynska 2018]. Thus, narratives have the capacity to shape who we are (our identity) and also what we know (our knowledge), and what we do (our actions).

The image-making role of narratives is also significant. Kenneth Boulding defines an image as "the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit, or its internal view of itself and its universe" [Boulding 1959:120–1]. However, some scholars refer the notion of image

only to national image, self-image, and reputation [Zahara 2016)]. Apart from images, perceptions – the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted [English Oxford Living Dictionaries] and stereotypes – a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people" [Cardwell 1996] are also significant in international relations, because they "serve to justify a nation's desired reaction or treatment toward another nation" [Alexander et al. 2005]. As Robert Jervis [1989] puts it, "the image of a state can be a major factor in determining whether and how easily the state can reach its goal". Therefore, a desired image can often bear a greater impact on international relations than a significant increment in military or economic power.

Country leaders are argued to shape the domestic and international public opinion by means of well thought-out communication with some emotional coloring, use of "compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn" [Freedman 2006:22]. Importantly, "narratives are not necessarily analytical and, when not grounded in evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion, or on metaphors and dubious historical analogies. A successful narrative will link certain selected events while excluding others, define and separate good news from bad tidings, and explain who is winning and who is losing" [Freedman 2006: 23].

Stories seem to play an extremely important role in communication, including the ways how organizations talk about themselves.

Identity-determining and image-making characterize the strategic narrative. Anne Marie Slaughter, defining a strategic narrative in terms of the competitive interests of the US nation, argues: "A narrative is a story. A national strategic narrative must be a story that all Americans can understand and identify with in their own lives" [Slaughter 2011:4]. This article follows the definition of strategic narrative suggested by Miskimmon *et al.* [2014] who sees it as a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. In other words, a strategic narrative is a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate. It is a narrative about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want [Miskimmon et al. 2014]. Consequently, the strategic narrative analysis comprises three levels: the system level (how a political actor conceives his understanding of international order), the identity level (the story of a political actor, its values, character, and its goals), and the issue level (why a policy is needed and desirable, and how it will be achieved) [Miskimmon A., et al. 2018]. The theory of strategic narratives also suggests that the strategic narrative process is subdivided into *formation* (includes understanding how and under what conditions political actors construct narratives), *projection* (includes considerations of how and under what conditions narratives are disseminated), and *reception* (includes considerations of how and under what conditions narratives are received/understood) [Miskimmon *et al.* 2018]. Therefore, leaders have a considerable range in constructing strategic narratives to exercise "public justifications" [Kornprobst 2012)], though they are constrained by domestic and international political contexts and their communication environment.

Grounded in the strategic narratives theory, this analysis tries to answer the following questions: Who are the key actors of the Donbas crisis as perceived by the elites? How are these actors perceived? More specifically, how is the EU and its role in the crisis resolution perceived in Ukraine? Who are the other key actors in the Donbas crises in the eyes of Ukrainian elites?

The analysis of the Ukraine elite opinion (40 interviews) helps us assess the range and flow of narratives. Elites are people in the position to shape the political agenda and perceptions of the general public of Ukraine towards the role of the EU and other countries in the Donbas conflict resolution. Since the structure of the narrative prescribes the obligatory consideration of the actors in the "story line", this article focuses on the elite's perceptions of the key actors in the "Donbas drama" – Ukraine, the EU/EU members states and Russia – and treats them as indicators of the reception of the "European choice" as the narrative formulated and projected by the Ukrainian post-Maidan government as well as "Normative Power Europe" as the narrative formulated and

projected by the EU towards the members of its Eastern Neighborhood. The position of elites in the intersection of domestic and external strategic narratives is natural. Introduction to this issue quoted Nadelemann who argued that elites are "transnational moral entrepreneurs" who are required to "mobilize popular opinion and political support both within their country and abroad", "stimulate and assist in the creation of likeminded organizations in other countries", and "play a significant role in elevating their objectives beyond its identification with the national interests of their government" [Nadelmann 1990: 482, as cited in Chaban and Zhabotynska 2018].

4. Introducing the method

The conceptual framework of this article integrates theoretical perspectives from the field of political science and cognitive linguistics, providing us with tools to trace and interpret the narratives. The dataset of this article is comprised of the texts of 40 interviews with Ukrainian elites from business, political, cultural and civil society spheres. The analyzed elite opinions were obtained in the course of semi-structured interviews undertaken within the framework of the C3EU project [C3EU, 2015-2018] in winter 2016-2017, after the conflict in Donbas had started.

The interviews were semi-structured. This format warranted comparison between individual respondents and cohorts. At the same time, the format allowed interviews to resemble conversation. The empirical data gathered in interviews are presented below without names. The anonymity is prescribed by the Human Ethics rules. The responses, however, do indicate what cohort the interviewees belong to (Bus for business elites, Pol for political elites, Civ for civil society representatives and Cult for cultural elites). The respondents represent different parts of Ukraine: the capital, its central part, as well as eastern regions. The answers of the interviewed were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and later translated verbatim from Ukrainian or Russian (the interviewees chose the language they would like to the interview to be conducted).

Ukrainian elites' responses are analyzed to trace the perceptions of key actors in the Donbas crisis – perceptions that are believed to feed into the narratives of reception (within the strategic narrative theory). The preliminary analysis of the data pointed to the perception of four main actors by the elites: Ukraine, the European Union (EU), Russia, and the USA. Elites also singled out other players – mostly EU member states (Germany, France, Poland, Lithuania, etc.). Yet, those other actors were seen to play a less significant role in the mediating the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, particularly in Donbas. With Ukraine being in the epicenter of the conflict, three axes of dyadic relations were formulated for the further analysis: Ukraine–the EU/EU member states, Ukraine–the US, and Ukraine–Russia. The narratives that appeared in reflection to the first axis of relations were the most visible in the material (the interview focused on the EU perceptions in Ukraine, after all). The last axis of relations – Ukraine-Russia – has received the least of reflections.

The forty texts provide a sufficient database for content analysis and generalization. The content analysis was conducted on three levels. Firstly, topical words of each text were analyzed in terms of their denotational and connotational meanings (e.g. *assistance* denotes 'help' and has positive evaluation; *insufficient* denotes 'not enough' and has negative evaluation). Secondly, the sentences were analyzed in terms of their direct or indirect (metaphoric) meaning and the meaning of positive or negative evaluation (e.g. "*these countries have made Russia sit at the negotiating table*" has a metaphoric meaning of participation in the negotiations on the conflict resolution and positive evaluation). And thirdly, sentences of each text were analyzed in terms of their propositional content, which identified the opinion expressed about key actors and their actions / attitudes towards the Donbas crisis (e.g. "*the European Union is the main guarantor of the maintenance of this peace process*" where the EU is recognized as an actor of the peace process which guarantees peace process and its evaluation is positive). The obtained opinions were grouped, generalized and processed.

5. Empirical Findings

The Donbas crisis: Ukraine–the EU axis. In the framework of the Russia-Ukrainian conflict, the EU's position on Ukraine is seen as somewhat ambiguous. The EU is perceived to aim to resolve the conflict, but, at the same time, it is not seen to show initiative or persistence: "It [EU support] is stable. Stable but insufficient. We understand what the unpredictable or rather predictable imperial policy of the Russian Federation is" (Bus6). The EU is not seen to demonstrate its political power and will either, although Ukraine anticipated more resolute actions on part of the EU: "I think this [EU] support and assistance is insufficient and in general it is so shallow... but in absence of other options … well, it is good we have at least this support" (Soc4). This somewhat indistinct policy of the EU is seen to contribute to elites' more negative assessments of EU diplomatic and mediation efforts to resolve the Donbass crisis.

The Minsk agreements and the role of the EU in their implementation are perceived in ambiguous terms too. On the one side, they are seen as a positive factor: "The European Union is the main guarantor of the maintenance of this peace process. And, unfortunately, I cannot formulate any alternatives to it, and I haven't met any options either" (Soc1). On the other hand, they are criticized. This important, as the EU is not a formal member of the Minsk Agreements (two EU member states – Germany and France – are the official mediators and arguably, the EU's proxies). There is also a shared consensus that Minsk agreements have influenced Russia's actions and somehow protected Ukraine from external Russian aggression:

> As for the Minsk process, these countries have made Russia sit at the negotiating table, but things are not moving any further. <…> To radically change the situation there, we need to understand the reasons, but the EU does not want or cannot do this (Soc8).

One of the most common opinions is that the EU is not going to resort to its full potential to end the Donbas conflict:

> It is a party of compromise. The EU cares neither about Ukrainian nor about Russian interests. They [the EU] seek to end the conflict. That is, it doesn't matter for them who's right and who's wrong. And that's the question. <…> On the one hand, it is probably good, but on the other hand, it is a very conformist position. Let me say, this is a position of a bureaucrat, not a politician (Bus9).

Interviewed elites believed that the EU seeks ways to stop military actions in the short-span time period only, but it does not address all the deeper issues that caused the crisis. Such a position, as well as the EU's limited desire to engage fully in the conflict does not appeal to the Ukrainian elites:

> … because this [EU position] I consider as negative and, unfortunately, wrong. They either don't understand or, as I've already said, they firstly care about their own interests. They do not want to see refugees on their own territory. That is why they would like to freeze this conflict (Bus10).

The EU's rather reluctant reactions to the conflict in Ukraine, and in Donbas in particular, are explained by the current mutual economic and political interests that exist between Europe and Russia. Yet, despite these interests, the EU has gone ahead with the sanction, "The EU has unanimously imposed sanctions against Russia and so far continues to adhere to them, although there is always a risk that Russian lobbyists in Europe will be able to weaken them" (Soc8). Consequently, Europe in this conflict is not seen to use all of its capabilities, because it primarily tries to secure its own interest in

relations with Russia. In the eyes of elites, such a position sufficiently narrows the field for EU's maneuvers and weakens the significance of its peacekeeping aspirations:

"There are some themes, certain topics that do not concern Ukraine but exist by themselves. Among them, there are mutual economic interests between the EU states and Russia. Of course, this is a factor that limits the capabilities of the EU" (Soc5).

Overall, the EU is perceived as a weakened political structure that has some significant internal problems which affect its foreign policy concerning efforts to resolve the Donbass crisis. Brexit and the strengthening of right-nationalist movements in the EU member states are among the most significant problems that are facing the EU, according to the respondents:

In my opinion, this [Brexit] is the most ... failure and what is of negative significance for us, because it weakens the EU, weakens EU's support of Ukraine <...> It is clear that this [the strengthening of right-nationalist movements] also weakens the unity of the European Union and weakens its support for Ukraine in the war with Russia (Soc4).

The interviewed decision-makers believed that these two main problems have the most negative impact on resolving the Donbas crisis, as they weaken the EU from the inside:

Europe is losing much internally, [it has] many challenges … So all this accounts for skepticism on the side of Ukraine and for skepticism as to the reliability of European institutions. That is, they are reliable, but how long they will last and how well they are able to withstand an external pressure remains a question (Pol2).

The Donbass conflict was seen to significantly affect Ukraine-EU relations. Elites shared an opinion that Ukrainians started to get disillusioned with the EU, because they think that the EU did not adequately pressure Russia to stop its hostile actions in Donbas, "I consider that Ukraine should solve this conflict on its own. But the international community should not stay aside" (Bus3). The weak EU's position towards Russia and the lack of rapid counteractions made Ukrainians feel a bit abandoned, which motivates them to believe that it is better to get focused more on their own country than to seek a refuge in the EU: "And now, well, now Ukraine needs to gain strength and rely mainly on its own forces. To restore the state and the army, then the European Union will understand us better" (Cul7).

At the same time, most of the interviewees believe that often Europeans do not understand Ukraine and the problems it confronts as a post-totalitarian / post-Soviet state:

In different ways [Europeans perceive Ukraine]. During Euromaidan, it was certain sympathy, but the attitude to Crimea is not unified, because many Europeans associate Crimea rather with Russia than with Ukraine. A severe conflict in the East – it depends: firstly, on the work of Russian propaganda, and secondly, on how much sensitive Europeans are to such things. Because they [Russians] pose it as an internal Ukrainian conflict. And, well, there are people who believe this (Bus7).

A somewhat distorted perception of Ukraine can be explained by the lack of truthful information obtained by Europeans as well as by effective work of Russian propaganda:

Today Ukraine really ...there was time when Ukraine topped [EU] news. Now we do not top the news, yet [we] are still present in the European information space. So, certainly, such events as the Euromaidan formed a very attractive and positive image of the country, but further events related to the war and this or that conflict, let us speak frankly, thanks to a very

active and effective Russian propaganda, this interest… it still remains, but Europeans became more pragmatic in their attitude to Ukraine, and they are not as fascinated as they were after the Euromaidan (Pol6).

The EU is recognized to effectively promote its legal norms and values, even in the framework of the Donbas crisis, spreading them to all the participants:

…lifting of sanctions is tied to full implementation of Minsk Agreements, it is enshrined in EU legal documents. This means that even if the majority of EU countries start crying out for lifting sanctions but there will be no legal grounds for it, the sanctions will remain. This is what makes the EU different from the USA, where sanctions can be lifted by the President's executive order. And this is what makes America, on the one hand, potentially much stronger (resolute), and on the other hand, much less predictable. And the EU, in this case, as it puts a strong emphasis on law and standards rather than on some personal decisions" (Pol8). "<…> but now there is the intensification, there is a dialogue between institutions, the exchange of experience, I mean they [Euromaidan and the Donbass crises] did affect [the EU], as it [EU integration] is our world-view choice and I am very confident and I will do everything possible for it not to be changed. Otherwise I just do not see myself in a country that is not developing in a European way (Pol7).

The interviewees ascribe a significant role in settling the Donbas crisis to the position of individual EU countries, primarily Germany and the United Kingdom. The role of France is understood as visible, but much weaker than that of Germany. Among other active participants, Poland and Lithuania are named:

I think that here everything is historically linked, that those who are most interested in stabilization and stopping of aggression in Ukraine – [they] are our partners on borders with Eastern Europe: it is Poland, the Baltic States, and partly Romania. The countries that understand what the Russian aggression is, that still remember the WWII. And I think they don't have any illusions about Russia's territorial ambitions. That is why they are the biggest defenders of Ukraine, and I would like to emphasize the role of Germany in this issue. It is because Angela Merkel did really much for Ukraine, and she plunged personally into these processes, [the ones] she could even have avoided, but she took a personal responsibility for them. It is important" (Soc9). "I mean Germany is very active, and Poland has its own agenda. France is partially active. Yes, the member states are more active than the EU as an institution (Soc10).

In summary, content analysis of the interview texts grouped alongside the *Ukraine–EU* axis demonstrates that Ukrainian elites recognize the EU's legal norms and values, its pro-Ukrainian position in the Donbas crisis and its diplomatic and mediation efforts to resolve this crisis. However, they see the EU's policy as aimed to freeze the conflict so as to not hurt itself. The inability of the EU to resort to its full potential to end the Donbas conflict is explained among elites by three factors: (1) mutual economic and political interests that exist between Europe and Russia, which results in the (2) the desire to secure its own interest in relations with Russia; and (3) the absence of adequate understanding of Ukraine as a post-Soviet state and the current problems it confronts. The EU is considered to be a somewhat weakened political structure with major internal problems that challenge it. The EU's internal challenges are seen to impact the resolution of the Donbas crisis. An insufficiently distinct or resolute pressure by the EU on Russia to stop the conflict underlines a certain disillusionment among Ukrainian elites – a sentiment that risks undermining the pro-European aspirations in Ukraine. A narrow scope of the EU's actions around the conflict trigger a particular perception – Ukrainians are to be more self-sufficient in solving

their own country's problem rather than seek help from the EU. Importantly, a significant role in settling the Donbas crisis is ascribed to the positions of individual EU countries, first of all Germany and the United Kingdom, and also Poland and Lithuania.

The Donbas crisis: Ukraine–US axis. Apart from the EU, an important role in resolving the Donbas conflict is seen to be played by the US. The US is perceived to be a more effective mediator than the EU, able to negotiate and communicate with Russia while delivering results, thus protecting Ukraine's interests: "I think that without the US participation the effectiveness is quiet low and that's exactly what we observe nowadays" (Bus6). Ukrainians recognize an important and significant role of the US in resolving the conflict, noting that, on the one hand, the US exercises pressure on other countries and, on the other hand, support Ukraine and Ukraine's development via providing financial aid and training:

> … the United States, because, I would say, it's our ally in the struggle against Russia…. America [the United States] invests a lot in Ukraine's public sector, it finances many different programs, and, I guess, it powerfully presses the Ukraine's state power, urging it to fulfil certain international obligations (Soc7).

In brief, the content analysis of the interview texts grouped along the *Ukraine-US* axis shows that Ukrainian elites very often (48 references) recognize the US as the country whose role in the Donbas crisis resolution is very important, significant and highly appreciated, and it is a much more effective mediator and helper to Ukraine than the EU.

The Donbas crisis: Ukraine–Russia axis. Russia is clearly identified as a party that has the most powerful negative impact on the Donbas conflict: "…Russia, because there's a direct conflict with it, and of course its actions greatly affect this conflict, sharpening or weakening it. It is the most important problem for Ukraine, that's why it's clear that [it is] Russia" (Soc7). Despite repeated attempts of the Russian Federation to deny their active participation in the conflict (in hostilities and sending its armed forces to fight against Ukraine in Donbass), all interviewees qualify Russia as the main participant in breaking away the two regions on the East:

> Russia is a carrier of soviet-imperial ideology, and it openly imposes [it] on Donbas and Luhansk residents and it promotes these values, in which there isn't any sense at all. So, I think that in this conflict a European mind is versus a Soviet mind (Bus9).

> Some Ukrainians are still oriented towards Russia, due to close political, economic and peer-to-peer ties that existed between Ukrainians and Russians before 2014:
> Well, another thing that we have, you see, is a huge part of the society that has such a … certain schizophrenia, because they did not outstay from this Orthodox Eastern Slavic world, this imaginary community, or rather imagined community, yes. But at the same time, their rationale tells them that Russia, nonetheless, is hostile, Russia is dangerous, Russia is terrible, Russia is after all a dead end of development, yet, all the same, this belonging still remains. However, on the other hand, the same sociology shows that the society is somehow shifting and gradually drifting to the west, even if for various reasons there is no great fuss about the European Union (Soc4).

However, after annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbass, and after heavy human and material losses suffered by Ukraine in the current war, the number of such people is constantly decreasing:

…people begin to understand, and first of all Ukrainians, I would say that they had a rethinking of their views as to who is a friend, who is an enemy, who is a brother, who is, so to say, not a brother [under 'brother' Russia is meant, as Russians have long been perceived as 'brothers', 'fraternal people']… [it happened] when they [Ukrainians] understood that, after all, the brother turned out to be not a brother at all, that this brother creates serious problems, that he can come and kill (Pol3).

To sum up, the content analysis of the interview texts along the *Ukraine–Russia* axis shows that Russia is recognized as the main participant in the war, a hostile party that exerts the most powerful negative impact on the Donbas conflict, though it pretends not to participate in it officially on part of the separatists. While there are Ukrainians that are still Russia-oriented, their numbers are constantly decreasing due to the annexation of Crimea and heavy human and economic/material losses suffered by Ukraine in the Donbas war.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the perceptions grouped along the three axes of Ukraine's dyadic interactions in the Donbas crisis brings to the fore a set of narratives of how the Ukrainian elites understand the conflict:

- It is due to the interference of the EU that the Donbas conflict has been suspended from a further deployment and from highly probable more negative consequences for both Ukrainians and Europeans.
- The EU is not an ineffective intermediary in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It cares for its own economic and political interests and does not use its full force and influence to resolve the conflict.
- In search of an intermediary or an effective force to settle the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in Donbas in particular, Ukrainian politicians are oriented not so much on the EU but rather on the US and individual EU countries.
- Europeans do not have full information about the situation in Ukraine. Russian propaganda has a great influence on the formation of views of ordinary Europeans and opinion leaders on Ukrainian realities (the real state of affairs in Ukraine).
- Europe is perceived as a weakened political structure because of its internal conflicts, including Brexit. The EU is often not as resolute as EU member states (primarily Germany) and the US. That is why the EU's influence on the international arena is not as significant as it was before, and it is also not as strong as the influence of individual EU countries or the US alone.
- The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians perceive Russia as an aggressive force, the initiator and the party to the conflict, although there is still a small proportion of Russia-oriented Ukrainians. However, Ukrainians identify themselves as Europeans and seek an alliance with Europe.
- Although the EU is not sufficiently involved in resolving the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, particularly in Donbas, without this involvement, the conflict would go far beyond the bounds of Donbas and Crimea. Such events as the Maidan, the annexation of Crimea and the Donbass crisis have contributed much to the identification of the main vector for Ukraine's further development and orientation on the European integration course. These events also decisively influenced the self-identification of Ukrainians as part of a wider European community.

To conclude, Ukrainian elites' perceptions of the role of the EU in resolving the Donbas crisis are critical for the EU if it aims to remain Ukraine's legitimate and credible partner. The perceptions of the EU's role in mediating the Donbas crises are shaped and modified by the cohesiveness and content of the strategic narratives employed by EU actors towards Ukraine, the EU's effective public diplomacy, and the way the EU hears and understands Ukraine. The EU-Ukraine relations will benefit from the EU's policies, diplomatic actions and narratives reflective of the dominant EU perceptions among various cohorts in Ukraine – elites and the general public. One avenue to max making EU's role in mediating the crises resolution more visible is to engage with

target audiences in a respectful and understanding way to maximize reception of EU messages in key policy areas, upgrade and diversify the range of public diplomacy actions, etc.

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