5. Presentation and Discussion of Results: Ukrainian Belonging

Working with Grounded Theory, I condensed my findings into seven super-categories, which proved to be relevant to explaining how national belonging among IDPs is constituted and to assessing the impact of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas on it.

The chapters' subsections represent the subcategories of each super-category and guide the analytical thread for their analysis. The chapters' general structure follows the idea of presenting relevant data excerpts first before interpreting them individually and embedding them afterwards into the broader societal context by comparing findings with the current state of research to illuminate the linkages between the individual and the societal levels. Each chapter's interim conclusion serves to condense and discuss the findings.

In this context, it is imperative to consider that working with Grounded Theory does not necessarily lead to the same findings (see chapter 4.2) or reflect the limitations of this research project, which both influence the outcome of my analysis: From the abundance of the data, I chose, in line with my research perspective, the pithiest aspects in the interviews. Hence, there are more relevant aspects concerning the research question in the data than I could analyze in depth, some of them will be outlined in the conclusion to round off the analysis' general picture.

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5.1. Background Information on the Interviewees

Prior to the presentation and discussion of my findings, I outline the interviewees' biography for a better understanding for the following analysis about their national belonging.

Interviewee I3, read as female, was born in a medium-sized city in the Donetsk oblast, one of the two oblasts in the Donbas region, in the late 1950s. She is the oldest interviewee in my sample. From her statements, I assume she is of ethnic Ukrainian origin. In childhood, her parents moved to a big city in Donetsk oblast due to her parents' studies. Interviewee I3 spent all her childhood and teenage years in this city, and she graduated school and university there. She started to work in the educational sector and raised her own family there. Due to her mother's health condition as the region started to lack doctors and medicine shortly after the conflict's outbreak, both fled to a big city in Southeastern Ukraine which was not affected by the conflict. However, both returned soon to their home in Donetsk oblast. Her mother felt better and thus wanted to go back home, but they also lacked the financial means to rent a flat somewhere else while they had their own property.[30] However, their financial situation deteriorated further because the Ukrainian government decided to limit access to state pensions for residents in non-government controlled areas as a reaction to the conflict from December 2014 onwards (cf. UNHCR 2017): Ukrainians in the conflict region were required to register as internally displaced with the Ukrainian authorities to be further entitled to receive their pension and had to pick up their pension at ATMs in the government controlled areas of the country (cf. ibid.). However, the local pension of DNR was not enough to cover her life expenses, so her children helped her out. Although already having financial (pension) problems before her mother's death, they could not flee another time due to her mother's health condition, which deteriorated again. After her mother's death a few years later, she moved to live with her children, who had fled earlier to a big city in Central Ukraine. She stresses that she did

30 In Ukraine, it is common to own house instead of renting from others. This was one of the problems for the Ukrainian governments in dealing with the Donbas conflict.

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not want to be alone and that she could not afford housing alone somewhere else as reasons to follow her children.

Interviewee I5, read as male, was born in a big city in the Donetsk oblast in the late 1970s. He mentions being a Muslim Crimean Tatar as well as Ukrainian regarding his ethnic origin. He graduated from school and university there but left to study abroad for some years. He returned to Ukraine around the turn of the millennium to start working in a religious profession in his hometown. As he changed his job temporarily, he moved to a big city in Central Ukraine for some years. He returned to continue his previous responsibilities some years later. He states that he witnessed the outbreak of the Euromaidan movement. or the ›Revolution of Dignity‹ as he calls it, in 2013/14 and even participated in it, both in Kyiv and the Donetsk region, as well as in the subsequent countermovement against secessionist tendencies in the region. He was forced to flee from the Donetsk region later due to his political commitment. He has not returned back to the Donbas since then, but now lives in a big city in Central Ukraine, where he continues to pursue his religious profession and political commitment.

Interviewee I9, read as female, was born in a medium-sized city in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, Eastern Ukraine but not the Donbas, in the early 1980s. She is the youngest interviewee in my sample. From her statements, I surmise she is of ethnic Ukrainian origin. During her childhood, her family moved to a medium-sized city in Zaporizhia oblast, Southern Ukraine, because of her parents' job. Interviewee I9 spent all her childhood and teenage years in this city. After graduating from school, she moved to a bigger city in the same oblast to study and work there. After falling in love, she moved to a big city in Donetsk oblast, where she started her own family as her husband was originally from there. When the Euromaidan 2013/14 and the subsequent Donbas conflict evolved, she moved with her child to her parents as she was afraid Russian troops might approach her city as well. At first, she thought she had only left temporarily as she did not expect the conflict to continue for long. Shortly after she had left, her city became involved in the Donbas conflict. However, as the conflict continued, she moved to her own apartment in another city in Zaporizhia oblast. She is the only one of all the IDPs interviewed to stress that she

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officially registered as an IDP. Her husband was not allowed to leave the city at first as he was expected to work in public service or to fight in the Ukrainian army. The conflict started to burden their relationship, leading in the end to divorce due to their divergent political attitudes. From her perspective, she »grew up as a patriot« and thus »always put Ukraine first, no matter what happened«, but her husband, as a Donbas resident, held the belief that the Donbas has the right to secede. After moving to Southern Ukraine, she started to be politically committed.

Interviewee I10, read as male, was born in a medium-sized city in the Donetsk oblast in the early 1970s. Interviewee I10 spent all his childhood, teenage, and adult years in this city: He graduated school and university there, set up his own business and started his own family there. He is of ethnic Russian origin but born in Ukraine. Due to the armed conflict in the Donbas, he and his family fled to an IDP camp in the government-controlled parts of Donetsk oblast in summer 2014. He has become politically committed in the IDP camp they live in.

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Table 1: Background information on the sample[31]

	Gender	Age	Place of Birth	Education	Last Place of Residence before Escape	Actual Place of Residence	Ancestry/ Ethnicity
3	f	(late) 1950s	medium-sized city in Donetsk oblast[32] (East)	tertiary	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	big city in Central Ukraine	(most likely) Ukrainian
5	m	(late) 1970s	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	tertiary	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	big city in Central Ukraine	Tatar and Ukrainian
9	f	(early) 1980s	medium-sized city in Dnipropetrovsk oblast (East)	tertiary	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	big city in Zaporizhia oblast (South)	(most likely) Ukrainian
10	m	(early) 1970s	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	tertiary	big city in Donetsk oblast (East)	small city in government-controlled Donbas (East)	Russian

31 Following Grounded Theory's theoretical sample approach, the sampling is based on pragmatic reasons and not on predetermined sampling criteria (see chapter 4.3). Therefore, the sampling is not balanced with regard to standard socio-economic aspects, such as gender, age, education, etc. Nonetheless, I want to provide some further information on socio-economic aspects in the case of Ukrainian IDPs. According to Sasse and Lackner (2018: 142), most IDPs are middle-aged and two-thirds of them are women. The levels of education and training are high in Ukraine, as stated by the European Training Foundation (2018: 5); most likely this is also the case for IDPs.

32 Regarding the administrative division of the country, Ukraine is organized into 24 so-called ›oblasts‹ in the sense of administrative areas. This term was used in the USSR and is still in use in Ukraine.

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5.2. Ancestry as a Relic of the Past (Soviet Nationality Regime)

Ancestry has been relevant for Ukrainian belonging in the light of the country's long history under foreign rule and in particular within the Soviet nationality regime, but it decreased in relevance after the country's independence 1991 (see chapter 3). In this light, the question arises of *which role ancestry plays as a marker of belonging today*, in particular in the face of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas.

Comparing the interviews, the findings suggest a lack of importance for ancestry as a marker of belonging, but can be considered to be a relic of the past Soviet nationality regime. All the interviewees address their descent, but vary in how they emphasize it. Most likely, its lack of relevance can be explained by the politics of belonging of the past Ukrainian government which strengthened the civic as well as inclusive foundations of ›Ukrainianness‹ (see chapter 3).

In the case of interviewee I3, ancestry plays a role in her self-understanding as Ukrainian as she stresses her parents' origin as an answer to the question of what it personally means to be Ukrainian:

> I3: »Well, I have been Ukrainian my whole life. My erm parents, my dad is from West-Ukraine, my mom is from CENTRAL UKRAINE.«

From this sparse information, one could assume that her family is ethnic Ukrainian as both her parents come from regions where ethnic Ukrainians dominate, but later migrated to the eastern region Donbas, which comprises a large ethnic Russian and Russophone population (cf. State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001, Fischer 2019: 7). The subjective importance of ancestry in identifying oneself as Ukrainian can, however, be doubted: first, as questions can externally structure one's answer, as is criticized by scholars using the narrative interview (see chapter 4); second, as ancestry, in the sense of ethnicity, is not addressed more concretely in her interview. In this context, her answer seems to emphasize the legacy of the Soviet nationality regime, which derives ethnicity or nationality from descent not residence and has not yet faded out (see chapter 3).

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Interviewee I5 addresses his ancestry at the very beginning of his biographical self-presentation:

I5: »Regarding national origin, the majority of my ancestors are Tatars, but there are also Ukrainians among them.«

His answer reveals, firstly, that descent plays a role in his self-presentation as it is among the first pieces of information which he provides without being directly asked about it. Secondly, he emphasizes that most of his ancestors are Tatars, most likely pointing out his dominating ethnic self-understanding. At the same time, he stresses that he has Ukrainian ancestors, most likely in the ethnic sense, too. The prominent placement of this information at the beginning of the interview highlights the relevance of ancestry to his self-identification. Nonetheless, his self-presentation as an ethnic Tatar and Ukrainian might also illustrate the lingering influence of the Soviet nationality regime on his self-identification. This becomes more plausible given the structure of his self-presentation, which seems to be the verbalization of a CV, as it includes personal data such as name, age, place and year of birth, as well as information on his educational and professional career (see chapter 4.4.1). Nonetheless, his prominent placing of ancestors still indicates its subjective relevance for his belongingness to Ukraine, most likely reinforced by the armed conflict in the country, as it seems to demonstrate loyalty to Ukraine.

In contrast, interviewees 9 and 10 demonstrate that ancestry has a lack of significance in terms of their self-identification as Ukrainian. Although interviewee I9 mentions her parents' Southern Ukrainian origin, this information seems to serve for the chronological embedding of her life history rather than to substantiate the relevance of ancestry in her understanding of being Ukrainian. This is further supported by the fact that she did not address her ancestry again, especially not in response to the direct question about what it means to be Ukrainian. At the same time, her information on ancestry is as sparse as that from the previous interviewees. In the case of I10, he states that his »parents are native to Russia«, who migrated to Ukraine due to work, so his family is most likely ethnic Russian, considering that the Soviet nationality regime was based on

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descent and not on residence (see chapter 3). However, his Russian origin does not play an important role in his self-identification given the sparse information he provides on ancestry and the marginal placement of this information within the interview. Referring to Schütze's narrative drives and constraints, I even argue that it was the need to explain his sibling's escape to Russia which unintentionally revealed the information about his ethnic Russian origin.

Comparing the interviews, ancestry does not play a major role for the interviewees' self-identification as Ukrainian. This becomes visible as ancestry is only addressed by two out of four respondents, due to its marginal thematization within the interviews and in contrast to the significance of other markers of belonging, which will be presented in the following chapters. Consequently, this supports, firstly, the stated *shift from an ethnic-exclusive to an inclusive, multi-ethnic understanding of ›Ukrainianness‹* on the societal level (cf. Onuch and Hale 2018: 91).[33] Various studies show that the majority of Ukrainians have come to see themselves as Ukrainian in the civic rather than the ethnic sense (see chapter 3). Therefore, my analysis mirrors the decreasing relevance of ancestry as a marker of belonging. At the same time, I postulate, secondly, that ancestry is most likely a *relic of the Soviet nationality regime*. I concurrently argue that the legacy of the Soviet nationality regime is slowly fading out considering the age differences among the interviewees.

However, the question arises of to what extent the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas contradicts the fading out of ancestry as markers of belonging like ethnicity, as »mainstream scholarship [on national belonging] teaches us to expect the mobilization and polarization of ethnic identities« (Kulyk 2023: 984). If we consider the dualistic nature of national

33 For example, although ancestry was in second position in the study by Wilson at the end of the 1990s, he nonetheless concluded there is a more civic than ethnic Ukrainian national identity (cf. Wilson 2002: 44). In Shulman's study at the beginning of the new millennium, the similar concept of Ukrainian ethnicity was in fifth position, following factors classified as civic markers of belonging (cf. Shulman 2004: 43f). In the study by Bureiko and Moga in 2015, Ukrainian origin was rated in the second to last position, following again civic markers of belonging. In contrast, more respondents voted for the inclusive option ›consider all citizens of Ukraine to be Ukrainians regardless of their ethnic origin‹ (cf. Bureiko and Moga 2019: 144f).

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belongingness, a person's ethnicity might have increased in relevance in the face of the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia. This is probably illustrated by interviewee I5, who seems to use ancestry to legitimize himself as a loyal Ukrainian by aligning his different (ethnic) identities of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar. In contrast, the case of I10 demonstrates that tensions have arisen for ethnic Russians in Ukraine concerning their belongingness. This becomes most apparent considering the language issue in Ukraine (see chapter 5.3 on language). Hence, interviewee I10 probably locks away his Russian origin as he seems to avoid mentioning it instead of being an example of fully adopting civic Ukrainian belonging or embracing mixed Russian–Ukrainian belonging. Whereas an inclusive understanding of being Ukrainian does not necessarily exclude other affiliations, such as in the case of a Crimean Tatar origin, an ethnic Russian background is more problematic to align given the conflict and its escalation into war recently. Thus, ethnic Russian Ukrainians need other markers to stress their sense of Ukrainian national belonging. Although the data from this study does not support the thesis of the growing significance of ethnicity in the light of the ongoing war (see Kulyk 2023), Sasse and Lackner (2019: 2,16) highlight the increased importance of ethnicity in the case of Ukrainians living in the government-controlled Donbas as it allows them to express their views on the conflict, more concretely, to demonstrate distancing from Russia. Probably their finding also applies to IDPs, as could be the case with interviewee I5. Lastly, we need further studies to show if the war will reverse the general trend towards a civic, culturally based, and inclusive understanding of ›Ukrainianness‹.

5.3. Switching Languages: From Russian to Ukrainian

In essence, the meaning of ›being Ukrainian‹ has initially been grounded in ethno-cultural characteristics, in particular language, due to Ukraine's long history of foreign rule. At the same time, Ukrainians experienced assimilation politics under Polish, Russian as well as Soviet rule (see chapter 3). While ethnic differences to the Polish supported the relevance of the Ukrainian language (and culture) as a marker of belonging, the simi-

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larities to Russians complicated Ukraine's nation-building. In the case of imperial Russian and Soviet rule, Ukrainians have not been regarded as a distinct, sovereign people for most of history (cf. Simon 2017: 2). Imperial Russian assimilation politics reached their peak with the banning of the Ukrainian language in the last decades of the 19th century (cf. ibid.). In the USSR, the Ukrainian language experienced an ambivalent time (see chapter 3): At first, the Soviet nationality regime temporarily supported the Ukrainian language in the 1920s and early 1930s, aiming to erase upcoming nationalism by admitting certain concessions to its peoples. However, Soviet politics radically changed in the mid-1930s to promote Sovietization, among other ideas, by setting up Russian as the statewide lingua franca. This resulted in the marginalization of the Ukrainian language (cf. Kulyk 2011: 631f). Since the country's independence in 1991, language has been an important aspect of Ukraine's nation-building. Due to the Soviet legacy of inherent, unsolved tensions and antagonisms among different peoples in the USSR (cf. Harris 2020: 597), Ukraine's nation-building process has, however, been complicated by opposing linguistic policies, especially when we consider the presidencies of President Yushchenko (2005–2010), who is characterized as ›pro-Ukrainian‹, and ›pro-Russian‹ President Yanukovych (2010–2014) (see chapter 3). The promotion of Ukrainian as the state language is said to have been moderate (cf. Kappeler 2014: 270–273) but nonetheless controversial among the Russian(-speaking) population (and Russia). In this light, the question arises of *what relevance language has as a marker of belonging today*, especially in the light of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas.

If we compare the interviews, the relevance that language plays as a marker of belonging for the IDPs interviewed lies in it being a *practical means to demonstrate loyalty to Ukraine* and concurrently an individual *expression of distinction* and *state linguistic emancipation from Russia*. Its relevance can be shortly coined as the need to *switch from Russian to the Ukrainian language*. The armed conflict has thereby strengthened the relevance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging.

My analysis results in five subcategories. The first subcategory deals with the legacy of *Russification* on contemporary Ukrainian national belonging. The following subcategory highlights *the role of the Russian language*

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in the armed conflict in the Donbas. The third subcategory deals with the process of *linguistic emancipation from Russia* in the light of experiencing Russification and accusing Russia of beginning the conflict. The last two subcategories deal with multiple linguistic affiliations as they highlight the *self-identification of Crimean Tatars and Russians as Ukrainians.*

Russification

The impact of Russification on Ukrainian belonging is well illustrated by interviewee I9, who reports being from an originally Ukrainian-speaking family:

> I9: »[T]hey moved from the village to the city; they had already learned Russian then; it was regarded as the city language […] meaning, before it was uh kind of uh in the village there is a lack of education uh there was the message at that time for everyone in the Soviet Union that the Ukrainian language was a village language such as, you know, of uneducated people.«

In this quote, interviewee I9 explains how her parents had to switch from Ukrainian to Russian in Soviet times. Having been raised in a village in Southern Ukraine, they used to speak Ukrainian as their first and everyday language. After leaving their village to study, her parents had, however, switched from Ukrainian to Russian in their everyday communication.

This quote illustrates how Ukrainians had to learn Russian as the Soviet regime had promoted the Russian language as a statewide lingua franca since the mid-1930s and thereby linked it to social mobility in the sense of access to good education and jobs as well as city life generally (cf. Bilaniuk 2003: 51, Kappeler 2014: 237–241, Bureiko and Moga 2019: 138). By mentioning that her parents wanted to achieve more than what was possible in the village, she indicates the societal pressure in Soviet times of speaking in Russian. The use of the Ukrainian language consequently decreased because it was only spoken at home, especially in rural areas (cf. Bilaniuk 2003: 51). Whereas Russian was considered prestigious (cf. ibid.), other languages, such as Ukrainian, were devalued, as interviewee I9 points out here: Russian had the status of being the language of state elites, educated

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people, culture, and technology in Soviet times as opposed to Ukrainian, which has been considered to be provincial and peasant, being the language of the uneducated and rural population (cf. Kuzio 2001: 347, Onuch and Hale 2018: 86, Kappeler 2014: 240).

The case of interviewee I9 illustrates how Ukrainians experienced a radical linguistic change in the aftermath of the WWII, leading to a large discrepancy between language use and ethnic (and cultural) identity (cf. Kulyk 2011: 631). This becomes visible as interviewee I9 stresses interpersonal alienation among her own family: Having been raised and socialized solely in Russian, she points out some difficulties she experienced in interpersonal communication with her Ukrainian-speaking relatives in the rural area:

> I9: »I also remember clearly it was so strange that (2 sec) uh it happened that in a family that, you know, people didn't understand each other after only one generation.«

The Role of the Russian Language in the Armed Conflict in the Donbas

The role of the Russian language in the Donbas conflict is outlined by interviewee I9, who recounts her experiences in social network groups aiming at defending the Russian language in the run-up to the conflict in the Donbas:

> I9: »I was signed in with an account where it was written that I was from [Donbas], and after some period of time, still before the Euromaidan, it started that I was added to groups, very strange ones, which were named ›we defend uh the Russian language‹. And at that time there was nothing, no one of us—and we were never oppressed by anyone. No one has forbidden anyone to speak in Uk-[34][rainian, author's note] in Russian here. This was all artificially inflated from the side kind of uh, well, third […] a third kind of country, which was not interested in the sake that uh really this

34 The – indicates that interviewees break off their sentence in the middle so that words are not spoken, but then continue speaking.

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> uh our population but uh to establish opposition. […] When the events started, the war and so on, I understood that uh this was genuinely prepared. Meaning, some people in the background already knew that it would be like that. That was independent of our Maidan; this coup [it] just uh (2 sec) was a very fortunate moment to do that. […] informational mass media indoctrinates us, propaganda influences us, propaganda somehow influences opinion about the events, but actually I saw uh the preparation of the ground before Maidan that uh this linguistic issue started uh to intensify.«

Interviewee I9 recalls here how she was invited to groups on popular social network services which clearly aimed at defending the Russian language. In this context, she explains how she views the Donbas conflict: as artificially created from outside, for which the language controversy among the population was instrumentalized as legitimization and was thus not the result of the Euromaidan movement 2023/14. I9 refers here to the language policy of the interim post-Euromaidan government (2014), which serves as an example of violent Ukrainization politics as legitimization for the secessionist movement in the Donbas since then. More concretely, she refers to the government's decision to repeal the 2012 law on granting more rights to minority languages by the pro-Russian ex-president Yanukovych (2010–2014), with which he aimed to promote the Russian language as part of his politics of belonging (see chapter 3). Russia legitimizes its own involvement with its mission of having to protect the ethnic Russian as well as Russophone population in Ukraine from the fascist Ukrainian government(s) which came to power due to the Euromaidan in 2013/14 (cf. Kappeler 2014: 352, Szostek 2018: 118, Wilson 2015: 354, Irvin-Erickson 2017: 136f). However, the new law was not officially adopted before the conflict's outbreak, but only after the Euromaidan (cf. Kappeler 2014: 345). Interviewee I9 consequently emphasizes that it was not the Euromaidan itself, repeating Russian criticism of it as a ›coup d'état by fascists‹, but the instrumentalization of the language issue, most likely by Russia, that led to the armed conflict in the Donbas.

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Linguistic emancipation from Russia

Against the backdrop of Russification politics on Ukraine and the Donbas conflict, interviewee I9 aptly demonstrates a tendency among the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population to switch from Russian to the Ukrainian language:

> I9: »I am—why I want uh to master Ukrainian now again and return to it, because we are the first and as I hope last generation which […] in our family that has spoken Russian namely, uh under the influence of Ru-(ssian, author's note) uh Soviet propaganda. (<2 sec) Well, this is also an interesting moment: when I started to learn Ukrainian, I started to understand my relatives better whom we visited.«

> I9: »Yes, I speak in Ukrainian because uh I think it's necessary to switch to it. I have seen when we were divided by the Russian language […] all this, meaning, this has been the main message uh that uh we want to speak Russian, but we aren't allowed. Meaning, I think that uh this (harms us?); as a country we should slowly switch to the Ukrainian language, totally, and to get rid of the Russian language; then we will have less in common with them.«

The case of interviewee I9 demonstrates the personal as well as political relevance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging. On the one hand, her aspiration to learn Ukrainian is driven by her personal wish to communicate with her Ukrainian-speaking relatives (first quote). On the other hand, she views the Ukrainian language as a practical means of (political) emancipation from Russia and as a unifying force for the country concurrently: In her opinion, the Russification politics have divided Ukraine and caused a low sense of self-identification as Ukrainian, which she sees among the reasons for the outbreak of the Donbas conflict (see second quote). Thus, she promotes switching from Russian to Ukrainian in the sense of emancipating from Russia as it would strengthen Ukrainians' sense of national belonging. She thereby legitimizes her position by pointing out that Ukrainian is the state language. Hence, interviewee

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I9 is most likely in favor of linguistic policies that promote the Ukrainian language as an aspect of Ukraine's nation-building (cf. Bilaniuk 2015: 11).

The importance of the Ukrainian language as an aspect of ›Ukrainianness‹ is also underlined by interviewee I5, who considers it integral for Ukrainian national belonging as he blames the weak sense of Ukrainian belonging among the Donbas residents as the reason for Russia's success in separating the Donbas from Ukraine (see the following chapter on Soviet nostalgia). Hence, similarly to I9, he favors the promotion of the Ukrainian language as a unifying marker of belonging in Ukraine.

However, the promotion of the Ukrainian language is challenged by the Soviet legacy of the negative assessment of nationalism, which equates nationalism with Nazism (cf. Kulyk 2016: 591, 603) and, thus, treats nationalism as a threat (cf. Kuzio 2017: 291, Kappeler 2014: 204). This becomes prominent with interviewee I9, who emphasizes that the choice for the Ukrainian language is not a sign of chauvinist nationalism. She thereby seems to feel forced to legitimize promoting the Ukrainian language as a necessary means for Ukrainians to distance and emancipate themselves from Russia, referring once again to the low levels of identification with Ukraine as reasons for the country's recent challenges:

> I9: »This uh (stuttering), you know, this isn't nationalism; we are the best, you know, it's not for that, but for being further away from them; we have our own, we need more identification; we have a weak, you know, level of identification, at the events people didn't understand that they are Ukrainians, well, didn't feel Ukrainian […].«

Her statement becomes topical considering that Ukrainian nation-building politics have often been framed as radically nationalist by East Ukrainian as well as Russian politicians, (aiming at) producing fears and tensions among the Ukrainian population, especially between the mainly Ukrainian-speaking Western and mostly Russian-speaking Southern and Eastern Ukrainian population (cf. Kappeler 2014: 270f, Zhurzhenko 2014: 256ff). Nevertheless, the conflict with Russia increasingly improves the connotation of Ukrainian nationalism among the population, among other elements, towards the

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Ukrainian language (cf. Kulyk 2016: 599f, 603–607), as exemplified by I9 with her wish to switch to the Ukrainian language solely.

The significance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging also unfolds when considering the issue of Russian propaganda in the Donbas conflict, which interviewee I9 had previously addressed when reflecting on the relationship between the Russian language and the Euromaidan:

> I5: »As a Donetsk citizen, I know 100 percent that this [the Donbas conflict, author's note] is not an internal Ukrainian conflict. Russian propaganda tries to show the war in Donbas as an internal conflict in Ukraine. Indeed, if Russia had not brought in troops, if it would not have switched on its propaganda. You know what they did when uh they occupied [the Donbas conflict, author's note]? They first switched off all Ukrainian television channels and all Ukrainian radio and switched on its own Russian and local separatist TV channels and its own local radio. So, what did they do directly? They removed all Ukrainian information content.«

Interviewee I5 demonstrates here his perception of the Donbas conflict: While Russian propaganda tries to depict it as an internal Ukrainian conflict, he stresses that the Donbas conflict is Russian occupation in secret. He criticizes Russia in this context for using propaganda on its newly occupied territories in the Donbas to influence the local population to support Russia's position in the conflict. In this light, the promotion of the Ukrainian language is important for the ideological battleground, accompanying the military hostilities in the Donbas.

Self-identification as Ukrainian in the case of Crimean Tatars

The importance of the Ukrainian language is also stressed by I5; however, his promotion of the Ukrainian language is striking given his Crimean Tatar Muslim background. Being asked what it means personally for him, he stresses the relevance of the Ukrainian language twice:

> I5: »It's belongingness to the country as a territory, to its history, to the language, to its culture and national ideas. (2 sec) So in fact,

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for me, being Ukrainian that's being part of Ukraine—territoriality, culturally, linguistically, in other words the language, ideologically, well to be part of Ukrainian culture.«

I5: »That's why I consider that the national idea has to be formed based on these principles. Integrity (knocks on table), supremacy of culture (knocks on table), language (knocks on table), and all rights and freedoms (knocks on table) for all citizens of Ukraine.«

Focusing only on language, his case demonstrates how the Ukrainian language is promoted on a broader societal level among the Crimean Tatar (and) Muslim community in Ukraine, citing a declaration from the Muslim organization he is attached to (UMMA n.d.: section 7, paragraph 4):

»Muslims in Ukraine defend the preservation and development of national identity and language. They support the Ukrainian language as the only state language and the Crimean Tatar language as the language of the indigenous people of Crimea; they support the culture and traditions of Ukraine's national minorities.«[35]

The Muslim organization UMMA strongly promotes the Ukrainian language here as the only state language, not advocating upvaluing the Crimean language as another official language, although it is the historic language of Muslims in Ukraine, not Ukrainian. Nonetheless, the UMMA also stresses the importance of minority rights, like for their community.

In the case of Crimean Tatars (and) Muslims, showing approval for the Ukrainian language is most likely a way to demonstrate their belongingness and loyalty to Ukraine in the face of the conflict in their home regions of Crimea and the Donbas (see also chapter 5.7). Hence, language as a marker of belonging is not necessarily exclusive to other ethno-lin-

35 The original Ukrainian text was translated into English: »Мусульмани України обстоюють збереження та розвиток національної ідентичності та мови. Вони підтримують українську мову як єдину державну, а кримськотатарську — як мову корінного народу Криму; підтримують культуру та традиції національних меншин України.«

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guistic affiliations and can thus bridge differences among the Ukrainian population, such as in case of the Islam.[36]

However, Ukraine's Muslim community is divided itself: between the DUMU, representing Islamic traditionalism, which uses the Russian language, and the UMMA, founded in 2008, representing a reformist Islamic agenda that supports Ukrainian nationalism (cf. Brylov 2018: 156f). Brylov (2018: 168) explains that due to the struggles over Crimea and the Donbas, the UMMA Muslims »argue for a convergence between Islamic reformism and Ukrainian nationalism«.

Self-identification as Ukrainian in the case of Russian(-speaking) Ukrainians

In terms of the large ethnic Russian population in Ukraine, the question arises of which role language use plays in their self-identification as Ukrainians.

Interviewee I10 questions and criticizes the significance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging, in contrast to I5 and I9:

> I10: »And if someone next to you uh speaks in Ukrainian and someone in the Russian language, this doesn't mean that the one who speaks in Russian is not Ukrainian. I speak in Russian and uh I am also able to speak in the Ukrainian language. [Both] […] are my mother languages. […] And the one who speaks in the Russian language is also a Ukrainian like I am. He lived here his whole life and invested his work and his heart and spirit in this country.«[37]

Respondent I10 emphasizes here that Russian speakers do not necessarily feel less Ukrainian than their Ukrainian-speaking counterparts. From his perspective, the use of the Russian language and a sense of Ukrainian belonging are not necessarily mutually exclusive. With his statement, inter-

36 Since Crimean Tatars make up a significant part of Muslim community in Ukraine, the position of the Muslim organization, interviewee I5 feels attached to, underlines the inclusiveness of the Ukrainian language as an ethnic marker of belonging.

37 The underlined part of the interview was formulated in Ukrainian in contrast to the rest of the interview, which was in Russian.

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viewee I10 most likely indicates a pressure on Russian-speaking and in particular ethnic Russian Ukrainians regarding the articulation of their Ukrainian belongingness, as language is clearly a visible or audible marker of belonging. The pressure on Russian(-speaking) Ukrainians has most likely increased due to the armed conflict as the Russian language could be viewed by others as unpatriotic in the sense of them having pro-Russian affiliations, given Ukraine's accusation of Russia's involvement in the conflict. This assumption is supported by the impression that he seems to hide his Russian descent (see chapter 5.2 on ancestry) and that he even proves to be able to speak in Ukrainian by switching between the two languages, thereby stressing that both are mother tongues for him. This assumption is also underpinned when he questions the potential the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging has to unify the population later by stating that the promotion of the Ukrainian language splits the population.

The existence of a certain pressure on Russian(-speaking) Ukrainians could also be visible in the following statement by respondent I9:

> I9: »Well, she/he is also a small patriot of Ukraine; she/he is already clearly such a-, feels Ukrainian. Although we are Russian-speaking, we speak in Russian, but I also learn Ukrainian.«[38]

The pressure on Russian(-speaking) Ukrainians seems to be indicated by the use of the word ›although‹, symbolizing the presumable existence of a contradiction between being a ›Ukrainian patriot‹ and a ›Russian speaker‹, and by her emphasis on having started to learn Ukrainian.

In a nutshell, I10 indicates that there is most likely a pressure to demonstrate one's belongingness to Ukraine as he is an example of when one's linguistic affiliation does not coincide with one's national belonging. Whereas interviewees I9 and I5 align their belongingness to Ukraine with their language use, interviewee I10 seems to have a higher hurdle to overcome in terms of switching from Russian to Ukrainian to demonstrate his posi-

38 Due to the anonymization of the interviews, her child's gender is not revealed so that the child is addressed as s*he.

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tion in the Donbas conflict. Instead, he seems to call for other markers of belonging than language, as the following chapters will show.

5.3.1. Discussion of the Findings

Comparing the interviews, we find that the *Ukrainian language is not a universal indicator of self-identification* as Ukrainian for all the interviewees. This becomes visible as only two out of four respondents addressed the role of the Ukrainian language in creating a sense of Ukrainian belongingness.

The relevance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging lies in its potential to function as a *unifying force to overcome the linguistic divide* among the population following the long-lasting Russification of Ukraine and as means to *visibly or audibly demonstrate belongingness and loyalty to Ukraine and concurrently distance to Russia,* which Ukraine holds responsible for the armed conflict in the Donbas.

To examine the relevance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging, we need to start with the history of the country's *Russification* or *›Sovietification‹*: The Ukrainian population experienced assimilation pressure under the imperial Russian as well as Soviet regimes, which aimed at erasing Ukrainian nationalism by promoting, among other things, the Russian language as the state language. As a result, the Ukrainian language has been devalued as the language of the uneducated, provincial rural population and therefore marginalized, whereas the Russian language has been positively connoted as the language of educated, cultivated people and thus the economic, cultural, and political elite of the USSR. As a result, most Ukrainians, especially in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, which have historically been under Russian or Soviet rule longer than their Western counterparts, have come to speak Russian as their main language, while at the same time many of them had little or even no knowledge of Ukrainian (cf. Kulyk 2011: 632). However, Janet Gunn (cf. 2015: 10) points out that for most Ukrainians whether one spoke Ukrainian, Russian, or a mixture of both, known as Surzhyk, has been irrelevant for their sense of national belonging for a long time. Consequently, Russification still has an impact on Ukraine: Firstly, as the Russian language has continued to dominate in certain regions (cf.

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Kapinos 2018), especially in the eastern and southern regions, and certain spheres of life, like education. Secondly, in terms of the persistence of the large discrepancy between (ethno-)linguistic and ethnic identity, as Kulyk stresses (cf. ibid.: 631).

To continue, we need to shift our focus to the *role the language controversy plays in the Donbas conflict* and Russia's support in it. First of all, ›Sovietification‹ politics not only installed the Russian language as the first language for most Soviet citizens, but also changed the population ratio in most Soviet Republics by promoting the migration of ethnic Russians to important industrial regions all over the USSR (cf. Boeckh 2011: 349, see chapters 3 and 5.3 on language). Against this background, one can understand how the language issue has come to be the ›official‹ reason for the outbreak of secessionist conflict in the Donbas and Russia's support of the two Peoples Republics DNR and LNR: By stressing that the Russian(-speaking) minority in Ukraine is threatened by the radical Ukrainization politics of fascist Ukrainian government(s), which came to power following the Euromaidan in 2013/14, Russia legitimized its intervention in Ukraine as the urgent need to defend its ›ethnic‹ compatriots (see also chapter 1). Since Putin regards Russians and Ukrainians to be the same people, namely ›Eastern Slavs‹, Russia sees itself not only as the protector of ethnic Russians but also of the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population in general (cf. cf. Kuzio 2017: 290).

However, this appears more as an instrumentalist reason for contemporary Russian imperialist aspirations: According to Douglas Irvin-Erickson, who researched strategic narratives in the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the use of strategic narratives »can be a powerful motivator of political and collective action« (Irvin-Erickson 2017: 136). For example, to mobilize support in Russian society as well as among the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine for armed military intervention in the Donbas (cf. ibid.: 136f, 140f). Such narratives are thereby invented strategically (cf. ibid.: 136), given the dominance of the Russian language in Ukraine's southeast until 2014 and the lack of a fascist threat against the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine (cf. Kappeler 2014: 355). At the same time, (Kappler 2014: 270–273) stresses that the instrumentalization of the language issue is not a new phenomenon in Ukrainian–Russian

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relations: Although Ukraine's nation-building politics were moderate and Russophobia was marginal in contrast to other post-Soviet countries, the situation of the ethnic Russian minority in Ukraine was repeatedly played up by Russia, which highlighted the alleged Ukrainization by force and discrimination of Russians in Ukraine. In this light, Zhurzhenko emphasizes that Russia increased its support of pro-Russian organizations in Ukraine, aiming at defending the Russian(-speaking) population against the state's violent ›Ukrainization‹ politics following the Orange Revolution in 2004/5 (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 258).[39] According to her, this promoted the emergence of »a heterogeneous but active and even aggressive milieu which became the breeding ground for pro-Russian separatism in 2014« (ibid.), as addressed vaguely by one of the interviewees. Since neither the Russian language nor the ethnic Russian population was really threatened by the Ukrainian government in the aftermath of the Euromaidan, Russia's claim of discrimination against the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine is considered to be *Russia's propagandist invention to legitimize its military intervention in Ukraine* (cf. Simon 2017: 3, Kappeler 2014: 355). One of the interviews demonstrates the dissemination of Russian narratives of a Ukrainian threat and how it is critically reflected on in Ukraine. Nonetheless, the ›fiction‹ of discrimination against Russian speakers in Ukraine has eventually led to real violence (cf. Wanner 2014: 429).

Against the background of Russification and the instrumentalization of the language controversy in the Donbas, the significance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging lies in its potential to *unify Ukrainians* in the face of armed conflict and as a *visible or audible sign of loyalty to Ukraine and distance to Russia* at the same time. Therefore, I postulate a *general societal trend in shifting from Russian to the Ukrainian language* in the population. This is well illustrated by one of the interviewees, who takes into account the discrepancy between linguistic and national affiliations among Eastern and Southern Ukrainians and how the conflict might increase the wish to adjust one's language use and national belonging to take a side in a conflict which affects them directly.

39 The state identity politics following the ›Orange Revolution‹ in 2004/5 and its impact on national belonging were outlined in the third chapter.

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The shift in language use is an example of *how the armed conflict has increased belongingness to Ukraine* with concurrently *increasing alienation from Russia* (cf. Kulyk 2016: 588, 607), which the escalation of the conflict into war in 2022 will most likely intensify further.[40] Historically seen,

40 The growing importance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging, most visibly the language shift, is further underpinned by my experience of meeting various Ukrainian activists from the predominantly Russian-speaking South and East at the beginning of 2020, of attending a scientific conference in March 20221, and of my voluntary work in helping Ukrainian students to settle in Linz after fleeing to Austria. Concerning the activists, it was striking that one activist solely communicated in Ukrainian with me, despite knowing that I do not speak and understand Ukrainian, and that other activists who accommodated me in Russian communicate usually solely in Ukrainian on social network services such as Facebook. I also observed how another activist who seems to have solely communicated in Russian before switched to Ukrainian on social media, while still accommodating me by speaking in Russian with me. This seems to be an indicator of the increasing subjective, but also political relevance of Ukrainian as it becomes more important in social spheres beyond the family, where Russian has dominated a for long time due to the Russification politics in the past (see chapter 5.3.1). This thesis is strengthened as the state's promotion of the Ukrainian language in recent years did not stipulate any obligation to use Ukrainian in communication in public settings such as social media, and especially not in private settings, like my encounters with the activists. My experience during a digital conference in March 2021 further underpins the political relevance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of belonging. The conference organizers and most participants spoke solely in Ukrainian—in a city, where Russian is spoken widely among the population. Considering that Ukrainian is the state language whose use in the sphere of education is promoted by ›the law on education‹ of 2017 (cf. Venice committee 2017), this indicates the feeling of having to follow the new law at first. This feeling may be increased by the coming into force of article 30 of the 2020 law »On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as a State Language« in January 2021, which strengthens the use of Ukrainian in the services sector (cf. Lankovich 2021: 40). Nonetheless, the use of Ukrainian can also be a political sign of demonstrating personal support for the Ukrainian state (including its language policy) and of the Ukrainian language's relevance as a marker of belonging, in contrast to a few participants among the students and local professors who communicated solely in Russian. My experiences during my voluntary work in helping Ukrainian students to settle in Linz after fleeing to Austria further underpin the growing importance of the Ukrainian language shift as most students that I encountered changed from Russian to Ukrainian in communication with me within days, although they were mainly from the eastern regions. However, this might also underpin the difficulties for Russian-speaking Ukrainians as language can be seen as an indicator of one's political attitude or position within the conflict.

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this was already the case in the past as the preference for the Ukrainian language was an important symbol against the Soviet regime and a symbol of showing affiliation to the newly established Ukrainian state in the 1990s (cf. Wanner 2014: 431).

Transferring these findings and assumptions to the societal level, we find that the Ukrainian language is increasingly gaining relevance as a marker of belonging. Given that for most Ukrainians language use has been irrelevant to their national belonging in the past (cf. Gunn 2015: 10), the Euromaidan in 2013/14 and the armed conflict in the Donbas have led to a stronger attachment to the Ukrainian language (cf. Kulyk 2018: 7). More concretely, such language use symbolizes one's belongingness to Ukraine and concurrently alienation from Russia, with Russian being increasingly seen as the language of the aggressor (cf. ibid.). In this context, Kulyk (2011: 629) points out that »people often identify strongly with the language of their perceived ethnic group, even if they shifted to another language at some stage in life or did not even learn it in childhood«. This becomes visible in the increased use of the Ukrainian language among the population, though with regional variances (cf. Bureiko and Moga 2019: 149f). According to a study by the International Republican Institute[41] (2023: 74), 60 percent of the Ukrainian population state that they speak Ukrainian at home, 9 percent speak Russian at home, and 29 percent speak both languages at home. However, we can still see a regional divide (ibid.): While 93 percent of the population in the West and 67 percent in the Center speak Ukrainian at home, only 35 percent speak Ukrainian at home in the South and 21 percent in the East. In contrast, Russian is only spoken by less than 1 percent of Western and by 6 percent of Central Ukrainians at home, while 16 percent of Southern and 24 percent of Eastern Ukrainians speak Russian at home. The same applies to speaking both languages at home, though with a different percentage. Strikingly, 7 percent stated they had deliberately and recently switched completely to Ukrainian and one percent to Russian (cf. ibid: 75f). The private Ukrainian research

41 The International Republican Institute (IRA) is a US-American nonprofit organization which is mainly funded by the US federal government and the Republican Party in its mission to strengthen democracy worldwide.

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institute ›Rating Group‹ (2023) published findings that point in a similar direction: 22 percent of the Ukrainian population uses the Ukrainian language more frequently now, meaning one year after the Russian invasion.

5.4. Cultural Assets: Demonstrating Loyalty to Ukraine and Distinction from Russia

Considering Ukraine's long history of foreign rule and its late nation-state creation, the meaning of ›being Ukrainian‹ was grounded in ethno-cultural characteristics for a long time (see chapter 3).[42] Similarly to language, Ukrainian culture was also subject to assimilation politics under the Polish, Russian, as well as Soviet rule (cf. ibid.). Moreover, we need to bear in mind that from an imperial Russian and Soviet perspective, Ukrainians have not been regarded as a distinct, sovereign people for most of history (cf. Simon 2017: 2). While ethnic differences to the Polish supported the relevance of Ukrainian culture as a marker of belonging, the similarities to Russians complicated Ukraine's nation-building (cf. Kappeler 2014). In Soviet times, Ukrainian culture experienced an ambivalent time in the Soviet nationality regime, in a similar way to the issue of language: At the beginning of the USSR, liberal conditions for the development of Ukrainian culture prevailed first, leading to the increasing ›Ukrainization‹ of culture and arts in the 1920s (cf. Kappeler 2014: 193). In short, with its liberal nationality regime, the Soviet regime aimed to control and finally erase nationalist aspirations among the different peoples in the USSR (cf. Brubaker 1994: 49). The promotion of the Ukrainian language (see chapter 5.3 on language) and culture was thereby a means to establish Soviet rule in Ukraine, where the peasants violently opposed the Soviet takeover (cf. Kappeler 2014: 178f). Unlike the Soviet plans, the liberal conditions for the Ukrainian language and culture promoted and accelerated the evolvement of the Ukrainian nation, which led to rising political demands from the Ukrainian population who opposed Soviet rule

42 Culture as a theoretical concept encompasses, among other things, symbols, traditions, and customs.

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(cf. Kappeler 2014: 195). Subsequently, Soviet politics radically changed in the mid-1930s, reaching their peak between the 1960s and 1970s, when the idea of creating a homogeneous ›Soviet people‹ came to the fore: Both the educational system and culture were forced into line as instruments of ›Sovietization‹ (cf. Kappeler 2014: 204). This included, among other ideas, the promotion of the Russian language as well as Soviet cultural propaganda, through which Ukrainian culture was devalued (cf. Boeckh 2011: 349, 355). Consequently, Ukrainian cultural assets were (partly) negatively associated with nationalist aspirations and, thus, had to be hidden or were even banned (cf. ibid.: 356, Kulyk 2016: 591). Since independence, Ukrainian governments have strengthened Ukrainian culture (see chapter 3). In this light, the question arises of *which role culture plays as a marker of belonging today*, in particular in the light of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas.

Comparing the interviews, we find that the relevance of Ukrainian culture as a marker of belonging lies less in concrete customs, traditions, and cultural assets defining the unifying bond between Ukrainians than in its potential to practically demonstrate belongingness and thus loyalty to Ukraine and concurrently its cultural demarcation from Russia. This is underpinned by the IDPs interviewed as they did not often mention Ukrainian culture as a marker of their belongingness and as they rarely mentioned specific customs, traditions, and cultural assets. The armed conflict has intensified the need to demonstrate belongingness to Ukraine practically and at the same time cultural emancipation from Russia.

My analysis results in two subcategories. The first subcategory highlights the aspect of the *re-appreciation of Ukrainian culture after Soviet devaluation*. The following subcategory deals with the *devaluation of Russian culture*. Against this background, the relevance of culture as a marker of belongingness lies in its potential to visibly demonstrate a distinction and emancipation from Russia and loyalty to Ukraine at the same time. Consequently, *Ukrainian politics of belonging promote the Ukrainization of the country's culture*, which is visible, among other media, regarding TV, cinema, radio, print and the music production industry, as will be discussed exemplarily.

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Re-appreciation of Ukrainian Culture after Soviet Devaluation

The relevance of cultural assets for Ukrainian belongingness becomes most visible with the traditional Ukrainian clothing called ›vyshyvanka‹, as illustrated by interviewee I9:[43]

> I9: »[W]e were taught kind of, I remember it's not like they taught us, I don't know how they instilled it in us, but (>1 sec) now I love vyshyvanka […] this is beautiful (<2 sec) and this is our national, yes, everything which was linked with Ukrainian nationalism it was such a, you know, ugh ugh ugh like, we were taught like that, you know, uh it was such a perception (stuttering) (>4 sec) (stuttering) that Ukrainian national cultural assets, you know, are something that you have to hide. (breathing in) […] Uh to wear vyshyvanka, you could only— now I always go out in a vyshyvanka on holidays, I am with a vyshyvanka, I feel proud, I am a Ukrainian woman, these are beautiful, embroidered clothes, uh not only because others have to know that I stubbornly want to wear it, even though it doesn't look good. It's beautiful clothing; that's how I see it. […] But back then uh, you know, it was only worn for uh some kinds of events when we uh did kind of uh spectacle, you know, about Ukraine, kind of medieval, there was such a, you know, understanding that it's medieval uh but we are so contemporary people and it was such a strange message that no one wore, meaning, there were uh certain people who basically, well, uh uh such revolutionaries, you know, who uh wore it all the time (stuttering) even before independence, but, the level of consciousness was uh, yes, for us (stuttering) it turned out […].«

Her statement reveals several important aspects for analyzing the significance of cultural assets like the vyshyvanka to feel Ukrainian. Firstly,

43 The ›vyshyvanka‹ is traditional clothing in the form of blouses and shirts which forms part of traditional Ukrainian folk costumes and that is characterized by specific hand-finished embroidery. Due to the commonalities between Ukrainians and Belarusians, it is also part of traditional Belarusian folk costumes, though with differences in the embroidery's artwork.

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Ukrainian cultural assets were associated with a pre-modern stage of cultural development during the Soviet era (cf. Boeckh 2011: 356f). Secondly, Ukrainian cultural assets were considered to be nationalistic during the Soviet era and thus negatively framed (cf. ibid.). Consequently, Ukrainian national elements had to be hidden, not only because they were devalued, but also when they were forbidden (cf. ibid., Kulyk 2016: 591).[44] Thirdly, the approval and even promotion of certain Ukrainian cultural assets served to represent an official image of Ukrainians which was created by the Soviet regime and which should not challenge the system (cf. Boeckh 2011: 356f). It was mainly based on culture in the vernacular or folklorist sense, and national Ukrainian elements were only included in the new Soviet culture if they were considered convenient and not to convey any political message (cf. ibid.). The impact of Soviet Ukrainian politics is still visible as the negative nationalist association of Ukrainian cultural assets is still partly persistent in independent Ukraine (cf. Kulyk 2016: 603f). In this light, the statement above indicates that a reassessment has been taking place because wearing a vyshevanka is positively associated by interviewee I9 with pride in being Ukrainian.

Devaluation of Russian Culture

Referring to the aforementioned devaluation of Ukrainian cultural assets in the Soviet era, interviewee I9 displays a similar attitude to Russian culture:

> I9: »[A]ctually we are old acquaintances, well, […] we had very beautiful decoration, vyshyvankas, costumes […] if you look at photos from the same time, they wear bast shoes, plaited ones, and in uh, well, you know, very simple, (stuttering) they are objectively lazier; we embroidered everything; there was a lot of hand craft, and it was, well, a whole culture; people dressed like that, you know, not like on holidays, yes, just wearing this clothing; it was manu-

44 Her statement indicates that the vyshyvanka also had to be hidden. However, this does not seem to have been the case, especially as she states that ›revolutionaries‹ wore the vyshyvanka as a political sign against the USSR. Nonetheless, it was most likely negatively associated with nationalism and/or backwardness and, thus, had to be worn with caution.

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> ally embroidered shirts, these vyshyvankas, meaning that you just had simple clothing; you needed to spend a lot of time on manual work […] I'm telling you, in the same time, if you compare, they, well […] they didn't have such clothing. Yes, and the same applies to the cuisine, their cuisine. We have, you know, a lot of varenyky and all that, so they uh even the soup borscht, it is very difficult to make borscht, such a delicious one, so they have shchi, such an easy one, also with cabbage, a lot easier, a dish a lot more uh, well, and also not so tasty; they have all, you know, kind of, you know, it's not ready yet, but it will do.«

In this statement, interviewee I9 highlights certain Ukrainian cultural assets, such as traditional clothing or Ukraine's national cuisine; however, her emphasis on Ukrainian cultural traits does not serve to demonstrate Ukrainian belonging, but rather to demarcate distinction to Russia. Considering the historically close ties between Ukrainians and Russians, which are, among other things, based on cultural commonalities, this statement demonstrates how culture is used to demonstrate cultural distancing from Russia. This becomes visible in the antagonism created as Ukrainian culture is presented here as older, more elaborate and better in terms of aesthetics and taste than Russian culture. By appreciating Ukrainian culture and devaluing Russian culture at the same time, this statement highlights the cultural emancipation of Ukrainian culture from its past devaluation in Soviet times, while at the same time turning the tables on Russia by devaluing its culture. This is important as Ukraine is still often not considered to be a distinct people from the Russian perspective, but a subordinated branch of the larger Eastern Slavic ethno-cultural group under Russian leadership (cf. Kuzio 2001: 344).

5.4.1. Discussion of the Findings

If we compare the interviews, it is apparent that Ukrainian culture is *not a universal indicator of self-identification as Ukrainian for all interviewees*. The scarce thematization of Ukrainian culture indicates its low relevance as a marker of Ukrainian belongingness at first. However, this can

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be attributed to the interview format, which avoids external structuring, so respondents could have addressed the aspect of culture as a marker of belonging more if they had been asked directly about it. In contrast, the low significance of culture as a marker of belonging could be explained with the indisputability of Ukrainian culture as it seems to be less politicized among the population in contrast to language, for example, and, for this reason, might have come up less often for discussion in the interviews. In contrast, the Soviet impact on the devaluation of Ukrainian culture might has not yet faded out completely.

The relevance of Ukrainian culture as a marker of belonging lies, similarly to language, in its potential to *visibly demonstrate belongingness and loyalty to Ukraine* and *concurrently distance to Russia,* which Ukraine holds responsible for the Donbas conflict. Considering the *negative connotation of Ukrainian culture with backwardness and nationalism during the Soviet era*, we see that the Donbas *conflict facilitates the upvaluation and thus (re-)integration of Ukrainian cultural assets* into Ukrainian national belonging, as stated by Kulyk (2016: 591, 603f; 2023). At the same time, the strengthening of Ukrainian culture goes with the *devaluation of Russian culture*, as opposed to Soviet times. This does not serve to demonstrate Ukrainian belonging, but rather to demarcate a distinction to Russia, taking their historically close ties and commonalities into account. This symbolizes *Ukraine's cultural emancipation* from its devaluation in Soviet times, while at the same time turning the tables on Russia by devaluing its culture. The importance of this unfolds as Ukraine is still often considered to be a subordinate branch of the larger Eastern Slavic ethno-cultural group under Russian leadership and not a distinct, sovereign people from the Russian perspective (cf. Kuzio 2001: 344).

The ongoing *conflict in the Donbas has strengthened the relevance of Ukrainian culture* as a marker of belonging, in tandem with people's increasing self-identification as Ukrainian. The vyshyvanka or the flag are prominent examples of how national symbols have outgrown their negative Soviet connotations and increased in importance due to the Donbas conflict. For example, national symbols like the vyshyvanka became increasingly popular after 2014 (cf. Plakhotnik 2019: 120). According to the private Ukrainian research institute ›Rating Group‹ (2014), 20 percent

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dressed in the vyshyvanka regularly at the end of 2014, even though, the majority of 62 percent rarely dressed in it. Whereas a quarter considers the vyshyvanka to be a festive, traditional outfit, a third stresses that it is »a manifestation of patriotism, as many believe that this is a demonstration of loyalty to tradition« (cf. ibid.). Most likely this also applies to other symbols associated with the Ukrainian nation, such as the flag.[45] New research, especially following the onset of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2023, could give better insights into how important cultural assets are for demonstrating one's ›Ukrainianness‹.

5.5. Historical Narratives: Struggle for Freedom

Since independence, Ukraine has experienced an ambivalent nation-building process (see chapter 3), which also applies to the *collectively shared memory of a nation's history*.[46] Briefly, the former presidents Yushchenko (2005–2010) and Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019), both considered to be politically pro-Ukrainian, promoted the development of a historiography, independent of its Soviet and Russian roots as these denied Ukrainian sovereignty due to the idea of an Eastern Slavic Union between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, though under Russian leadership (cf. Kuzio 2017: 290, Bekeshkina 2017: 2, Kappeler 2014: 377, Shevel 2014). Thus, Ukrainian history had to be written from scratch, illustrating the social-constructivist character of historiography, culture of remembrance as well as pol-

45 This becomes apparent as Ukrainian cities seem largely to use national symbols such as the flag in their cityscape due to the armed conflict.

46 A broad range of terms used to examine the collectively shared memory of one's own group's past exist. Besides Maurice Halbwachs' terminology of ›collective memory‹ or Aby Warburg's ›social memory‹, terms such as ›collective remembrance‹, ›national‹ or ›public memory‹, etc. are used. Since working with Grounded Theory does not mean applying theoretical assumptions to the data (see chapter 4.2), but developing a theory from the data itself, the wording of categories has merely to be regarded as vocabulary which enables us to speak about the data material in a comprehensible way without restricting the analysis too much (see chapter 2). To avoid definitional confusion with more prominent concepts, I speak of ›historical memory‹ or historical narratives here, as the narratives are the product of politics of memory.

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itics of belonging.[47] In this light, the question arises of *what significance historical memory has as a marker of belonging today*, in particular in the face of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas.

My analysis of the interviews indicates that historical memory has an importance as a marker of belonging, both in the sense of *demonstrating Ukraine's uniqueness* and *historical demarcation from Russia*. Its relevance can be grasped in the narrative of democratic and freedom-loving Ukraine, which has to fight against the Russian threat.

My analysis results in three *historical (sub-)narratives*: The first subcategory deals with the *Cossack heritage* and its impact on the creation of the image of the *Ukrainian history of freedom fights and democratic tradition*. The following subcategory highlights the *Holodomor*, the experience of death by starvation during Soviet rule, which lies at the foundation of the image of Russia being a threat to Ukraine. The last subcategory deals with the changes in the remembrance culture of *World War II* as an example of Ukraine's current politics of memory and remembrance aiming at *emancipation from Soviet and Russian historiography*. At the same time, the armed conflict has strengthened the relevance of Ukrainian historical memory as a marker of belonging. Against this background, the relevance of historical memory as a marker of belonging lies in its potential to illustrate Ukraine's history of *historical suffering under Russian threat* from the Russian Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union and finally to Russia nowadays.

Cossack Heritage: Ukrainian History of Freedom Fights and Democratic Tradition

The relevance of the country's Cossack history for Ukraine's national belonging is well illustrated by interviewee I9, who refers directly to it when asked what it personally means to her to be Ukrainian:

47 A detailed explanation of Ukrainian politics of memory and remembrance is presented in the following sub-chapters as it fits better thematically with the analysis of the data, unlike the previous introductions.

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I9: »Well, as I said, we are free people, definitely, people who uh we have our anthem about freedom, that we uh have been fighting for uh for a long time; we haven't directly succeeded, […] uh but we haven't given up (stuttering), we are continuing this fight; uh Ukrainians are free people who value freedom […] uh this is the main message. We had many moments uh in our whole history when uh, well, we wanted freedom; serfdom was abolished earlier here […] and the first constitution was written in Ukraine, you know, […] the first constitution in the world was written here, called after Pylyp Orlyk […] well, we have such a mentality that we, we—for that, you know, for rights, […] the Cossacks uh all that uh that are those people who didn't want to uh they run away […] from some other authorities, they formed, already had formed some kind of uh detachments uh to, well, their own decisions somehow, meaning, they didn't want to be under governance.«

By highlighting Ukraine's Cossack history, interviewee I9 stresses the relevance of freedom and democracy for (her) self-identification as Ukrainian. The Cossacks were a society of free warriors at the autonomous steppe border between the Russian Empire, the Crimean Khanate, and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Middle Ages, who offered military and diplomatic tasks to the surrounding rulers. Being originally of Tatar origin, the Cossacks had become predominantly Eastern Slavic by the 16th century because Ukrainians and Russians, mostly peasants or, in the case of Western Ukraine, nobility, fled serfdom, assimilation pressure and religious persecution under Polish–Lithuanian and Russian rule (cf. Kappeler 2014: 54, 2013: 11–14; Wilson 2015: 58). In contrast, Cossack society was characterized by a societal model of free people with a democratic self-government, peasant councils, and collective land ownership (cf. De Cordier 2016: 5).

Interviewee I9 stresses here the impact of the country's Cossack history on contemporary Ukrainian national symbols and narratives which are present in national public discourses: the country's anthem, serfdom

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in Medieval Eastern Europe and, the constitution of the Cossack leader Pylyp Orlyk in 1710.

Ukraine's anthem was officially adopted in 2003, and its title can be translated into English as ›(the glory and freedom of) Ukraine has not yet perished‹. The anthem contains a clear reference to the country's Cossack history (e. g. stressing ›Cossack descent/blood‹) and highlights the values of liberty and sovereignty for Ukraine, in particular by stating that Ukrainians would sacrifice their lives for freedom (cf. Ukrainian Parliament 2003, Pavlyshyn 2017, Kappeler 2013: 103).

The reference to the constitution of the past Cossack leader Pylyp Orlyk in 1710[48] serves to emphasize that Ukraine has a »long and deep democratic history« (The US–Ukraine Foundation, n.d.).[49] Considering the date of its declaration, the constitution of Pylyp Orlyk demonstrates how early democratic ideas evolved in that region—especially when compared with

48 Pylyp Orlyk (1672–1742) was one of the leaders of the Cossacks at the beginning of the 18th century who worked closely together with Iwan Masepa (1639–1709), the head of the Cossacks at that time (cf. Vasylenko 1958: 1264f). In the course of the 16th century, the Cossack Hetmanate, an autonomous state-like society of the Cossacks, evolved. As Russia, whom the Cossacks served in its military campaigns, increased the pressure on the Cossacks, Mazepa sought to free the Cossacks from their dependence on Russia. In 1709, Masepa planned a rebellion against Russia with the help of the Swedish. However, when the rebellion failed, Mazepa and Orlyk fled from Eastern Ukraine, and the Hetmanate was gradually incorporated into the Russian Empire, losing its previous privileges and liberties (cf. Kappeler 2013: 35–39). Orlyk, having become Mazepa's successor after his death, wrote the first Ukrainian constitution while in exile (cf. Vasylenko 1958: 1264f). More detailed information about the life of Pylyp Orlyk and the circumstances of the emergence of the constitution can be found, for example, in the article by Mykola Vasylenko (1958).

49 According to Alisher Juzgenbayev (2021), the constitution was written against the background of »injustice and violence« in the Russian Empire and addressed the independence of Cossack society in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. At the same time, »fear of autocracy« was among the factors which motivated the idea of limiting the power of Cossack leaders, called Hetmans, while establishing a kind of parliament (cf. ibid.). Moreover, Orlyk stresses the idea of elections (cf. ibid.). This mirrors early ideas about democracy and especially the separation of powers. Nonetheless, this constitution also has its democratic shortcomings, for example, as the right to vote seems only to have been granted to the military class, not all members of Cossack society (cf. ibid.). Thus, the highlights and shortcomings of this constitutional idea have to be understood in its historical context of absolutism in Europe.

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the cradles of (modern) democracy, the US and France (cf. ibid.): Pylyp Orlyk's constitution was promoted more than 30 years before Montesquieu's Spirit of the Laws in 1747 and more than 70 years before the United States Constitution of 1787 or the declaration of human rights following the French Revolution in 1789. Such documents offer insights into how past societies intended to structure themselves and distribute political power, but also how such societies desired to be viewed by others (cf. Juzgenbayev 2021). If we take history into account, this document mirrors the narrative about the relationship between the Cossacks and Russia, as the Cossacks aimed to create a society different from Tsarist Russia from which people fled. Today, the constitution serves to stress Ukraine's historical democratic roots.

The relevance of the Cossack narratives for Ukrainian national belonging unfolds when regarding the country's Cossack history: On the one hand, the historical reference to the Cossacks serves to create the narrative of Ukraine's history of struggling for freedom against Russia. On the other hand, the historical reference to the Cossacks serves to create the narrative of Ukraine's democratic roots, especially in contrast to Russia, as the following chapters demonstrate.

Holodomor: Soviet genocide in Ukraine

Another significant aspect of historical memory and its contribution to Ukrainian national belonging are the references to the Holodomor, as expressed by interviewee I9:

> I9: »Meaning, I clearly grew up with that understanding of who the aggressor is. Because (1.5 sec) my grandma was in prison when there was Holodomor due to the law of three spikelets […] (1 sec) and in our family there is great resentment towards the Soviet regime, meaning that uh no one from my family ever thought that the USSR was good and the regime was good. Meaning, my whole family uh grandma was in prison, meaning, grandfather told me […] how everything happened. There was crop, there was a lot of crop when Holodomor, well, […] they collected at the field, meaning, all those people who lived there around the

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> kolkhoz collected there […] grain so to say and it was said that we would send it uh (2 sec) to set up socialism in countries, to some other, starving countries there, but it laid there, meaning […] it was not even exported, you know, meaning, it was already visible that […] they just don't give it to the people. Because it was not exported, it laid and rotted on the field. (breathing in) But children died […] I don't know in which way grandma, but she tried to take something and to feed the children and she ended up in prison; she was in prison. Yes, her family survived, but (2 sec) but I, I clearly understand that they wanted to kill us. Just wanted to kill all […] like the nation.«

The term ›Holodomor‹ refers to the collective suffering during a great famine in the early 1930s, which resulted in the deaths of approximately six to seven million[50] Soviet citizens (cf. Simon 2007), in particular Ukrainian and Kazakh citizens. It is considered to be the consequence of the harsh Soviet collectivization of the agricultural sector, which began in the late 1920s, with the broader aim to develop the USSR into an industrialized country (cf. Kappeler 2014: 197–201). According to the Bolshevik revolutionary logic, peasants were considered to be second-class citizens, whose duty it was to feed the whole Soviet population (cf. Simon 2007). If the peasants did not fulfill their harvest quota, armed requisition detachments took their grain harvest away, leading to starvation and in many cases to death by starvation in the end (cf. ibid.). At the same time, Ukraine was confronted with a bad harvest for two years (cf. ibid.). The famine claimed a particularly large number of victims in Ukraine; recent research states that more than 10 percent of the Ukrainian population at that time died due to starvation (cf. ibid.). Most affected were the regions around the capital Kyiv and the eastern city of Kharkiv, but less the Donbas, with Western Ukraine not affected at all (cf. ibid.). Other regions affected do not count as being part of Ukraine anymore, for example, independent Mol-

50 Unfortunately, the exact number of victims cannot be calculated because civil records were incomplete at that time and the authorities were officially instructed not to document the famine victims (cf. Simon 2007).

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dova (cf. ibid.). About 80 percent of the victims were ethnic Ukrainians as it was the rural population that was most affected (cf. ibid.)

Interviewee I9 recounts here the experiences of her grandmother, who was sentenced to prison for trying to steal crops as her family was starving as a consequence of Soviet economic policies. She stresses that the local population was told that the crop was designated to help other starving countries as well as to support setting up socialist systems elsewhere. However, as interviewee I9 recounts, the crop was not exported but rotted there, while the local population had to starve.[51] According to Veselova at al. (2008: 188), Ukrainian peasants had various survival strategies, among them, collecting ears of corn left in the fields of the collective farms and processing them together with chopped leaves and grass into food. However, in summer 1932, the Soviet regime enforced a decree to protect the property of the state-owned collective farms from theft (the so-called »On the Protection of Socialist Property« law, also known as the »Law of Five Ears of Grain« (in Russian: Закон о колосках), which criminalized the survival strategies of starving peasants (cf. ibid.). Interviewee I9 refers to this law when recalling her grandmother's imprisonment.

By highlighting her grandmother's experience of the Holodomor, she emphasizes the relevance of suffering under and resentment towards the Soviet regime for her self-identification as Ukrainian—especially as this is part of her main narration, which was only prompted by the initial question to narrate about her (family) life history.

The relevance of the Holodomor for contemporary Ukrainian national belonging evolves when considering the country's state politics of memory and remembrance. In Soviet times, Holodomor was a taboo topic for a long time, with any reflection on and (public) discussion of it being criminalized (cf. Penter and Tytarenko 2021: 635f). Only in 1987 did the Holodomor became known to a broader Soviet public (cf. Portnov 2020: 32). After Ukraine's independence in 1991, the Holodomor has become one of the most important elements of the country's nation-building pro-

51 This quote has to be critically reflected on as no scientific sources were found which prove that crops were available in Ukraine at that time, but were condemned to rot rather than being eaten by the starving population.

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cess and thus of the contemporary culture of remembrance in Ukraine (cf. Penter and Tytarenko 2021: 634, Simon 2007). The commemoration of Holodomor serves to distance Ukraine from its Soviet past and, at the same time, serves to consolidate the Ukrainian nation (cf. Simon 2007). In this context, the question of if the Holodomor was a genocide on Ukrainians conducted by the Soviet regime dominates Ukrainian public and academic discourses (cf. Penter and Tytarenko 2021: 634). During Yushchenko's presidency (2005–2010), the Holodomor was officially recognized as Soviet genocide on Ukrainians (cf. Kappeler 2014: 202, Kulyk 2016: 593, Shevel 2014: 157).[52] At the same time, the Ukrainian state has been trying to convince other countries to officially recognize the Holodomor as a Soviet genocide on the Ukrainian nation (cf. Penter and Tytarenko 2021: 634); with growing success since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Considering the impact of the Holodomor on Ukrainian national belonging, the Holodomor narrative impressively illustrates the creation of Russia as Ukraine's historical ›other‹, more precisely its ›enemy‹, under which Ukraine historically had to suffer: from oppressive Tsarist times, to Russian-dominated Soviet aggression to Russia's current threatening of Ukraine's sovereignty and independence.

52 The Holodomor was officially recognized as genocide by a resolution passed by the Ukrainian parliament, the so-called Verkhovna Rada, in 2003 (cf. Simon 2013: 19). In 2006, the parliament confirmed its former resolution by adopting a law that additionally classifies Holodomor denial as unlawful and strengthened Holodomor remembrance culture in Ukraine (cf. Ukrainian Parliament 2006). The large number of Ukrainian famine deaths and the USSR's prevention and prohibition of relief measures, for example, by refusing to provide the starving population with a minimum of food by sealing off Ukraine from the rest of the USSR, by exporting wheat or the requisition of any food, constitute the basis of the thesis of the Holodomor as genocide by starvation to death (cf. Simon 2013: 17f). According to Simon, this starvation can be seen as punishment of the Ukrainian peasant population for their resistance to collectivization and particularly to grain requisitions, which was classified as nationalistic. In this light, starvation was most likely intended to break Ukrainian nationalist tendencies against the Soviet regime (cf. ibid.). However, the question of if the Holodomor was a genocide or not remains a debated question in academic circles.

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World War II: Historiographic Emancipation from Russia

Another significant aspect of historical memory and its contribution to Ukrainian national belonging is the reference to the memory of WWII in Ukraine depicted by interviewee I9:

I9: »[T]his Second World War, which was called here Great Patriotic War […], this was incorrectly communicated. When now uh uh big public confrontations are taking place, uh people who who grew up in this culture of the old system believe that (coughing) the evil Hitler just came […] and just attacked (stuttering) the poor and unfortunate USSR for no reason. And we such uh, you know, well, he attacked half Europe, and we are such, you know, uh a nation of heroes which uh […] braced our energy and helped everyone. This is the message which is imparted to us by the media. But now uh when we became an independent Ukraine, slowly they started to reveal uh the main story that uh that there was the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, when they uh decided to divide it among [the Nazis, author's note] and the USSR […] Also, all these moments, well, but there is a number of people, a big part of society who say that uh no, we won. Meaning, they uh they (stuttering) are in favor of this Great Patriotic War; they don't understand this uh history as the Second World War. […] And in society we also have big (stuttering) disagreement something like this. Still, every 9th May we have uh we have uh such a, you know, they made […] out of this such uh we call it ›победобесие‹ people call it like that, uh you know, kind of victory kitsch. […] Meaning, in the whole world uh the 8th is the day of trauma […] day of very […] tragic events in the history of humankind. Many people, many countries were involved, and uh here as if already, you know, no one seeks the real culprits and victors because, well, […] but for us, you know, it was such uh ›победобесие‹, that's what it is called, kind of uh exhibiting such messages: we can repeat it, a very kind of uh […] confusing message, we can repeat the war, this is uh, meaning, uh, you know, a way of militarizing us, indoctrinating us so that we are uh this way. Although we Ukrainians, we are mentally different anyway.«

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Interviewee I9 illustrates here the existence of two traditions of commemorating WWII: Soviet-Russian remembrance culture symbolized by the wording ›Great Patriotic War‹ and Western remembrance culture symbolized by the wording ›Second World War‹. Ukraine has used to commemorate this historic event as the Great Patriotic War, hereby indicating that Soviet remembrance culture has been prominent in Ukraine even after the Union's dissolution in 1991. (Post-) Soviet remembrance culture is basically based on the perception of Hitler and his Nazi regime as ›evil‹, while portraying the USSR as the ›nation of heroes‹, which successfully defeated Nazi Germany for the sake of the whole world.

By addressing WWII, interviewee I9 emphasizes the relevance of WWII for her sense of Ukrainian national belonging—as this is part of her main narration prompted by the initial question. Overall, she criticizes the Soviet politics of memory and the USSR's remembrance culture concerning WWII by stressing that the Ukrainian population was misinformed about the facts of this war in the past by addressing the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact or the German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact of 1939. This pact, in which both regimes jointly planned to divide Eastern Europe between themselves (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica 2024), was concluded between the Soviets and the Nazi regime only a few days before the outbreak of WWII. By referring to history, she alludes to the idea that it was originally Hitler and Stalin who plotted together against Ukraine as they planned to divide Eastern Europe between themselves. From her perspective, Stalin and thus the Soviet Union were not the heroes who rescued the world from the Nazis but are to blame for strengthening the Nazis at first. Moreover, this perspective strengthens her perspective on Russia as Ukraine's enemy, as discussed in the previous sub-chapters. Furthermore, the perception of the Nazis as the common enemy, which was constitutive for (post-) Soviet politics of memory and thus the USSR's remembrance culture, seems to be increasingly eroding in contemporary Ukraine, considering interviewee I9's statement here. Strikingly, she names Hitler and even Molotov and Ribbentrop as Hitler's and Stalin's representatives, but does not name Stalin once, although criticism of Stalin has grown since his death, and in particular in Ukraine since its independence (cf. Kuzio 2017).

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Most importantly, it seems as if she is thereby arguing that Russia stands in the tradition of the Soviet regime, as Russia is its legal successor. This becomes more apparent when she states that »we can repeat the war«, referring to Russia, whose WWII culture of remembrance she criticizes here as ›kitschy‹.[53] Thus, she creates a historical line here: As Russia is turning on Ukraine this time, Russian intervention in Ukraine is legitimized by framing Ukraine as a modern example of fascism (see chapter 5.3. on language).

The relevance of remembering WWII for contemporary Ukrainian national belonging evolves when considering Ukraine's state politics of memory and remembrance culture. President Yushchenko had started to revise the Soviet interpretations of WWII (cf. Shevel 2014: 157). As demonstrated in the interview with I9, Ukraine is undergoing a historiographic turn as it has turned away from the Soviet historiography on WWII as it is still present in Russia. This becomes most visible with the turn in the wording from ›Great Patriotic War‹ to ›Second World War‹ and with the commemoration day for WWII. While Ukraine has commemorated 9th May as ›Victory Day‹ in the tradition of Soviet remembrance, even after independence, which indicates the persistent influence of Soviet historiography, Ukraine introduced 8th May as its ›Remembrance and Reconciliation Day‹ under president Petro Poroshenko (2014–2019) in 2015, thereby integrating itself into European remembrance culture (cf. Kuz-

53 In contrast, Russia's victory in WWII has been increasingly politicized under President Putin (cf. Goncharenko 2020), which is criticized by interviewee I9 as Russian commemoration of WWII nowadays has developed into a kind of ›kitschy‹ remembrance. Her criticism is illustrated by her use of the wording ›победобесие‹. Invented by the archpriest Georgy Mitrofanov in 2005 as a response to the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany (cf. Победобесие n.d.), the term emphasizes the propagandistic and spectacular character of the commemoration cult concerning WWII in Russia (cf. Победобесие n.d., Ganieva 2018). Journalist Alisa Ganieva, who outlines Russia's current commemoration day as »carnival-like hysteria«, explains this commemoration cult as the attempt to accentuate Soviet accomplishments during WWII with the Russian wish to regain their national pride »after the painful humiliation of losing the Cold War« (Ganieva 2018). More information on the WWII narrative in Russia and the link between commemoration of WWII and Russian as well as Ukrainian national belonging can be found, for example, in the article by Taras Kuzio (2017).

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io 2017: 299, Goncharenko 2020, Myeshkov 2015: 18). This quote thereby illustrates the relationship between the impact of state politics of memory and remembrance culture on national belonging and its individual expression, as interviewee I9 highlights a divide among the Ukrainian population considering remembrance of WWII.

5.5.1. Discussion of the Findings

Comparing the interviews, *Ukrainian historical memory is not a universal indicator of self-identification* as Ukrainian for all interviewees. This becomes visible as only one out of four respondents addressed Ukrainian history to underline her Ukrainian belonging. The scarce thematization of Ukrainian history indicates the low relevance of Ukrainian history as a marker of Ukrainian belonging at first. However, this can be attributed to the interview format as respondents could have addressed Ukrainian history or historical memory (more) if they had been asked directly about it. At the same time, the low relevance of Ukrainian historical memory can also be explained by the fact that it is *not a practical and visible marker of belonging* in the sense of loyalty to Ukraine and distinction from Russia, unlike language. Moreover, its low relevance could also demonstrate how Ukraine's historiography is still in the process of emancipating itself from the Soviet past and ongoing Russian influence.

The relevance of Ukrainian historical memory unfolds in the light of the ongoing armed conflict in Donbas as it serves to *legitimize Ukraine's position* in the ongoing conflict, which escalated into a war in 2022, as the *country's historical fight for freedom from and against Russian aggression*. Its significance as a marker of belonging lies in its potential to underline the unique and especially democratic character of the Ukrainian nation on the one hand and to demonstrate differentiation and distancing from the country's Soviet past and Russia on the other.

To examine the relevance of Ukrainian historical memory, we need to consider the country's *Cossack history in the Middle Ages* as well as the experience of the *Holodomor* in the 1930s. Due to serfdom, assimilation pressure, and religious persecution of Ukrainians under Polish–Lithuanian as well as Russian Tsarist rule, Ukrainian peasants, and to

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some extent nobility, fled to join Cossack society, which was characterized by a societal model of free people with democratic self-government (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives). The interviewee's reference to Cossack history reveals how values such as love for liberty, individualism, equality, and democracy are ascribed to Ukraine by creating the *narrative of a Ukrainian history of freedom fights and democratic tradition*. The Holodomor reference shows how Russia, considered to be the Soviet Union's legal successor and thus the former power center of the USSR, is portrayed as Ukraine's historical ›other‹, more concretely as a *historical threat to Ukraine's existence* as Russia is accused of starving millions of Ukrainian Soviet citizens to death. At the same time, it serves to unify Ukrainians under a negative assessment of the country's Soviet past.

Although Cossack and Holodomor references only played a role in one interview, both have become central elements of Ukraine's nation-building process and, thus, of its national belonging (cf. Kappeler 2014: 274, 350; Kuzio 2017: 300, Portnov 2020: 32, Simon 2007). The relevance of such historical references unfolds in the light of the ongoing conflict as they serve to *demarcate Ukraine from Russia*, as Ukraine holds it responsible for the Donbas conflict, by drawing a *historical line from past Soviet to current Russian aggression against Ukraine*. Whereas Ukraine is associated with values such as freedom, individualism, equality, and democracy (Cossack reference), Russia is associated with values such as unfreedom, collectivism, and autocracy (cf. Kappeler 2013: 100f, 2011: 198f; Riabchuk 2012: 445).[54] While Ukraine is portrayed as the victim, Russia is depicted as the aggressive ›villain‹ (Holodomor reference). In this light, the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine seems to be the continuation of the country's fight against historical suffering under Russian imperialist aspirations, from Tsarist to Soviet and to Russia's current rule. Consequently, historical memory serves to legitimize *Ukraine's historical pursuit of independence and emancipation from Russia for self-defense purposes*. This is further

54 The antagonistic relationship between Ukraine and Russia will be further discussed in the chapter on foreign policy orientation (5.8.1). The role of the antagonistic narrative between ›democratic Ukraine‹ and ›authoritarian Russia‹ in contemporary Ukrainian national belonging will be further discussed in the subsequent chapter on democracy (5.6).

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underpinned by references to possible Russian involvement in the previous and still ongoing secessionist conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia in 2008 (see chapter 5.7). However, we need to critically reflect on the ideological background of such narratives, for example, when Ukraine's democratic roots are glorified by interviewees.

However, historical memory is a social construct as social groups do not ›have‹ but ›create‹ historical memory (cf. Assmann 2008: 111). Hence, nation-building is based on ›narrating a nation‹ especially by elites and founded on the »production and usage of symbols, myth-making, remembering and forgetting practices« (Kozachenko 2019: 2). It is not the past itself as investigated by historians and archaeologists, but the remembrance of the past which constitutes the foundation of historical memory (cf. Assmann 2008: 113). Thus, history is ›created‹ from the present perspective on the past (cf. Kappeler 2014: 8). In this context, historical memory can also be altered and manipulated during nation-building (cf. Kozachenko 2019: 2).

The construction of historical memory becomes apparent, firstly, in the impact of Soviet historiography on Ukrainian national belonging, as manifested in the tabooing of certain aspects of Ukrainian history under the Soviet regime, such as the Cossacks or the Holodomor. Consequently, Ukrainian historical memory, which has been an important aspect of Ukrainian national belonging under foreign rule (cf. Kappeler 2014: 115), seems to have been challenged by the Soviet politics of memory. This is apparent when revisiting the aforementioned statistics on the Holodomor, as approval of viewing the Holodomor as Soviet genocide is stronger in the west and weaker in the east and south of Ukraine (cf. Rating Group Ukraine 2018), although they were affected most by the Holodomor (cf. Simon 2013: 19). This example shows how the Soviet politics of memory were successful in re-interpreting Ukrainian history by making the Holodomor a taboo and how it continues to shape historical memory in Ukraine, but is successfully challenged by Ukraine's contemporary historiography. Secondly, the construction of historical memory becomes visible in Ukraine's increasing shift from the Soviet to its own, independent historiography. The Ukrainian governments under the presidents Yushchenko (2005–2010) and Poroshenko (2014–2019) pursued ›Ukrainization‹

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of the country's history, creating its own historiography, emancipated from the Soviet and Russian one. Among others, the independent Ukrainian state tied itself to the history and traditions of the Cossacks (cf. Brudny and Finkel 2011: 822, Kappeler 2013: 89), for example in the national anthem, as nation-building requires symbols, myths, and heroes (cf. Brudny and Finkel 2011: 822). Focusing on realigning the Ukrainian nation's foundation, self-image, and its sense of national belonging, Yushchenko sought to contrast the Soviet-shaped historiography, which was classified as ›false‹, with a new, ›truthful‹ national history. This led to the reverse of previously common patterns of interpretation of history in Ukraine (cf. Bredies 2010: 2), as addressed by interviewee I9, who stresses how the ›truth about WWII was revealed‹ following the country's independence. In addition, the Ukrainian government under President Poroshenko pursued a ›de-Communization‹ process of Ukraine's history in 2015 (cf. Kuzio 2017: 299). More concretely, this means a shift from Soviet to Western historiography in terms of the commemoration tradition of WWII and the condemning of Communist in Ukraine: Soviet symbols were banned, cities and streets with Communist names were renamed, Soviet archives were opened and the denial of Soviet crimes, e. g. the Holodomor, was criminalized (cf. Kuzio 2017: 299).

The social construction process behind nation-building unfolds when the asymmetrical Russian–Ukrainian relationship, in which Ukraine has long been regarded as a subordinate branch of the encompassing ›Eastern Slavic‹ unity and has consequently been denied sovereignty, is considered (cf. Kuzio 2001: 344). Thus, Ukraine had to reject Soviet historiography (cf. ibid.: 347) and create its own one to legitimize its sovereignty. Politics of memory and belonging, accompanied by a related culture of remembrance, have therefore been central elements of a form of politically motivated ›state-prescribed‹ nationalism, especially under Yushchenko (2005–2010) (cf. Bredies 2010: 2). Poroshenko's efforts in the state's politics of memory can be regarded similarly. In this context, the prevalence of certain narratives mirrors their strategic selection with regard to their potential of demarcating Ukraine from Russia (cf. Kappeler 2011a: 198, Subtelny 2011: 21), as it is visible in the antagonistic picture between democratic, freedom-loving Ukraine and aggressive, imperialist Russia. According to

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Bredies (2010: 3), the Ukrainian state's politics of memory closely resembles the practice of Soviet historical propaganda. In this light, the reproduction of state national narratives underpins the impact of nation-building politics on the population's sense of national belonging. This becomes prominent, for example, in the reproduction of the Holodomor genocide narrative by the majority of the population. Hence, the government's politics of memory and remembrance culture seem to have come to fruition with regard to establishing certain aspects of Ukrainian history as elements of national belonging. My analysis demonstrates how Ukraine's politics of memory is actively shaping and framing collective as well as individual memory as the state's nation-building narratives are reproduced, for example in the interviews analyzed.

Thirdly, historical memory has become an important battleground between Ukraine and Russia. According to Kozachenko (2019: 1), Ukraine and Russia had already been growing apart concerning historical memory before the events of 2014, but it was due to the ›Euromaidan‹ movement that the long-lasting ›memory war‹ »turned into a real undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine«. This becomes prominent as historiography influences how the armed conflict in the Donbas and its escalation into Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022 is regarded. Both sides frame the war as a genocide. This demonstrates that the conflict between both is not only military, but also political and informational, considering the power of memory politics to construct narratives in order to legitimize one's own position (cf. ibid.). This is further underpinned by Irvin-Erickson (2017), who highlights the use of historical narratives to frame the conflict in one's own favor. From the perspective of Russia, the genocide narrative was used to justify its intervention in Ukraine (cf. Kozachenko 2019: 1) as the ›Euromaidan‹ movement was framed as a coup d‹état which brought fascists into power, thus threatening the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine (see chapter 5.3 on language). In short, the existing memory divide between Western and Eastern Ukrainians (cf. Kappeler 2014: 328) seems to have been used strategically, as the conflict's framing correlates to specific historical memory. More concretely, the use of positive Soviet memories and the framing of Ukraine as the contemporary incarnation of Nazism supported mobilization on the ground for the separatist cause

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and against the Ukrainian government: Southern and Eastern Ukrainians greater Soviet nostalgia was addressed by the government framing Russia as the new version of the USSR and, secondly, by evoking the historical fear that fascist Western Ukrainians were taking over power in the country (cf. Kozachenko 2019: 8f), as is illustrated in the data analyzed as well. From the perspective of Ukraine, the conflict was framed as a continuation of Russian genocidal action in order to legitimize Ukraine's pursuit of emancipation from Russia, in the political, economic as well as historiographic sense, going with further cooperation with Europe instead (cf. Irvin-Erickson 2017: 136, 141). According to Irvin-Erickson, such narratives are not spontaneous but invented to influence public opinion. »[N]arratives of historic victimization« can be invented by political actors »at the hands of a particular group in the past in order to justify political suppression, repression, or even mass violence against that group in the present« (ibid.: 136). In the case of Ukraine, the recognition of the Holodomor as genocide of the Ukrainian people has become a powerful force in legitimizing Ukraine's efforts to maintain its independence against Russia in the light of the ongoing conflict (cf. Brudny and Finkel 2011: 821). Thus, historical memory as part of national belonging has played a significant role in the armed conflict.

Fourthly, the armed conflict has accelerated Ukraine's historiographic emancipation process from Russia, given the temporal coincidence between the outbreak of the conflict and the country's recent politics of memory. This becomes most visible with Poroshenko's De-Communization of Ukrainian historiography, affecting, among other aspects, the country's culture of commemorating WWII. According to Kozachenko (2019), the conflict has impacted historical memory in Ukraine in the sense of bridging the historical memory divide among the population: In accordance with Kuzio, Kozachenko differentiates between two historical narratives which have competed in Ukraine since the country's independence in 1991 (cf. ibid.): the ›Ukrainophile‹ versus the ›Sovietophile‹ narrative. The ›Ukrainophile‹ narrative portrays Ukraine as peaceful and, from a post-colonial perspective, as having suffered under the aggressive Russian and Soviet empires, as is visible in the data here as well. The ›Sovietophile‹ narrative, based on Soviet historiography, stresses the ›Slavic uni-

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ty‹ between Russia and Ukraine and portrays the Soviet era as a glorious time for Ukraine (cf. ibid.), as is visible in the data here as well (see chapter 5.7 on foreign policy orientation). Whereas Ukrainian governments have increasingly promoted the ›Ukrainophile‹ narrative, Russian politics of memory is said to have »shifted to the revival of the Sovietophile historiography, and the mythology and glorification of the Soviet past«, including the revival of Stalinism (Kozachenko 2019: 2f), as illustrated in my analysis. The data analyzed here and other studies show the (partial) success of Ukrainian politics of memory in reframing the country's history: For example, the Ukrainian government under President Yushchenko sought to declare the Holodomor as Soviet genocide on the Ukrainian population, which has impacted the attitude of the population on this topic. The private Ukrainian research institute ›Rating Group Ukraine‹ conducted a survey in 2018 on how the population views the Holodomor today: A large majority of 79 percent of the Ukrainian population has come to regard the Holodomor as genocide, as illustrated in this study by interviewee I9. This was reinforced by the armed conflict, as only 59 percent of the Ukrainian population agreed with this view in 2012 (cf. Rating Group Ukraine 2018). Considering the strong roots of Soviet identity in the southeast (cf. Harris 2020: 605), the switch to the ›Ukrainophile‹ narrative goes with casting off Soviet belongingness in the sphere of historical memory, as discussed in this chapter as well as with regard to Soviet nostalgia (see chapter 5.7 on foreign policy orientation).

However, historical memory is debated and controversial within Ukrainian nation-building. This becomes most visible in the regional differences already presented regarding the approval of the Holodomor as genocide or statistics on the preference for commemorating WWII. The opposing identity and memory politics of the presidents Yushchenko (2005–2010) and Yanukovych (2010–2014) most likely played a major role in this respect: Whereas Yushchenko sought to create Ukraine's own, independent historiography, Yanukovych aimed at reversing his predecessor's course by mixing elements of Soviet historiography with national Ukrainian elements (cf. Bredies 2010: 2). Consequently, the Soviet politics of memory as well as its remembrance culture are still partly rooted in the historical memory of some Ukrainians, thus causing disagreement

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among the population, as is also visible in the data (see the chapter on Soviet nostalgia versus this chapter). Considering the instrumentalist politics of memory against the background of deep identity cleavages in the population, one of which is historical memory, it becomes apparent how politics of memory can fail to strengthen national belonging when it threatens processes of social consensus-building. An example is the country's controversial culture of commemoration concerning Ukrainian nationalists fighting for Ukrainian independence in the 20th century, as the Ukrainian government under President Yushchenko promoted honoring them (cf. Kuzio 2017: 299).

5.6. Democracy: Threatened by Russia

Theoretically seen, national belonging is based, among other ideas, on citizenship and the belief in shared common political principles, values, and preferences (see chapter 2). As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) conceptualizes belonging, it is based on attachment and mutuality between those sharing specific commonalities to feel belonging to each other. While attachments symbolize the (im)material and immaterial linkage between human beings, for example through citizenship and civil and political rights, mutuality represents the expectation of the »reciprocity, loyalty, and commitment« of those belonging to the same community (ibid.: 5).

As discussed in the third chapter, Ukrainian belonging has been growing in its civic nature since the country's independence, strengthened especially by the last two social movements as well as the armed conflict in the Donbas and its escalation into the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. At the same time, political principles also play a role in the ethnic side of Ukrainian belonging, as stressed by Shulman's (2005) concept of ›Ethnic Ukrainian‹ versus ›Eastern Slavic‹ belonging: While ›Ethnic Ukrainian‹ belonging goes with a pro-democratic and liberal attitude, favoring further democratization of Ukraine, ›Eastern Slavic‹ belonging is associated with an anti-democratic orientation. However, we need to consider Ukraine's political history: Although historical narratives stress Ukraine's democratic roots (see chapter 5.5 on historical

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narratives), Ukraine is only slowly transforming from an authoritarian Soviet republic into a democratic nation-state, whose political transformation is monitored closely and repeatedly criticized for its shortcomings, especially corruption. In this light, the *question arises of what relevance a democratic attitude has as a marker of belonging*, especially in the light of the ongoing war in the country.

Comparing the interviews, a democratic attitude has a significance for the interviewees' sense of belonging to Ukraine. My analysis results in two subcategories: Whereas the first subcategory deals with the relevance of *citizenship* to feeling Ukrainian, the second subcategory highlights the role of *civil rights*, the institutionalization of democratic principles, in Ukrainian belonging. The relevance of this marker of belonging lies in its potential to demonstrate *political demarcation from Russia, which is perceived as Ukraine's historic threat* (see also the chapters 5.5. and 5.7).

Citizenship

The relevance of citizenship as a marker of Ukrainian belonging is well illustrated by interviewees I5 and I9 when asked about the meaning of citizenship to them:

> I5: »This uh is my official belonging, […] to Ukraine. (4 sec) Well, I am fully a citizen of Ukraine […]«.

> I9: »Ukrainians should have it, uh uh citizenship. I don't know who else should have it; this has to be discussed, Ukrainians should have citizenship. […] But, you know, I am not against dual or triple citizenship. […] Why should a human being only have one form of citizenship? Why uh can't one be a citizen of other countries too? I don't understand that. Well, for us it's forbidden by law […] but in other countries it's not forbidden. […] I don't understand that. […] I don't think that there is something bad in giving someone citizenship. But it has to be uh people uh I think who bring in money, well, meaning, who have a business […]. When a person brings money in here, they build something here […] open a business, factory, well, something there, so we need to accommodate

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> them; uh doesn't matter who they are, some foreigner […] Well, Arabs, uh these uh Blacks remain here; they want to get citizenship here, […] they are creating their own small businesses and open cafés here; well, people work, you know, what's wrong with that? Why… they work, they bring in taxes here, they pay taxes, they […] are normal members of society. […] I support them. I think, we need to revise the situation somehow, you know, the people, who bring in money, who work here and uh pay taxes, so they should get some more comfortable conditions […]. For that you need to somehow get citizenship easily.«

Both quotes demonstrate a rather formal understanding of how ›Ukrainianness‹ is linked to Ukrainian citizenship. For interviewee I5, citizenship is his »official sense of belonging«, while I9 rebukes the idea that »Ukrainians should have citizenship«. At the same time, their understanding of citizenship reveals the inclusive nature of Ukrainian citizenship: Whereas I5 is himself of (ethnic) Crimean Tatar origin, I9 points out being open to giving Ukrainian citizenship to people of other ethnic descents, referring to the country's Arab and Black minorities, and to the idea of dual citizenship. This indicates the impact of the decision for an inclusive concept of national membership at the onset of Ukraine's independence in 1991, giving citizenship to all permanent residents on Ukrainian territory (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 253). Interviewee I10 is another example of the inclusiveness of Ukrainian citizenship considering his ethnic Russian descent. Although interviewee I9 does not demonstrate an exclusive position on citizenship in the ethnic sense, she displays exclusion in the economic sense, which hits migrants particularly, as one of their difficulties is labor and can thus be racist in its effects on migrants.

While dual citizenship may play an important role in the case of the Ukrainian diaspora, this concept becomes a problematic issue in the case of the Russian minority in Ukraine, given the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. This is illustrated by interviewee I10, who expresses great skepticism about this concept because dual citizenship may drag other countries into the ongoing conflict:

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I10: »[B]ecause what is happening now […] there is no sense at all to talk about that. […] How can we give people dual citizenship, Ukrainian and Russian, tell me? How, when there is a conflict going on with Russia? Alright, we will do another type of dual citizenship Ukrainian–Polish. This person will be a citizen of Poland and Ukraine, right? Ukraine is now in a conflict with Russia, so then Poland also has to join in the conflict, right? It is also their people, also citizens of Poland. This means we drag another state into our inner affairs. […] At the moment, I don't want to talk at all about that. This is absolutely not right. Maybe some time when we already have peace in Ukraine and all these issues of conflict die down, when there really is Euro-integration, then we can think about doing a kind of dual citizenship. But even then, what is the sense? For what reason? I don't understand that.«

Although it is debatable whether other countries would join in the conflict or war to protect their citizens living in Ukraine, which is underpinned by the reluctance of the Western state community to intervene militarily in the Russian–Ukrainian war, his skepticism becomes more plausible in the case of Russia, which legitimizes its position in the war by stressing the duty to protect the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine (see chapter 5.3 on language). Consequently, a form of multiple citizenship could strengthen Russia's position in such conflicts from a legal perspective: Russia's announcement of handing over Russian passports to the population in the DNR and LNR in 2019 (cf. von Twickel 2019: 22) appears to have been a strategic decision to maintain its influence on the Donbas, to strengthen pro-Russian sympathies in the region, and to legally legitimize future interference in Ukraine's affairs concerning the country's attempts to reintegrate both regions (cf. Burkhardt 2020: 2, 4, 6). The latter becomes visible when we consider that the official recognition of the DNR and LNR on 21st February 2022 preceded the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022. In this light, the skepticism about or even rejection of forms of multiple citizenship in Ukraine seems to serve to demarcate the country strategically from Russia. One can assume that exclusivity with regard to one's citizenship may promote loyalty to Ukraine, especially in

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the context of the Russian minority in the country. This becomes apparent in his case, as he clearly expresses loyalty to Ukraine by stressing he is willing to even fight for the country's sake (see chapter 5.7 on foreign policy orientation). Nonetheless, interviewee I10 also displays a (partial) openness towards dual citizenship here in the context of a future scenario of peace and/or EU integration. Considering his ethnic Russian background, this is particularly striking as one would rather expect him to be interested in dual Ukrainian–Russian citizenship.[55]

Civil Rights and Liberties

Referring to the last sub-chapter, the interviews stress civil rights and liberties, which are linked to citizenship in a democracy:[56]

> I5: »This uh is my official belonging, […] to Ukraine. (4 sec) Well, I am fully a citizen of Ukraine […]«., who has the right to vote, who can be elected, who has uh an influence on politics, on public processes which take place in the country. That's why, for me, citizenship is uh the chance to influence the future of Ukraine, meaning for me to have an active position in Ukraine. To try to do something for Ukraine.«

> I10: »First, a citizen is someone who influences the state in its development, its further future. Even at elections when we elect these or those leaders who are supposed to direct and lead the state to a bright future—well, this election depends on us, on citizens of Ukraine. The one we elected, the one we rely on, like we elected Zelensky, joke or not he got more than 70 percent of the votes. […] This is what depends on citizens of Ukraine, namely on citizens of Ukraine. Because on their own, leaders, they alone cannot do anything. This depends on us directly. Who we will support, how we will support, and what we will do.«

55 This will also be a topic in the sub-chapter on foreign policy orientation.

56 Interviewees were asked what it personally means to be a citizen of Ukraine.

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Although citizenship is not linked to a democratic political system only, these passages reveal a clear preference for democracy in Ukraine, since both interviewees emphasize civil rights and liberties. Among other ideas, both highlight the right to vote and more broadly the opportunity to co-create Ukraine's future when addressing citizenship.

The significance of civil rights and liberties for Ukrainians emerges when thinking of minorities in Ukraine. This is well illustrated by the Muslim and Crimean Tatar interviewee I5, who reflects on how the national idea of Ukraine should be formulated:

> I5: »And for me that is the unity of Ukraine. Well, […] unity means both the territorial and ideological unity of Ukraine. That is a high level of rights and freedom, […] uh equal, fair treatment of all followers of all religions and representatives of all peoples living in Ukraine. […] For me, for example, I wouldn't want Muslims to be discriminated against. Yes, for example, Christians would have all rights, but Muslims wouldn't have any rights or would have significantly fewer rights. I, for example, wouldn't like there to be uh such a level of nationalism that even if you are Ukrainian, but for example of Tatar origin like I am, then you are not this kind of Ukrainian, you know, like a second-class Ukrainian. Ultra-nationalists have such ideas, but they aren't popular among the main mass of Ukrainian society. […] That's why I believe that the national idea has to be formed based on these principles. Integrity (knocks on table), supremacy of culture (knocks on table), language (knocks on table), and all rights and freedoms (knocks on table) for all citizens of Ukraine. That should be the national idea.«

If we consider that his Muslim and Crimean Tatar background distinguishes him ethnically and religiously from the ethnic Ukrainian majority of mainly (Orthodox-)Christian faith, his emphasis on the egality of all Ukrainian citizens indicates his preference for an inclusive definition of ›Ukrainianness‹ which integrates ethnic and religious minorities.[57] At

57 Most Ukrainians are of Christian denomination (71.7 %), mainly Eastern Orthodox (67.3 %) or Greek Catholic (9.4 %), or atheists and unaffiliated (11 %). Religious mi-

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the same time, this statement indicates tensions between the titular nation and the country's minorities.

The significance of democracy as a marker of belonging unfolds further when considering the ongoing war since 2014 and Russia's role in it:

I5: »And for us as Muslims of Ukraine it is not profitable at all that uh uh either Russia occupies us or that there will be uh a kind of united space or that in Ukraine there is such a situation or realities like in Russia. Because so far in Ukraine a high level of rights and freedom remains; Muslims can live in peace. If we have such realities like in Russia, then first they will start to repress Ukrainian nationalists, Muslims and Muslim Ukrainian nationalists, who we in fact are. They will start first with us. And it will be like in Crimea, in Crimea where uh people were sentenced to 10, to 15 years in prison, actually for nothing. The will do the same thing with Muslims in Ukraine. That's why we categorically don't need such a situation like that in Russia.«

I5: »I went to Russia at the time of Yeltsin, President Yeltsin. This was another Russia. […] And at that time, Russia still had freedom of speech; you could criticize and scold the president. There was no uh strong dictatorship, uh people felt more or less free. Like how we feel in Ukraine, for example. […] Yeltsin left and Putin came to power. And in front of my eyes uh big, colossal changes just happened in Russia. No freedom of speech, no freedom of political parties. Uh uh uh uh a police state, a military state, was established you know. […] And […] in 2001, Russia was not recognizable anymore. It became a totally different country. And I did not want to remain there. I absolutely did not feel comfort-

norities are Jews, Buddhists, Hindus as well as declared Pagans (all less than 1 %) (cf. Razumkov Center 2018). The Muslim population is estimated to be between half a million (cf. The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) 2019: 42) and one million (cf. Дубовская and Безкоровайная 2017). The number of Crimean Tatars varies between 250,000 (cf. IAGCI 2019: 42) and half a million (cf. Дубовская and Безкоровайная 2017). Unfortunately, the Ukrainian census, which could provide clearer information, has not been repeated since 2001.

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> able there, and uh even I felt danger there. That's why with happiness I returned to Ukraine, and in Ukraine of course we had a high level of freedom. And even now we try with all our energy to fight for the conservation of this high level of freedom. And what happened now with Russia, that that is horror. (3 sec). They are strongly developing towards the model of uh North Korea. […].«

This statement reveals interviewee I5's belongingness to Ukraine against the background of a negative anti-democratic assessment of Russia, which is grounded in his own experiences during the transition of power between Yeltsin and Putin in 1999. His concern about discrimination of Muslims as well as Ukrainian nationalists under Russian rule arises due to his own background as a Muslim Crimean Tatar and pro-Ukrainian activist.[58] His concern becomes apparent when contrasting Ukraine with Russia: While Ukraine guarantees »a high level of rights and freedom«, also for its minorities, Russia is indirectly depicted as non-democratic and as a threat to non-Russian minorities like Muslims and Crimean Tatars. In this context, he highlights the experience of pro-Ukrainian nationalists in Crimea, who are facing repression in the form of, among others, intimidation, harassment as well as politically motivated persecution (cf. Amnesty International 2019) so that many fled from Crimea, among them especially Crimean Tatars, who are worried that their rights will no longer be protected under Russian rule (cf. Kappeler 2014: 354). At the same time, discrimination of religious minorities, which has increased in Russia in recent years, is said to have expanded to Crimea as well as to DNR and LNR in the Donbas (cf. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020: 34). The interviewee illustrates that by mentioning the closing of religious institutions in the Donbas by the »occupational Russian regime« as he frames Russia's role. In the case of the Donbas, where interviewee I5 is from and was politically active, Amnesty International points out that the situation concerning civil and human

58 Interviewee I5 mentions having actively taken part in the ›Euromaidan‹ as well as in protests for Ukrainian integrity and against separatism in the Donbas, which led to his escape from the new separatist authorities in the region. More information in this respect can be found in the chapter on activism.

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rights has deteriorated, with interrogations, arrests and ill-treatment like torture and inhumane conditions in prison becoming more common (cf. Amnesty International 2019).

The escalation of the conflict into war in 2022 followed this path as Amnesty International (2023) states: Russia's military invasion of Ukraine since 2022 is classified as a violation of the UN Charta and, thus, as a crime under international law. The Russian invasion has had serious consequences for human rights and the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and triggered a displacement crisis. Among others, the Russian armed forces did not only attack military target objects, but also the country's civilian infrastructure, which led to the injury or death of thousands of Ukrainian civilians. Russian troops thereby denied the civilian population access to humanitarian aid. The civilian population was also forced to undergo a screening process, called ›filtration‹, including torture and violence. In addition, the Russian armed forces are accused of having committed sexual violence, forced resettlement of Ukrainians, abduction of Ukrainian children to Russia, and unlawful killings against the Ukrainian civilian population. In Russian-occupied Crimea, the authorities have continued to crackdown on dissidents, human rights defenders, Crimean Tatar representatives and activists, people with pro-Ukrainian views and members of religious minorities. As a consequence, Ukraine is suffering under the negative effects of the conflict on the rights to housing, energy, health, and education. According to the UNHCR (2024), the number of IDPs increased up to 3.7 million and the number of Ukrainian refugees globally to 6.5 million. Nonetheless, Ukraine has also been criticized for its political and military reactions to Russia's invasion (for example, for its restriction of employees' rights and the centralization of the media) (cf. Amnesty International 2023).

If we consider that the history of the Crimean Tatars and their historical homeland Crimea is not Ukrainian, but Russian in large parts (cf. Wydra 2003: 337f), similarly in the Donbas (cf. Kappeler 2014: 106, 377), interviewee I5's belongingness to Ukraine is striking.[59] In this light, his

59 Crimea, which was part of the Mongolian Khanate of the Golden Horde in the 13th century and later of the Crimean Khanate, which emerged from the split in the Gold-

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self-identification as Ukrainian is based on the antagonistic relationship between Ukraine and Russia. Whereas Ukraine is characterized as inclusive and democratic, Russia, as Ukraine's ›other‹, is viewed as non-democratic and a threat, especially to Muslims and Crimean Tatars (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives). Against this backdrop, his pro-Ukrainian activism during the Euromaidan and the outbreak of separatism in the Donbas (see chapter 5.7 on foreign policy orientation) can be explained with his ethnic and religious background, since independent Ukraine seems to be important for him as the protector of Crimean Tatars and Muslims.

5.6.1. Discussion of the Findings

Comparing the interviews, *citizenship does not play a major role as marker of belonging*, given its scarce thematization compared to other markers of belonging, although the aspect of citizenship was addressed clearly within the interview, unlike other facets of ›Ukrainianness‹. Against the background that the ongoing war is strengthening Ukrainian (civic) national belonging (cf. Kulyk 2023, Onuch 2022), of which citizenship is an important civic marker of belonging (see, for example, Bureiko and Moga 2019: 145)[60], this result is striking when considering the strong attachment of most interviewees to Ukraine, which is expressed throughout the interviews (see especially the chapter 5.7).

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en Horde in the 14th century, had belonged to the Russian Empire since the Khanate's defeat in the late 18th century and later to the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1954, it was handed over to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (cf. Wydra 2003: 337f). The Donbas region belonged to the Russian Empire for a long time, as part of the administrative region called Novorossiya, but was incorporated into the Ukrainian Socialist Republic after the Soviet Union's emergence (cf. Kappeler 2014: 377).

60 Citizenship is ranked mid-table (71 %) in the study of Bureiko and Moga (2019: 145). The importance of citizenship as a marker of belonging has thus been increasing over the past few years, if we compare the studies by Kulyk and Bekeshkina. For example, whereas 52 percent of Ukrainians stated that being Ukrainian citizens was their primary form of self-identification in 2012, this figure increased to 61 percent of the population in 2014 (cf. Kulyk 2016: 595) and has seemed to remain the most important marker of self-identification for the majority of Ukrainians since then (62 % in 2017) (cf. Bekeshkina 2017: 15f).

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The low significance of citizenship can be ascribed, firstly, to the methodological differences between qualitative and quantitative study approaches. While quantitative studies ask directly for the relevance of certain aspects which are believed to constitute Ukrainian belonging, the narrative interview focuses on subjective relevance with as little external structuring as possible, thus seeking to analyze the meaning behind the importance of certain phenomena. The interviewees here were not asked to rate certain elements in their importance for ›Ukrainianness‹, but to explain their personal perspective on it. The assumed low significance of citizenship as a marker belonging might also possibly attributed, secondly, to the obviousness of Ukrainian citizenship to the interviewees, because their citizenship as an official symbol of belongingness to Ukraine is not questioned or disputed among the Ukrainian population, unlike other markers of belonging, such as language. Thirdly, citizenship may also be less relevant, especially in the light of the conflict, as it is a less visible marker of belonging—compared to other facets of ›Ukrainianness‹.

However, the significance of citizenship unfolds when we focus on political values linked to it, more concretely a *pro-democratic attitude and preference for an inclusive Ukrainian nation*. Embedding the findings and assumptions into a broader societal context, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2019), a non-governmental organization in the US, emphasizes that a slight majority (51%) of Ukrainians prefers democracy to any other form of governance, which is said to have increased over the past few years.[61] The preference for democracy is visible in all regions, including the East, which was previously more ambivalent on this question (c. f. ibid.). Hence, the emphasis on democratic principles in the interviews mirrors the increasing statewide relevance of democracy for Ukrainian belonging. To summarize, the significance of democracy as a marker of belonging lies in its *inclusive character*, unifying Ukrainians of different ethnic and religious background, and its *potential to demonstrate Ukraine's demarcation from Russia*. Similarly to historical memo-

61 At the same time, 21 percent do not care about the form of governance in Ukraine and 17 percent believe that a non-democratic government is of benefit, depending on the situation (cf. International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2019).

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ry (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives), Ukraine is depicted as democratic and Russia as non-democratic and in this context as *a threat* to Ukraine in the light of the ongoing war.

If we consider that Ukraine's recent challenges have strengthened the civic nature of ›Ukrainianness‹ but also seem to have increased the relevance of Shulman's ›Ethnic Ukrainian‹ belonging (see chapter 3), the significance of a pro-democratic attitude among Ukrainians can be linked to both notions. In this context, Brudny and Finkel emphasize a link between national belonging and the prospects for democracy in newly democratizing states (cf. Brudny and Finkel 2011: 813): The non-existence of hegemonic, non-democratic national belonging stimulated the development of a form of liberal, democratic and inclusive ›Ukrainianness‹ in post-communist Ukraine (cf. ibid.: 814, 817).

In a nutshell, this sub-chapter demonstrates the creation and maintenance of an antagonistic relationship between Ukraine, which is positively portrayed as democratic, and Russia, which is viewed negatively as an undemocratic threat to Ukraine. However, a pro-democratic and pro-Ukrainian attitude does not necessarily exclude (strong) criticism of the Ukrainian government and state, as demonstrated by all interviewees. The interviewees mainly criticized the failures of the Ukrainian army in fighting back separatists and Russia and thus liberating the occupied territories and the corrupt government, which is not doing enough to support those most affected by the conflict. Interviewee I10 exemplifies this:

I10: »I mean that the government before Zelensky only cared about their pockets. Everything that happened, happened for thievery, looting, the destruction of Ukraine. (long break) Well, I would like […] the government of Ukraine [to think] about the people because the main wealth of the country are the people. (long break) Because there is no country without people.«

I10: »Because like I said at the beginning, people want a bright future, to defeat corruption, defeat uh the state, which was not doing anything for us, so that there is popular sovereignty/democracy.«

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5.7. Looking West: Russia versus the EU

As outlined in the second chapter, the evolvement of national belonging is a dual process which is based on inclusion and exclusion concurrently. The questions arise of *who Ukraine's 'others' are* and *what significance foreign policy orientation has as a marker of belonging,* especially against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in the Donbas.

A comparison of the interviews shows that Russia and the EU are the primary ›others‹ against which Ukrainian national belonging has to be defined and that demarcation can be drawn either in the sense of *friendship* or *enmity*. My analysis indicates that foreign policy orientation plays a role as a marker of belonging as all the interviewees address this issue. Its relevance can be briefly coined as the need to politically emancipate Ukraine from Russia, which does not view Ukraine as a sovereign nation that is independent from Russia, among others, by seeking an alliance with the EU. The armed conflict has thereby strengthened the relevance of Ukraine's foreign policy orientation as a marker of belonging.

My analysis results in three subcategories. The first subcategory deals with the relationship to *Russia*, Ukraine's central historical ›other‹ (see chapter 3), which is portrayed as *Ukraine's enemy* as it is held responsible for the outbreak of secessionist armed conflict in the Donbas. In this context, Ukraine claims that Russia aims to occupy the Donbas in order to restore its former glory. In contrast, as the second subcategory reveals, the *European Union* is regarded more as *Ukraine's friend,* which offers an alternative relationship to Ukraine, namely of voluntary cooperation instead of an asymmetrical relationship like that with Russia. Interestingly, two international political-military actors which dominate international affairs do not appear as relevant others to which a relationship has to be defined: namely, the US and NATO. This result is striking as both are the only relevant international political-military actors which could offer Ukraine security from Russia in contrast to the EU. The last sub-chapter illuminates the legacy of *Soviet nostalgia* and its impact on Ukrainian belonging and the conflict in the Donbas.

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Russia—Our Enemy

Referring to the previous chapters[62], we already have various references to how Russia was viewed by past Ukrainian governments, especially in light of the Donbas conflict, as well as by citizens with a strong sense of Ukrainian belonging. In a nutshell, Russia is viewed as Ukraine's historical ›other‹ under which Ukraine is suffering: After the dissolution of the medieval multi-ethnic empire Kievan Rus' at the end of the 13th, which is considered to be Ukraine's (ethno-cultural) cradle, the country experienced a long history of foreign rule, especially under the Russian Tsarist Empire and later the Soviet regime (see chapters 2 and 5.3 on language). As both the imperial Russian and the Soviet regimes have not regarded Ukraine as a distinct, sovereign people or nation, both sought to assimilate Ukrainians into Russian or Soviet culture, especially in terms of language and culture (see chapters 5.3 and 5.4). Imperial Russian assimilation politics reached their peak with the banning of the Ukrainian language in the last decades of the 19th century (see chapter 5.3). The Cossack society in Ukraine's Eastern regions today was therefore a place of asylum for Ukrainians fleeing serfdom, assimilation pressure, and religious persecution under Polish–Lithuanian and Russian rule (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives). Soviet assimilation politics took a similar path by devaluing the Ukrainian language and culture as backward and nationalistic, while concurrently setting up the Russian language as the statewide lingua franca and the language of the state elites and educated citizens (ibid.). This resulted in the marginalization of the Ukrainian language and culture (see chapters 5.3 and 5.4.). Against this backdrop, Ukrainian nation-building had to be based on the Ukrainization of the country following the dissolution of the USSR, especially with regard to language (see chapter 5.3). However, the country's (moderate) (linguistic) nation-building efforts have been problematic for the large Russian(-speaking) population, who still feel strongly attached to Russia and the country's Soviet past, leading, among others, to the outbreak of the armed conflict in the

62 My analysis shows the difficulties of marking out the categories on which Ukrainian belonging as a core category is founded, as the marker of belonging of foreign policy orientation is especially fed by the analysis of the previous categories.

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Donbas and its escalation into the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022 (see chapters 2 and 5.3). The experience of the Holodomor has further intensified the portrayal of Russia as an enemy which wants to harm or even destroy the Ukrainian nation (see chapter 5.5). This narrative has been reactivated or used within the Donbas conflict and its escalation into Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022 to emphasize that Russia is once again threatening Ukraine's existence as a sovereign and independent nation(-state). Thus, both the imperial Russian and the Soviet regimes are the historical reference points in portraying Russia as the historical enemy from which Ukraine has to emancipate itself politically, linguistically, culturally, and historically nowadays, as the previous chapters show.

The country's history becomes topical in the light of the armed conflict in the Donbas by drawing a historical line *from the past to current Russian ›aggression‹ against Ukraine* and *legitimizing Ukraine's position as self-defense in its fight against Russian aggression*. Two of the interviewees (I5 and I9) classify the armed conflict in the Donbas not as an expression of the free will of Donbas residents to secede from Ukraine but as Russian annexation:

> I5: »This is Russian occupation. That's all. Uh as a [Donbas, author's note] citizen, I know 100 percent that this is not an internal Ukrainian conflict. Russian propaganda tries to portray the war in Donbas as an internal conflict in Ukraine. […] Well, that's why this is uh no civil war; this is direct military occupation by Russia.«

Both interviewees emphasize that the conflict in the country is not an internal conflict or civil war between Ukraine and the regions seeking secession, as it might seem. This relates to the fact that the history of the Donbas[63] (cf. Kappeler 2014: 106, 377), and in particular of Crimea[64] (cf.

63 The Donbas region belonged to the Russian Empire for a long time, as part of the administrative region called Novorossiya, but was incorporated into the Ukrainian Socialist Republic after the Soviet Union's emergence (cf. Kappeler 2014: 377).

64 The beginning of Crimea's history is dated back to around 1000 BCE (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica 2024). After Greek and Roman rule, the peninsula became part of the

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Wydra 2003: 337f), is in large parts Russian and not Ukrainian. History is used by the Russian regime under Putin to legitimatize its current geopolitical aspirations, which argues that Crimea and Donbas are historically Russian and not Ukrainian regions. In this context, interviewee I5 criticizes Russian propaganda because it frames the Donbas conflict as an internal issue or a civil war, most likely in order to raise legitimacy for Russia's position by veiling its (military) involvement.

Interviewee I9 explains the Donbas conflict further with the preceding Euromaidan movement 2013/14 as its trigger (see chapter 5.3): The Russian media classifies the Euromaidan as a coup d‹état that brought fascists to power who threaten the Russian(-speaking) population in Ukraine.

Mongolian Khanate of the Golden Horde in the 13th century (cf. ibid., cf. Wydra 2003: 337f). The Crimean population is said to have increasingly adopted Islam since the early 14th century (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica). Due to the split in the Golden Horde in the 14th century, the so-called Crimean Khanat emerged (cf. Wydra 2003: 337f). Crimea belonged to the Russian Empire following the Khanate's defeat in the late 18th century (cf. ibid.). Following the collapse of the Russian Empire due to the Revolution of 1917, the region declared itself an independent democratic republic (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica). After the victory of the communist forces in the Revolution, the peninsula became an autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921 (cf. ibid.). The Soviet collectivization process and the Soviet suppression of ethnic minorities both had harsh consequences for the Crimean Tatar population (cf. ibid.). During WWII, many Crimean Tatars were deported to Siberia and Central Asia for having (suspectedly) collaborated with the Nazis (cf. ibid.). After WWII, Crimea lost its autonomous republic status to become a region (oblast) of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. In 1954, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, born in Ukraine to Russian migrant parents, gave the peninsula to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a present to emphasize both states' friendship. Although legally rehabilitated in 1967, the Crimean Tatars were not allowed to resettle in Crimea (cf. ibid.). In the context of the dissolution of the USSR from the late 1980s, an increasing number of Crimean Tatars resettled on the peninsula (cf. ibid.). Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, Crimea became an autonomous region with specific rights in contrast to the country's other regions, also including the Donbas (cf. ibid.). Nevertheless, the relationship between the capital Kyiv and Crimea was complex and tense (cf. ibid.). Among others, ethnic Russians constituted the majority of the local population (cf. ibid.). Crimean residents had voted in favor of Ukraine's independence, though with a slight majority (cf. ibid.). In addition, Russia as the USSR's legal successor was confronted with the problem of having lost control over the Black Sea Fleet's base at Sevastopol, Crimea's capital (cf. ibid.). This problem was solved by a treaty granting Russia special access to the base (cf. ibid.).

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For example, Russia criticizes Ukraine's interim government's decision to withdraw specific rights from Russian as a minority language in Ukraine in spring 2014. This law repealed pro-Russian ex-president Yanukovych's law on granting more rights to minority languages in 2012, from which mainly the Russian language profited. However, this decision was not officially adopted before the conflict's outbreak in spring 2014 (cf. Kappeler 2014: 345). In contrast, she views Crimea and the Donbas conflict as part of Russia's larger strategy of seizing Ukraine as it is still denied sovereign, independent existence by Russia—which is similar to I5's views on the conflict cited earlier. Ukraine's language policy was therefore repeatedly instrumentalized by Russia to legitimatize its (future) intervention in Ukraine using the language issue as an example of violent Ukrainization politics (see chapter 5.3 on language).

The emphasis on Russian occupation instead of on an internal conflict is grounded in the observation that Russian military personnel and technology were secretly involved in the secession of Crimea, in fact making it an annexation by Russia, as interviewee I9 puts it:

> I9: »Well, the [conflict started with the, author's note] events in Crimea, Crimea was surrendered by our people without any shot […] directly unrest started in uh the Donbas […] uh it started all with pro-Ukrainian meetings, which uh were dispersed; later there just came uh military personnel in tanks and the military carried out operations and the technology was Russian and uh […] we caught [them, author's note] many times […] with documents that [they are, author's note] military members […] and this operation, you know, of military members of that country; they are not volunteers at all, they are directly military personnel who were sent (<2 sec) that's why this is an ordinary military conflict, armed conflict which is… tried to uh to make it somehow a civil war.«

This statement has to be understood in the light of the events in 2014: When pro-Russian Yanukovych became president in 2010, he extended Russia's lease on the Crimean port Sevastopol for its Black Sea Fleet until 2042 and thereby allowed the Russian regime to base up to 25,000 troops

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there (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica n.d. a). Following the Euromaidan movement in 2013/14, which led, among others, to the escape of President Yanukovych to Russia, unidentified masked military personnel seized the local Crimean parliament and other key administrative buildings between February and March 2014 (cf. ibid.). Although the pro-Russian local party only achieved 5 percent in the local elections in Crimea in 2010, they took over the power in the Crimean parliament in spring 2014 (cf. ibid.). Pro-Russian rallies in spring 2014 were flanked by pro-Ukrainian rallies involving Crimean Tatars who wanted Crimea to remain part of Ukraine (cf. ibid.). After Putin received the Russian parliament's approval to send troops to Crimea to support the local Russian(-speaking) population there, Russian and local pro-Russian para-military forces officially took over control of Crimea (cf. ibid.). The Crimean parliament voted unanimously in favor of seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia instead (cf. ibid.). A referendum was held in March 2014 to underpin this decision with regard to the people's will (cf. ibid.). However, the referendum was unconstitutional according to Ukrainian law and was criticized for being conducted undemocratically (cf. ibid.). Although having officially reported 97 percent support for Crimea's accession to Russia, the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights estimated a lower actual turnout of 30 percent, with between 50 to 60 percent of the voters supporting acceding to Russia later (cf. ibid.). On March 18th 2014, the Russian government formalized Crimea's accession to the Russian federation, thereby breaking international law (cf. ibid.). The unidentified masked military personnel at the secession's beginning later turned out to be Russian military personnel (cf. ibid.).

In this statement, interviewee I9 also criticizes the fact that Poroshenko (2014–2019), Ukraine's president at that time, decided to not oppose the secessionist movement. However, according to Poroshenko, a military answer would have left Ukraine exposed on its eastern border, where Russia had assembled significant military units and technology in the meantime (cf. Watts 2014) while Ukraine lacked its own well-trained and equipped army at that time (cf. Bonenberger 2022, Akimenko 2018).

Russia's covert military operation in Crimea is considered to have been the model for a similar scenario in the Donbas shortly afterwards (cf. ibid.),

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another Ukrainian region which Putin views historically as Russian. However, in contrast to Crimea, the situation in eastern Ukraine descended into an ongoing armed conflict (cf. ibid.) as Ukrainians decided to form volunteer battalions to fight the Russian occupation.

The accusation of Russia's involvement in Crimea and the Donbas is grounded in a historical comparison of earlier secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space in which Russia is also alleged to have interfered or intervened:

I9: »I have already seen objectively uh, you know, well, Russia has problems with everyone, some problems with Georgia, with Moldova. I have never viewed it as a friend; I have seen it as an aggressive country, a country which always interferes in some kind of conflicts uh and, as I think, not in its own territory, meaning, you know, it participates in some military action, but not on its own territory. […] I have a family which uh didn't love, suffered a lot from the Soviet regime (2 sec), and Russia like uh the successor uh well to the Soviet Union uh I grew up automatically in such an informational field […] we had television all from Russia; yes, we were given information. (coughs) But I uh my parents always, I was small, you know, I caught comments; they commented on what was happening in their own way. When there were the Georgian events uh war in Georgia, Russia gave us such, well, you know, that Georgia uh Abkhazian people want to secede. But I, well, what I heard even if I was only little and less interested, what I remember from my parents […] They clearly uh gave, that's why I uh never had any question who the aggressor is.

I5: »Russia has occupied parts of Georgian territory; Russia has occupied a part of Moldavian territory, you know.«

Comparing past conflicts, such as those between Russia and Georgia or Moldova and their regions which sought secession, both interviewees blame Russia for secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space, characterizing Russia as an aggressive occupational force. Interviewee I9 stress-

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es in this context that she grew up in a family which suffered from the Soviet regime (referring to the family's experience of the Holodomor, see chapter 5.5) and is therefore critical towards the Soviet regime and Russia as its successor. In her family, they blame Russia for the secessionist conflicts in Moldova in the 1990s and in Georgia in 2008, which still continue, similarly to the Donbas conflict but mainly pacified in a status quo as independent from their motherland and not (yet) integrated into the Russian Federation. With this statement, I9 draws a historical line from past Soviet to current Russian aggression on Ukraine.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to which objective Russia is pursuing with its involvement in the armed conflict in the Donbas.

I5: »In the beginning, the aim was at least to occupy and occupy half of Ukraine. (3 sec) There was the idea to occupy all Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine up to Dnipropetrovsk.«

I5: »Russia has occupied parts of Georgian territory; Russia has occupied a part of Moldovan territory, you know. And this won't stop them, you know. Uh it will continue its uh active policy of occupation; Belarus is next in line, you know. […] Well, then they can look at the Baltic states; they will even seek to occupy more of Ukraine.«

I5: »And uh Russia, which at the time of Putin, basically started to revive the Soviet cult, the cult of Stalin, the cult of uh a power- powerful military state, yes, so people in Donetsk liked that. Because that was what they had lost. They had lost the Soviet Union. […] And here Russia is offering them that again now; there will be a great uh military state which will threaten all others. Which will uh be uh the strongest, the most terrible.«

According to interviewee I5, Russia intends to occupy Eastern European regions with the long-term aim of becoming the reincarnation of its imperial and Soviet glorious past by developing into a powerful military state again. Ukraine, but also other countries like Belarus and the Baltic

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states, are thus in Russia's line of sight. This is also partly supported by interviewee I9 when she draws another historical line: she portrays Russia as the »descendant of the Mongolian yoke« which seeks to conquer other countries and to demonstrate its power by threatening the world, as it draws strength from others' fears.[65]

This negative assessment of Russia relates to two geopolitical strategies which are ascribed to Putin's regime: ›Novorossiya‹ and ›Russkiy Mir‹. In a nutshell, Russia is said to want to unite ethnic Russians as well as Russian speakers outside Russia (see chapter 5.3 on language) in order to restore Russia's past glory and power. In this context, Russia is believed to seek to reclaim eastern and southern Ukrainian territory, including Crimea and the Donbas. Russia argues that these regions are traditionally Russian because they were historically part of the Russian Tsarist Empire, called ›Novorossiya‹ region (literally: New Russia) (cf. Basora and Fisher 2014, Harris 2020: 603).[66] The concept of ›Novorossiya‹ is embedded into Russia's broader geopolitical and ideological concept of the ›Russkiy Mir‹ (literally: Russian World) (cf. Harris 2020: 603): Since ›Eastern Slavs‹ are generally seen as Russian, no matter if they are of ethnic Russian, Ukrainian, or Belarusian origin, Russia is said to want to unite ethnic Russians as well as Russian speakers abroad with their real homeland Russia (cf. Kuz-

65 The dominance of the Mongols over the Kievan Rus' in medieval times, in particular the Golden Horde, has been called the Mongol or Tatar yoke, as Mongols and the peoples associated with them were generally named Tatars, in both Russian and Soviet historiography. By framing it as a yoke, Mongolian dominance is portrayed as barbarian, cruel oppression, and exploitation of the Slavic peoples (cf. Bilz-Leonhardt 2008: 33). Russian and Soviet historiography denied any positive influence from the Mongols during their dominance over the Kievan Rus' and instead framed Russian history as a triumph over backward peoples like the Mongols (cf. ibid.: 35). However, after the USSR's dissolution, contemporary Russian historiography deconstructs the myth of the Mongol/Tatar yoke over the Slavic peoples by revising previous historical narratives about the Mongolian dominance by emphasizing the Mongols' positive impact on the development of Russia (cf. ibid.: 36f).

66 The historical region ›Novorossiya‹ in the Russian Tsarist Empire extended from Bessarabia in the west, nowadays the Moldovan Republic, to the Donbas in the east and Dnipropetrovs'k in the north, the latter two being Ukrainian territory nowadays (cf. Kappeler 2014: 377).

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io 2017: 290, Bekeshkina 2017: 2, Kappeler 2014: 377).[67] Russian speakers are thereby generally considered to be Russia's ›compatriots‹ (›sootechestvenniki‹ in Russian). As a consequence, Ukraine is denied an independent existence as well as a sovereign identity (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 258). Lastly, both concepts are considered to be the foundation of Putin's aspiration to »restore Russia to its former imperial glory« (Basora and Fisher 2014): »[A]s a great, respected and feared powerful state which lies at the center of a Eurasian civilization that rivals the West, as did the USSR« (Kuzio 2017: 300), as it is also addressed by the interviewees. Hence, the idea of uniting Eastern Slavs can be used as Russia's legitimization to interfere in other countries to protect Russian ›compatriots‹ as well as to expand itself territorially. The term ›Novorossiya‹ is thus more than ›harmless branding‹; it »represents the construction of a new (geo)political reality« (Zhurzhenko 2014: 206), threatening the existence of East European states such as Ukraine (cf. Kappeler 2014: 377). Menkiszak et al. (2014) point out that Russia does not consider Ukraine to be a sovereign and independent state, but as part of its own sphere of influence, considering Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia thereby also intends to assign a non-aligned status to Ukraine, accompanied by the renunciation of any further European integration. The ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas and its escalation into Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has to be seen in this geopolitical light.

Referring to Russia's geopolitical aims, interviewees I5 and I9 reject any further cooperation with Russia and especially any form of Russian rule over Ukraine. Interviewee I9 underpins her rejection with a historical reference, pointing to Ukraine's negative past experience with Rus-

67 The concept of the ›*Russian world*‹ developed during the 2000s from a marginal intellectual discourse to the state's current ideology supported by Russian authorities as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. Whereas it meant at first the ethnic Russian diaspora, it has become a synonym for the Eastern Slavic civilization, encompassing not only ethnic Russians, but also Ukrainians and Belarusians—in the sense of a supranational community united by the Russian language and culture and Orthodox beliefs (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 258f). More information on the development, content, and implementation of the concept of the ›Russian world‹ can be found, for example, in the article by Zhurzhenko (2014).

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sia and thereby creating a historical line from past to current Russian aggression against Ukraine (see also chapter 5.5 on historical narratives):

I9: »[W]e don't want to be with Russia; we don't want to develop with them, to deal with them. Because we have already been there, […]; we tried that, it's enough.«

In the light of the outbreak of the armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014, interviewee I9 stresses that Russia is a dangerous neighbor to Ukraine due to their territorial closeness, its military strengths and its unpredictable politics:

I9: »[I]t is a dreadful neighbor really, nearby with these weapons, they permanently uh, you know, it's not clear what's on their minds. Not clear whom they will attack, not clear when they will come up with such an idea; they uh for them uh they are fighting all the time […] they are not at all predictable people; everything could be in their minds.«

I9: »They announced in Crimea (2 sec) they at first uh issued an ultimatum (<2 sec) ultimatum, meaning, they carried out a referendum and issued an ultimatum, well, ›leave Ukrainian military‹ […] and I was very afraid that we will have a war; we are close to the border with Russia; I was afraid that they also want to come to us (breathes in).«

In contrast, although not supporting separatism, interviewee I10 does not speak ill directly about Russia in his interview, most likely due to his ethnic Russian background.

I10: »I think this is an artificially created situation. Well, the people themselves who live there and here, no one wants war. […] (It is a bad higher power?) which plays card games, a chess game, creates kind of positions for themselves in order to enrich themselves more. But the ordinary people suffer. [..] [This is an (author's note)]

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> artificially created situation in order to achieve certain goals. […] Well, and those who planned that achieved their goals.«

However, he criticizes Russia indirectly twice. First, because, through its involvement in the Donbas and in Crimea, Russia has violated international agreements on Ukraine's sovereignty, the so-called Budapest Memorandum:

> I10: »Because the agreements which were formerly accepted on non-aggression […] they all don't work now. Meaning, for example Russia, we concretely see that those agreements, which were specifically signed on documents, they don't work.«

This quote illustrates that he is critical of Russia. Signing a treaty at the OSCE conference in Budapest in 1994, Russia, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), and the USA agreed to provide security assurances to Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in exchange for their nuclear weapons, which they possessed after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (cf. United Nations 1994). The security assurances consisted of the acknowledgment of the independence and sovereignty within the existing borders of the three former Soviet countries, the prohibition to threaten their territorial integrity or political independence through economic or military power—except in self-defense or cases in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (UN)—and of security support in case any of the three countries is ever attacked (cf. ibid.). In this light, interviewee I10 sees the ongoing conflict in the Donbas as Russia's violation of the Budapest Memorandum. Hence, interviewee I10 hereby illustrates once again that he does not consider himself to be Russia's ›compatriot‹ (see chapter 5.3 on language) as his Russian background does not link him closer to Russia.

In this light, it seems as if he explains Russia's involvement in the Donbas conflict and thus violation of the Budapest memorandum using the relationship between Russia and the US:

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I10: »Well, but it seems to me that all this is in the background namely because of the relationship between Russia and America. […] On the surface, uh just the sphere of influence of Russia and America somewhere may intersect at a certain moment and due to that all this is happening. Well, there was the time of the Cold War.«

In this quote, he addresses the relationship between Russia and the US after being asked about the countries helping Ukraine, referring to one of his statements just before. Although not directly linking the armed conflict to their relationship, he seems to view it as one of the underlying mechanisms of the Donbas conflict.

Interviewee I5 bases his rejection of Russia on his fear of persecution of minorities and pro-Ukrainian activists like him.

I5: »And for us as Muslims in Ukraine, it is not profitable at all that uh uh either Russia occupies us or that there will be uh a kind of united space or that in Ukraine there is such a situation or realities like in Russia. Because so far in Ukraine a high level of rights and freedom remains; Muslims can live in peace. If we have such realities like in Russia, then first they will start to repress Ukrainian nationalists, Muslims, and Muslim Ukrainian nationalists, who we in fact are.«

I5: »The Russian regime and its local adherents started to enforce politics of purging, in other words to arrest and detain those who took part in the revolution of dignity, who protested against the so-called DNR and LNR and Russian occupation.«

He stresses the lack of freedom and civil rights under Russian rule for minorities and pro-Ukrainian minded people who took part in the Euromaidan and in activism against the establishment of the two People's Republics DNR and LNR. In this context, he explains how the new authorities not only closed Muslim institutions like mosques, but also how he had to flee from the Donbas due to persecution of pro-Ukrainian activists like him.

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He underpins his argument by stressing Russia's development towards an authoritarian and autocratic system under Putin, developing into a bigger and more dangerous ›North Korea‹.

I5: »I went to Russia at the time of Yeltsin, President Yeltsin. This was another Russia. […] And at that time, Russia still had freedom of speech; you could criticize and scold the president. There was no uh strong dictatorship; uh people felt more or less free, like how we feel in Ukraine, for example. […] Yeltsin left and Putin came to power. And in front of my eyes uh big, colossal changes just happened in Russia. No freedom of speech, no freedom of political parties. Uh uh uh a police state, a military state, has been uh established you know. Uh again some of uh the first imperial slogans have been reborn, mixed with soviet slogans. And […] in 2001, Russia was not recognizable anymore. It became a totally different country. And I did not want to remain there. I absolutely did not feel comfortable there and uh I even felt danger there. That's why with happiness I returned to Ukraine, and in Ukraine of course we had a high level of freedom. And even now we try, with all our energy, to fight for the conservation of this high level of freedom. And what has happened now with Russia, that that is horror. (3 sec) They are strongly developing towards the model of uh North Korea. (2 sec) Well, if they uh carry on this type of politics, which Russia is conducting, the closure from the outside world, the rest of the world will be enemies again, there will be an arms race again, no freedom of speech, no kind of, no freedom at all. The fact they even want to cut off the Internet, so that Russia has its own kind of Internet. But they will turn into North Korea. Just a bigger one uh and more dangerous than North Korea. (5 sec) Well, that's what I think about Russia.«

The last three statements by I5 demonstrate an antagonism between democratic Ukraine and undemocratic Russia and thereby express a connection between a negative view of Russia and the relevance of democracy as a marker of belonging for Ukrainians (see also the chapter 5.5 on histor-

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ical narratives). This is partly also expressed by interviewee I9 (see especially chapter 5.5 on this).

Moreover, I5 not only highlights the risks for Ukraine with the last quote, but also for the world's state community, portraying Russia as an enemy of the EU as well. Among other threats, he stresses that Russia is interested in weakening the EU and that the world could be drawn back into an arms race by Russia.

I5: »Because uh Russia spent […] money so that [the EU, author's note] it collapses. Russia supports right-wing parties, left-wing parties, in Hungary, also uh in other countries, uh in France, Le Pen and others. In other words, […] to maximally weaken Europe. That the European Union ends its existence and all countries become on their own, separated, again. Because when Europe is united, it is powerful, economically, very powerful also ideologically, you know. Uhm but when countries collapse, different uh countries are not united; then somewhere rightist nationalists, like in Hungary or Greece or somewhere else, will come to power. Or in Italy. This might even happen in France. Others will become left-wing extremists, for example, or ultra-secular. In other words, Europe won't be a united space economically anymore, won't be a united space ideologically. For Russia this is an ideal variant because against the European Union it won't be able to deal with it. Russia easily can deal with any separate country.«

Interviewee I5 addresses Putin's involvement in founding Russian-friendly, (extremist) right-wing parties in plenty of EU countries here, like Front National (France), Alternative for Germany (»Alternative für Deutschland«), Austria's Freedom Party (»Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs«), Lega (Nord) in Italy or Orban's Fidesz (Hungary). Putin's party United Russia had successfully endeavored to establish partnerships with conservative parties in the EU for years, but changed its political course around the beginning of the 2010s (cf. Bidder 2017). This turnaround was accelerated by two crises. On the one hand, Putin faced mass demonstrations by the mainly liberal-minded metropolitan middle class as well as Krem-

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lin administration officials at the turn of 2011/2012. Subsequently, Putin strengthened the faction of national conservatives within the Russian leadership (cf. ibid.). On the other hand, Putin maneuvered Russia into isolation after violating international law with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (cf. ibid.). Since then, the Kremlin has intensified its contacts with (extremist) right-wing parties outside Russia.[68] Relations with the right-wing fringe in (Western) Europe existed before but were only sporadic (cf. ibid.). Many European right-wing populists and extremists see Putin as a geopolitical alternative to the liberal Western powers. They share a common ideology, like the rejection of homosexuality, and admire his authoritarian leadership style and his aggressive behavior in Crimea (cf. ibid.). In addition to this ideological proximity, European (extremist) right-wing parties have pragmatic reasons for cooperating with Russia: Among others, they seek financing for their political aims and election campaigns because potential donors risk being publicly ostracized due to their (former) position as political outsiders or profit mutually from positive media coverage (cf. ibid.). From the Western perspective, Putin's support of far-right anti-EU forces is considered to be destabilizing the West and the EU as he sees both alliances as rivals standing in the way of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space. The right-wing populists are therefore his Trojan horses, a strategy already known as the ›Communistic International‹ (cf. ibid.). Among others, the Putin-friendly think tank »Centre for Political Economy« identified ›mass migration‹ and ›conflicts between ethnic groups‹ as core weak points of the EU—long before the flood of refugees into the EU started in 2015—and a demand for a strong right-wing political leader, for example among Germans (cf. ibid.).

Against the background of the Donbas conflict and Putin's connections to European right-wing (anti-EU) populists and extremists, interviewee I9 stresses the necessity for the international state community to weaken Russia in order to reduce the risk Russia is posing to the world community:

68 However, the connections between Putin and European (extremist) right-wing parties are not always transparent: For example, the French Front National received a million euro loan from a private Russian bank—but Putin is considered to be the mastermind behind this deal (cf. Bidder 2017).

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I9: »I think that uh, you know, we have to weaken Russia. We don't have a conflict with these uh with the people [in the Donbas, author's note]; they were persuaded [by Russia, author's note]; you know, they also- they have Russian television there; you just need to switch only our Ukrainian one on for them, well, you understand, to say that they uh aren't enemies here or anything, and then they will forget like Mariupol citizens[69]. DNR is a terrible dream; uh we all need to weaken Russia, to influence so that they can't, meaning, when they run out of money, then this all ends immediately. […] Meaning, we need to oppress Russia (stutters) uh with international politics […]. They [the sanctions, author's note] have to be prolonged so that their economy collapses […] Well this is the only solution which I see uh in any situation with Russia, […]. Well, locally you can't solve it; if they have the desire, they will continue, meaning, this uh depends on them, not only on us.«

She refers here to the sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries and alliances, like the US and EU, which she strongly supports but would like to extend in time and strength. From her point of view, Russia can only be stopped by severe sanctions hitting especially its economy so that Russia lacks the financial means to continue the conflict in the Donbas. At the same time, she addresses the world community, which she calls on to fulfil their duty to stop Russia. The discourse on the effectiveness of sanctions and the responsibility of the world community and some countries and alliances in particular, such as the US and EU, to intervene in Russia's actions and to help Ukraine became topical once again with the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Lastly, interviewee I9 demonstrates most clearly of all the socially created antagonism between Russia and Ukraine, leading to deep cleavages between both. While Putin stresses the unity of Ukrainians, Belarusians,

69 In 2014, the secessionist movement in the Donbas and maybe also Russia hoped that secessionist aspirations would spread among other eastern and southern Ukrainian regions, like around Mariupol. Mariupol is an industrial center and international harbor on the Sea of Azov, Ukraine's sea access. Whereas Mariupol Ukrainian military forces and local volunteers successfully prevented Mariupol from seceding from Ukraine in 2014, Ukrainian forces surrendered to Russia by 20th May 2022 after a week-long siege of the city. Pictures of Ukrainian military forces fortifying the city's industrial plant circulated around the globe.

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and Russians (see chapter 1), many Ukrainians, like I9, use a variety of antagonistic narratives to demarcate themselves from Russia:

> I9: »We fight, […] you know, we always fight, well, that I, as I say, have a clear belief that (stutters) we won't give up, because we have fought throughout our history […]. Meaning, (stutters) when it's said that we- we are one people with Russia, they, you know, have slavery in their mentality; we don't have that, we are free people, we fight. They have, you know, they choose a Tsar, they love to live under a Tsar, we didn't have that. And we are mentally different people, this is different between us; we- we don't love to obey.«

> I9: »I'm telling you, they have a slavery mindset, which uh suits them, uh kind of ›we don't have any democracy for long, but everyone fears us‹. (ca. 3 sec) I think that this is still the influence of the Mongolian yoke.«

Interviewee I9 creates a negative image here of a Russia whose government is pictured as authoritarian and its people as subservient This is symbolized by her reference to Russia's Tsarist history as well as to the reference to Russia as an occupying force (referring to the interpretation of the Mongolian yoke in this chapter before). In contrast, Ukrainians are characterized as a people with a mentality of freedom. In this light, the Donbas conflict and its escalation into Russian war in 2022 are classified as recent examples of Ukraine's history of freedom fights.

However, not all Ukrainians consider Russia to be Ukraine's enemy, given the lack of criticism of Russia by interviewees I3 and I10. In the case of interviewee I10, his ethnic Russian background might to be a reason why he also does not speak ill of Russia. Strikingly, I10 highlights that support for refugees from the Donbas is better in Russia than in Ukraine. His positive assessment of Russia is nonetheless not in contrast to his Ukrainian belonging as criticism of the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian belonging do not mutually exclude each other. However, his interview reveals certain moments of criticism of Russia, though it is more implicit: For example, he stresses not having been in Russia since his grandmother died a

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long time ago. His criticism of Russia is most prominent when referring to the Budapest Memorandum, which was already discussed in this chapter. Concerning I3, her difficulties in speaking openly (see chapter 4.4.1) and most likely her difficulties in uncoupling Ukraine from Russia due to their close historical and cultural ties in the past could be reasons why she does not speak ill of Russia. This becomes apparent when she reveals she has a positive image of the common past (see the sub-chapter on Soviet nostalgia and the following second quote) and thus expressed surprise about Russia's interference in Ukraine.

I3: »Russia is—I always thought that (laughs) how should I say it? (2 sec) Well, since the Soviet Union we had always been together. I didn't expect (2 sec) such a development of events.«

I3: »At all, uh such conflicts like now did not occur in the Soviet Union. (2 sec) So, uh I have positive memories about the Soviet Union.«

According to journalist Heather Murdock (2022), working for Voice of America English News (VOA), an increasing number of Ukrainians, especially older people from the conflict region with positive memories of the Soviet Union, stress that they did not expect Russia to attack Ukraine in spring 2022 as both are still regarded as brotherly nations.

Considering that the Donbas conflict has divided partners, families, and friends on the questions of belonging, independence, and Russia's involvement (see. e. g. interviewee I9), interviewee I3's lack of criticism of Russia can also be interpreted as an attempt to ignore the conflict to save personal peace and relations:

I3: »The most important thing is that such moments don't destroy a family and amicable relations.«

This is similarly stressed by interviewee I10. In order to not let the Donbas conflict become a conflict among IDPs in his refugee camp, having political conversations is prohibited, and interviewers are not allowed to address political topics when interviewing IDPs there:

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I10: »Because uh we have had enough of this international conflict, it was necessary to unite the people so that they do not perceive each other as enemies here. Well, that's why, […] all conversations about political topics have to be absent here. No one talks about any political topic. Even those who came here with questions, for focus groups, [we] directly forewarned them not to touch on political topics in any case.«

However, as I10 demonstrates, Ukrainian belonging goes hand in hand with distance to and criticism of the Russian regime, but not necessarily the Russian people:

I10: »[They are, author's note] normal people, who also don't want war and who also- there are protests everywhere against everything that is happening.«

With this statement, I10 refers to the fact that the Russian population does not fully support the regime's plans and actions considering Ukraine, as citizens are still willing to protest against their regime although freedom of speech and assembly has been radically restricted in recent years, leading to persecution in Russia.

The European Union—Our Friend

In contrast to the last sub-chapter, the IDPs interviewed mostly have a positive view of the European Union, as illustrated by Muslim interviewee I5:

I5: »And under the conditions of uh Russian occupation and the war with Russia, and the will of Russia to occupy Ukraine, uh we as Ukrainians, as Muslims, we always appreciated the support of the US and the European Union.«

A preference for further cooperation with the EU thereby accompanies rejection of Russia, as interviewee I9 demonstrates:

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I9: »[W]e don't want to be with Russia; we don't want to develop with them, to deal with them. We want, well, to cooperate, well, with Europe, well, with other civilized countries. […] Because we have already been there; we were there, we tried that, it's enough.«

I9: »[W]e objectively want to join you in the European Union, […] we want to be with Europe […]. We want objectively—our youth wants—is attracted to Europe […].«

Through her statement, interviewee I9 symbolizes the (individual) desire to cooperate more closely with the European Union (EU) up to Ukraine's accession to the EU. At the same time, this desire clearly accompanies rejection of Russia and thus of any future cooperation with Russia (see previous sub-chapter). Her first quote thereby creates an antagonistic picture between the EU as a »civilized« country and Russia, which, due to the subtext, is viewed as uncivilized (see also the chapter 5.4 on culture for this view). Both of her quotes mirror the widespread consent for closer ties to the EU and rejection of Russia among Ukrainians (as it will be shown by statistics later): In both quotes she uses the first-person plural (›we‹) instead of the first-person singular marking her own opinion. Thereby she stresses that her opinion is not individual, but collective in Ukraine.

The choice for future cooperation and even belonging to the EU is legitimatized using various reasons: from economic advantages, freedom of travel, cultural, scientific, and educational exchange up to strategic reasons for partnership and the closeness between Ukraine and Europe with regard to history and values in contrast to Russia. The aspects of economic advantages, strategic reasons for partnership, and the (political) closeness between Ukraine and EU will be analyzed in detail in the following. First, economic reasons for joining the EU are stressed among the interviewees, as interviewee I9 demonstrates:

I9: »We objectively want to join you in the European Union; we need to boost our economy.«

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I9: »We want to be with the European Union; we want that experience, want to learn normal trades, trade relations, normal qualitative production for normal prices, like you have […].«

Interviewee I9 stresses here that accession to the EU would have positive impact on the Ukrainian economy. At the same time, we need to remember her emphasis on cooperation with the EU instead of Russia, as discussed in the previous sub-chapter on Ukrainian-Russian relations.

The relevance of economic advantages for Ukrainians supporting the country's EU accession unfolds when considering Ukraine's economic development since its independence in 1991. Among other problems, Ukraine had faced a declining economy in general and falling living standards (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica n.d. b). The country's economic struggles were amplified by the outbreak of the Donbas conflict in 2014 and its escalation into Russian war against Ukraine in 2022 (cf. ibid.).

However, the relevance of economic reasons can only be understood when including Ukraine's foreign (trade) relations into the analysis. To understand this, we need to start with Ukraine's independence: Popular vote for Ukrainian independence was mainly motivated by hope for economic improvement, not the country's sovereignty (cf. Shevel 2014: 148f). After independence, Ukraine started to seek closer cooperation with the EU as early as in 1993—although »Russia has historically been Ukraine's most important trade partner« (cf. ibid.). Kappeler (2014: 264, 277) explains this as the country's aspirations to diversify its foreign trade relations due the Soviet heritage of close economic interlacing which had become problematic after the USSR's collapse leading to economic crisis. In 1993, the Ukrainian Parliament declared »its European integration aspirations for the first time« by adopting the resolution »On the Key Directions of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine«, which stresses Ukrainian membership in the European Communities as one of Ukraine's top foreign policy goals (cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2021). This led to the signing of the »Partnership and Cooperation Agreement« between Ukraine and the EU in 1994 (cf. ibid.). This treaty creates a framework for cooperation in economic, political, social, cultural, and security issues between the EU and a non-EU member, often the start of an accession process for states willing

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to join the EU. The Ukrainian parliament regularly reconfirmed the country's foreign policy orientation towards the EU (cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2021). The Ukrainian–European relations were extended in the following years, opening out into the agreement on signing the »European Union Association Agreement« in 2013 (cf. ibid.). At the same time, »Russia sought to inject new dynamism into trade ties with fellow former Soviet states« so that Ukraine was among eight post-Soviet states to sign the Russia-led ›Commonwealth of Independent States free-trade agreement‹ in 2011 (cf. Gardner 2014). Due to its negotiations with the EU on bilateral free trade in the past years Ukraine could not join Russia's own customs union, now known as the Eurasian Economic Union (EECU) (cf. ibid.), a regional economic association involving Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Thus, Ukrainian foreign policy has long been characterized by a seesaw policy (cf. Movčan and Radetzkaja 2015) as both, Russia and the EU, promised Ukraine economic benefits for foreign (trade) relations. However, Ukraine's deepened EU-relations are said to have been a thorn in Putin's flesh as »critics have referred to [his EECU] as a reincarnation of the Soviet Union« (cf. Walker 2013a). »Russia's opposition to Ukraine's association agreement with the EU became explicit and assertive in the summer of 2013, when Russia […] warned that signing the association agreement with the EU would be economically »suicidal« for Ukraine« (cf. Gardner 2014): Among other measures, Putin announced Russia would impose restrictions on Ukrainian exports if Ukrainian (pro-Russian) president Yanukovych (2010–2014) would sign the EU treaty (cf. ibid.). At the same time, Putin offered »Ukraine financial incentives to stick with Russia«, more concretely he announced to buy Ukrainian government bonds and to cut the gas price for the country in exchange for not signing the planned EU association agreement at the end of 2013. (Walker 2013b). According to Kappeler (2014: 276f), but also other scientists and experts on Ukrainian foreign policy, Russia had a lever to exert economic as well as political pressure on Ukraine due to Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia—despite the country's European integration aspirations. Among others, Russia has been one of the main creditors of Ukraine (cf. Walker 2013a), which has faced economic struggles since its independence, and the country is highly dependent on

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Russian gas–on Russian discount for its own gas consumption but also on the transition fee Ukraine can take for being a transit country for Russian gas on its way to Europe (cf. Kappeler 2014: 263f, 277), which is important for Ukraine's GDP. Russian pressure on Ukraine finally led to Ukraine's decision to refrain from signing the »European Union Association Agreement« in November 2013, which caused mass protests now known as the »Euromaidan movement« 2013/2014 or »Revolution of Dignity«.

Second, the choice for future cooperation with the EU up to Ukraine's accession is legitimatized using strategic reasons due to the threat Russia is posing to Ukraine as interviewee I9 demonstrates:

> I9: »I have already seen objectively uh, you know, well, Russia has problems with everyone, has some problems with Georgia, with Moldova. I have never viewed it as a friend. I have seen it as an aggressive country.«

> I9: »We have a very aggressive enemy close by; we need to uh be friends with someone.«

To understand both quotes, we have to recall the last sub-chapter on Ukrainian–Russian relations, in which Russia is portrayed as an enemy that poses a threat to Ukraine. It is historically underpinned (see the chapter 5.5 on historical narratives) that Russia is viewed as an occupation power which denies Ukraine its sovereignty and independence and thus strives to annex Ukraine in order to restore its former imperial glory. Against this background, the EU is seen as a strategic partner for Ukraine, not only for economic development but also militarily with regard to Ukraine's survival as a sovereign country. Interviewee I10 seems to argue similarly when highlighting the issue of peace in his pro-European foreign policy orientation in contrast to Russia, which violated the Budapest Memorandum (see previous sub-chapter). Being asked what he thinks of the European Union, he answers:

> I10: »Common decisions of peaceful existence because the agreements which were formerly accepted on non-aggression […]—they all

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don't work now, meaning, for example Russia; we see concretely that (break) those agreements, which were specifically signed in documents [for nuclear weapons exchange, author's note], they don't work.«

Third, a pro-European foreign policy orientation is underpinned with an emphasis on the historical commonalities between European and Ukrainian values:

I9: »And, well, we want to be with you, […] European values are close to us; human rights are close, […] when the life and freedom of a person is higher than anything else; we aren't Russians, uh these values aren't understandable for them, […] we want experience, we want friendship, want communication, we want close relations, we want to learn and we want to be farther from Russians.«

Interviewee I9 stresses human rights here—and democratic principles in the subtext of this quote—as a commonality between Ukraine and the EU in contrast to Russia, which is denied sharing these values. Thus, this quote demonstrates (the creation of) antagonistic narratives between democratic Ukraine and undemocratic, authoritarian Russia, as already discussed in the chapters on historical memory (5.5) and democracy (5.6). At the same time, Ukrainian belonging does not go with demarcation from the EU but with highlighting commonalities. The EU is not considered to threaten Ukrainian sovereignty but to be a friend to safeguard Ukraine from the threat of Russia.

Interviewee I5 also stresses the attractiveness of European values, especially democratic principles, for contemporary Ukrainian belonging, but from a different perspective:

I5: »Uh principally, I have always liked the idea, the principles of the European Union. This is the freedom of faith, yes, freedom of speech, freedom of art, the freedom of entrepreneurship.«

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As already analyzed, democratic principles play an important role in Ukrainian belongingness, as demonstrated previously by interviewee I5. The relevance of democratic principles unfolds when considering the antagonistic relationship between Russia and Ukraine as, due to its undemocratic, authoritarian state, Russia is considered a threat to Ukrainians, especially to pro-Ukrainian citizens and minorities, like Muslims and Crimean Tatars (see chapter 5.6 on democracy).

Nonetheless, the EU is not glorified, as two interviewees state. In the case of interviewee I9, cooperation with the EU is preferred in the light of past experiences with Russia and the fear of what could come next for Ukraine under Russian rule (as analyzed in the previous sub-chapter).

I9: »We want objectively, our youth wants, is attracted to Europe, wants to learn, […] even if we get it in the neck, but, you know, this will be experience, well, mistakes, meaning, you have to get this experience, well, we need development, we need to do something with the country.«

I9: »[E]ven if we join […] the European Union and we don't succeed in anything, it will be better than doing nothing in our situation. Meaning, we will get it in the neck, we will make conclusions, well, […] you won't destroy us worse; I tell you honestly, we can only get experience from all that, because we have a very aggressive enemy close by; we need to uh be friends with someone. We will even be friends with those baring their teeth.«

I9: »The (stutters) more we are in your claws, even if you (eat?) our economy, you will protect us anyway. This is (our blood?) (noise), you know; you can drink it, but not them. Uh, I'm telling you we are ready for this new experience; we don't know where it will direct us, but uh, you see, (?) you have to try, to make mistakes, to break off, well, to do something, to try, like that. A country is built like that.«

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Interviewee I9 reflects here that cooperation with or accession to the EU may be accompanied by difficulties and challenges for Ukraine. The formulation »we might get it in the neck«, which she expresses twice at different times, symbolizes possible setbacks for Ukraine regarding its development ambitions. She hereby addresses the widespread concern in the Donbas that accession to the EU will have a negative impact on Ukraine's economic welfare (cf. Giuliano 2018: 163)—a narrative that might have been pushed by Russia. This is also expressed in her interview when she reflects on the idea that the EU might ›eat‹ the Ukrainian economy (third quote). Nevertheless, she clearly favors cooperation or accession with the EU for strategic reasons like protection, as addressed before in this sub-chapter. This becomes clear when she states that the EU cannot ›destroy‹ (second quote) Ukraine worse, most likely referring to Ukraine's negative experiences with Russia in the past. Thus, interviewee I9 reflects on the possible trade-off between protection from Russia and a possible negative economic impact on Ukraine. She seems to go so far as to suggest that she prefers the negative impact of the EU in exchange for protection from Russia: This becomes apparent from a passage in the third quote which I have translated as the ›EU is allowed to drink Ukrainian blood, but not Russia‹—however, this passage was difficult to translate due to noise at that time of the interview.

Finally, it seems that striving for cooperation with the EU is more a question of strategy than of other factors, like cultural closeness.

However, not all Ukrainians prefer closer ties with the EU. This becomes apparent with the interviewees I3 and I5, neither of whom express such a clear desire for accession to the EU as I9, for example. In the case of I3, difficulties in speaking openly, political apathy (see chapter 4.4.1) and/or difficulties in uncoupling themselves from Russia (see the following sub-chapter on Soviet Nostalgia and the previous sub-chapter) could be possible reasons for less support of Ukraine's accession to the EU. Although I5 might not advocate closer ties with the EU, I3 has a positive picture of the EU:

I3: »I don't know it [the EU, author's note]. I am far away; I don't think about it at all. (1 sec) Once, actually, I traveled to Prague. That's all. Besides that, I haven't been (there). (4 sec) What I see, what I hear I, like it. (1 sec) People work. Well, they have a completely

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different life from that in the Soviet Union. For us all it was different. I only know a little bit about the European Union. Well.«

In the case of I5, he criticizes ›excesses‹ in the EU, such as same-sex marriage, but also acknowledges that there are European countries which uphold religious values—a position which has to be understood in the light of his religious profession. His main criticism focuses on the decline of European values as the EU prizes economic interests, for example with Russia or China, over human rights, even over a genocide. His disappointment at the EU's role in the armed conflict most likely decreases his support of Ukraine's future within the European state community:

I5: »Under the conditions of uh Russian occupation and the war with Russia […] uh we as Ukrainians, as Muslims, we always appreciated the support of the US and the European Union. Now such a situation is happening that everyone wants to be friends with Putin and Russia. Well, and no one wants to uh (4sec) have a conflict with Russia, in the economic sense, for some kind of rights and freedom. Today, you know, all these European democratic values, which European civilization was founded upon, they are so rapidly depreciating that soon they won't be worth anything. Uh, you know, uh no one cares about rights and freedom anymore, everyone cares only about profitable economic trade. This is my- it is economically lucrative to even trade with China, even with Russia, they won't even care that a genocide is taking place there. Look, China is committing a genocide on Uygurs, and no one cares. Because uh its very profitable to trade with China, you know. […] And that's why uh all these uh values on which European and American civilization is founded […] these now are devaluing, devalue. […] They still talk about them, about specific values, but no one will defend them anymore or wants to. (3 sec) Yes, uh and now Europe does not care that Russia occupied Crimea and Donbas. Yes, and already everyone says that for us it is not profitable to impose uh any kind of sanctions on Russia and to stop having an economic relationship with them.«

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Soviet Nostalgia

Referring to the negative view of Russia which some of the interviewees display and share, we need to contrast the findings with the interviewees' Soviet nostalgia.

In a nutshell, Soviet nostalgia can be defined as positive memories about the USSR, particularly about its social achievements and social justice, but does not necessarily mean a belief in the Marxist-Leninist ideology behind it (cf. De Cordier 2015: 3). My analysis demonstrates that Soviet nostalgia plays a role in Ukrainian belonging among Southern and Eastern Ukrainians—when considering that the southeast had belonged to the USSR longer than Western and Central Ukraine (cf. Kappeler 2014: 206, 215).

If we compare the interviews, Soviet nostalgia becomes apparent in the interviews with I3 and I10:

I3: »In the Soviet Union I think, I don't know what many people say now, but in any case, we had uh social protection; we had a childhood which- which was not threatened; there was stability; everyone had work. (4 sec) And by the way, everyone had amicable relations. (3 sec) There was peace. […] No one was frighted. At least internally. […] Well, like I said, foremost there was stability. (6 sec) All in all, uh such conflicts, like now, […] did not exist in the USSR. […] So, uh I have positive memories about the USSR.«

I10: »Well, actually it's very hard to say what the politics were like back then because I wasn't mature enough to judge […]. Well, at least uh my memories of childhood are all positive […] because at that time uh, first, parents could calmly- […] did not fear the future, so to say. […] Well, you could calmly uh put money aside for holidays, to go on holidays twice a year to relax. Well, there were free trips for children to pioneer camps, to various recreation centers, well, to various health resorts […]. […] There were fewer problems.«

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I10: »As for the positive memories, I also lived under the USSR; I was an Octobrist; I was a Pioneer and in the Komsomol. […] Well, kind of better qualities, I think. That there was a state of being organized. Well, we strove for some kind of ideals. […] To respect the elderly, to help others, somehow develop one's country, to study well. Meaning only the best memories of that time have remained, good ones.«

Both interviewees articulate positive memories about the USSR. While interviewee I3 focuses on social protection, stability, especially economically, and peace, interviewee I10 emphasizes the positive impact of child and youth organizations on his personal development or the possibility of the broader population going on holiday as well. In this context, we can see that I3 is aware of different perceptions of the USSR, as she mentions that she does not know what other people say, but has her own positive attitude towards the Soviet past. Nonetheless, interviewee I10 critically reflects on his lack of ability to evaluate Soviet politics as a child, but does not criticize it now as an adult.

These positive memories also have to be seen from the perspective of their current life experiences. In the case of I3, she highlights a distinction between the peaceful times of the USSR and the current conflictual times, most likely referring to the outbreak of the Donbas conflict in 2014. She stresses that such a conflict would not have happened in the USSR. In the case of I10, we can assume that his positive memories of the USSR function as a contrasting foil for the economic challenges Ukraine has faced following its independence and its current struggles so that ›parents cannot be calm about the future‹. Moreover, he most likely indirectly criticizes the loss of typical Soviet values and ideals like respecting the elderly, etc. as well.

According to Ivan Kozachenko (2019), who analyzed memory work concerning the Soviet past, Soviet nostalgia is practiced within two main discursive frameworks: The ›pragmatic‹ discursive frame is based on a positive assessment of the USSR, especially concerning economic stability and its social, scientific, and technological/industrial achievements. In this light, cooperation with Russia in the EEU or EACU nowadays

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is viewed positively because it is said to »recreate a new version of the USSR and will restore its lost glory«, expressing a positive memory of the Soviet economy, whereas cooperation with the EU is regarded negatively as it is associated with a »loss of sovereignty, industrial degradation and economic problems« (ibid.: 5). The ongoing economic struggles following independence can create nostalgia for the Soviet past (cf. Shevel 2014: 159). The ›romantic‹ frame is based on one's own positive experiences or those passed on by older generations. The core of this frame consists of the emphasis on »[…] affordability of living, state welfare, and the unity of different ethnic groups […]« (Kozachenko: 5). Referring to both interviewees, one can clearly see the use of both frameworks when they remember the USSR. Both stress economic stability and concurrently idealize the relationship among people as well as the unity within the USSR. To add to Kozachenko's work, we need to critically reflect on both positive images of the USSR due to the tendency towards idealization in my interviewees' answers. For example, I3 negates such conflicts in the USSR, like the current one; however, the USSR tried to prevent or tackled any outbreak of nationalism and separatism in the Union (see chapter 3 on the Soviet nationality regime).

In contrast, interviewees I5 and I9 express a clear negative assessment of the USSR:

> I5: »My childhood took place uh in the last years of the Soviet Union when already uh the process, the irreversible process of the collapse of the Soviet Union uh had already started. When there was a total lack of everything. Well, there were not even enough basic nutritional products. These are very arduous memories of my childhood. Uh when after school, together with my parents we had to queue in the shop for hours to at least just buy bread. […] And nutritional products were in short supply; in fact, in the shops nothing was sold. And one had to go to the village to buy uh any kind of food there, to buy potatoes, maybe meat, maybe butter, milk; buying such things in the city was almost not possible. Well, that's why all my memories of childhood are basically kind of less pleasant ones. Well, Donbas was just an industrial region. […] This

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means a total lack, uh great poverty. When the Soviet Union collapsed, and, well, Ukraine became independent, all these industrial regions, which before only lived due to industry, at once became poorer. This means enterprises and mines closed, people did not receive a salary for many months. […] This means all these memories of uh my childhood they are, you know, very arduous. Uh and in the first years of Ukraine's independence, well, when the reconstruction of the economy had not yet started, the freedom of trade, which means that everything was in a bad bad condition, […] well, in fact up to around 1996 to 1997, […] it was hard.«

After outlining his biography to me at the beginning of the interview, from date and place of birth to educational background to his current profession, interviewee I5 reflects on his childhood in the Donetsk region. In contrast to interviewee I3, interviewee I5 states he does not have any positive memories about the USSR. In a nutshell, he stresses the economic decline and shortfalls which characterized the last years of the Soviet Union—a pattern that is common among memories of the Soviet Union. He also reflects that the economic hardships following the USSR's collapse persisted in the first years of Ukraine's independence, but slowly changed in the following years. Strikingly, he does not see Ukraine's transformation from a Soviet to a market-capitalist economy critically, which underlines his pro-Western orientation, as is visible in the previous sub-chapters:

KS: »And then after ›being abroad‹, you returned to the ›Donetsk region[70]‹?«

I5: »Yes. Well, when I returned, there was already a different Ukraine. […] The […] wealth had significantly increased in these four years [when he was abroad, author's note]. This means, when I left, the country- it was 1997, people still lived very badly and poorly in the country. Very. Within uh well these years uhm the situation improved significantly. And when I returned uh to Donetsk

70 Information in brackets displays that the passage had to be anonymized.

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region, Donetsk had become different; people started to live better. This means that economy re- re-formatted itself. From one that was orientated towards Soviet production. […] Well, the market economy regulates itself; all those enterprises, companies, and factories, which were not necessary anymore, closed. What was necessary opened.«

Interviewee I9 shares a similar negative attitude to the USSR. Among other problems, she points out the lack of goods, thereby emphasizing the bad quality, the lack of individual choice concerning which goods to get and the need to queue for hours to get rationed food towards the end of the USSR. However, we need to consider that both interviewees only experienced the Soviet Union in their childhood and teenage years and thus lack positive memories in contrast to older Ukrainians, who not only experienced the tough times at the beginning and end of the Soviet Union, but also good times in between.

Interviewee I5, however, also criticizes his Ukrainian compatriots as blind for having positive memories about the Soviet past:

I5: »There was nothing good. […] Those who are nostalgic about the Soviet Union, […] [t]hey remember that everything was cheap. […] well, that you could get a flat for free, that you could practically go on holidays for free. Uh but this was all in […] the time of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. During the last days of the Soviet Union, there was a total shortfall […]. In fact, those people who […] are nostalgic about the Soviet Union, they are nostalgic about the fact that they got something for free or very cheaply, meaning products. […] In the Soviet Union, there was no freedom; in the Soviet Union there were no opportunities to study, travel, even to practice one's religion. […] No intellectual freedom, no cultural freedom. The only thing by which it was all replaced was that they gave you something for free or cheap. And even what was given was not the best. […] That's why people didn't know that people live a lot better beyond the Soviet Union; yes, they thought that they had uh the best. In the Soviet Union, nothing was good. Nothing at all.«

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Interviewee I5 refers unconsciously to Kozachenko's (2019) work on Soviet nostalgia here. Firstly, he analyzes that Soviet nostalgia is based especially on economic arguments (›getting something cheap or for free‹). Secondly, he critically reflects that people tend to forget the experience of loss and shortfall at the end of the USSR, while the previous positive memories remain. Thirdly, he criticizes that people have positive memories of the economic benefits, while they tend to forget the material shortfall in the last years of the USSR as well as the immaterial shortfall in terms of civil rights and liberties. His negative assessment of the USSR stresses once again the relevance of democratic values for his identification with Ukraine (see chapter 5.6 on democracy).

Concerning national belonging, my analysis indicates a link between someone's memories about the USSR and their current identification with Ukraine. On the one hand, a negative impact of Soviet nostalgia in terms of undermining or restraining identification with Ukraine can be assumed, when contrasting the positive memories about the Soviet past with the country's current major challenges, such as the armed conflict and economic issues. Probably the outbreak of the armed conflict in the region has invoked or increased Soviet nostalgia, as the peaceful, stable Soviet past contrasts with the current time of conflict, violence, and economic hardship. However, Soviet nostalgia can be in line with a strong sense of belonging to Ukraine and orientation towards Europe, as demonstrated by the ethnic Russian interviewee who has (some) positive memories of the Soviet past. On the other hand, my analysis demonstrates that a negative assessment of the Soviet past can strengthen someone's sense of belonging to Ukraine. Among others, the lack of democracy, individualism, freedom, and tolerance in the Soviet Union seems to play a role in forming a pro-Ukrainian instead of a pro-Soviet attitude among Ukrainians.

The negative impact of Soviet nostalgia on someone's sense of belonging to Ukraine is most apparent with regard to supporting separatism. According to Kozachenko (2019: 3), nostalgia for the golden Soviet times can account for backing separatism in Ukraine.[71] Although interviewee I3

71 According to Kozachenko (2019: 3), Soviet nostalgia played a role in backing separatism and the ›anti-Maidan‹, the counter movement to the ›Euromaidan‹, which pre-

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does not display support for secession of the Donbas, this does not mean that she has no sympathy for the separatists. This stands out, first, as she does not display a strong affiliation to Ukraine, as illuminated in the previous chapters, and, second, as she left the Donbas for practical and not for political reasons like I5 and I9.[72]

The link between Soviet nostalgia and separatism is addressed by interviewee I5, who traces back Putin's success in seceding Donbas from Ukraine to Soviet nostalgia among Donbas residents. In a nutshell, he explains how the Soviet Union created its own Soviet ideology based on communistic values, rejecting religion and the idea of different nations, with which it aimed to indoctrinate the citizens, especially through education.

I5: »Well, [Donetsk, author's note] is a very communistic, Soviet city. Because in the time of the Soviet Union, there was an attempt to make all these big industrial regions maximally communistic. Kids were educated in the communistic spirit in schools there. […] Strong communist ideology. Well, that's why it was a very Soviet city. The city was multinational. Meaning people of different nationalities lived there [in Donetsk, author's note], but all of them were made Soviet people. In other words, the Soviet Union created a new type of human being. […] This was a human without religion, without national belonging, […]. Yes, who has all these uh communist ideas, ideas of the Soviet Union, who lives accord-

ceded the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas. In contrast, a negative assessment of Ukraine's Soviet past limits sympathy and support for separatism and the anti-Maidan, and concurrently accounts for backing of the ›Euromaidan‹ (cf. Kozachenko 2019: 6), as exemplified by interviewees I5 and I9.

72 Interviewee I3 explains her decision to leave her city with her mother's illness and the lack of doctors and medicine in the DNR. However, after her mother recovered, they moved back to their city in DNR at the end of 2015. Another reason for going back was also their lack of money to rent a flat somewhere else. After her mother, with whom she had lived together, had died in 2017, she followed her children to another city. She mentions the difficulty of living alone and financial dependence on her children as reasons for her leaving her hometown. In contrast, I9 fled separatism in her region from a pro-Russian orientated city, whereas interviewee I5 was forced to flee persecution due to his activism against separatism in the Donbas.

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ing to them. That's why uh Donetsk uh was, you know, a city uh where people were […] pro-Soviet.«

With this statements, interviewee I5 explains why Soviet nostalgia was more widespread among Donbas residents before the outbreak of the Donbas conflict than in other regions (cf. Rating Group Ukraine 2015) with the success of Soviet ideology, which was indoctrinated into Donbas residents as he explained in his previous quote:

I5: »Yes, many strongly regretted the collapse of the Soviet Union. In other regions of Ukraine, people were happy that the Soviet Union collapsed, […] but for Donetsk citizens it was a tragedy because from childhood on they were taught that the biggest value is that we have such a country, that we have such an ideology. […] There were no religious values; there were no national […] [and] no cultural values in the Donbas. They- inhabitants of the Donbas were just made simple-minded Soviet people. Well, when what you are educated to believe in, what has, in your opinion, a high value, collapses, for the people it was really a tragedy. They did not know how to live further.«

Thus, I5, Putin took advantage of the still existing Soviet nostalgia and the weak sense of Ukrainian belonging among the Donbas residents—compared to the stronger national belonging in other regions (see chapter 3)—who were thus receptive to Russian propaganda:

I5: »Uh, that's why basically the occupation of the Donbas was uh not difficult. You did not have to try too much for that. (2 sec) The level of the national consciousness was very low. People did not regard themselves as either Ukrainian or anything else. They regarded themselves as Soviet people. That's why their ties with Ukraine were only because they had a Ukrainian passport, that's all, and had Ukrainian money in their pocket. To understand oneself as part of the culture, part of the history of Ukraine, (to

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understand) her as a united political nation, that did not exist in Donbas.«

I5: »Because people did not have other national values and ideas, so principally they were, and still are, very easily influenced by Russian propaganda.«

I5: »[Russia had planned to, author's note] bring in a small number of their military troops and use propaganda and the Soviet mentality of the local population to convince them to join the side of Russia.«

However, he also emphasizes that the sense of Soviet belonging is gradually fading out among the younger generations due to access to information, most likely indirectly criticizing the Soviet information regime, and traveling:

I5: »I think that Putin succeeded in the last moment in taking advantage uh in taking advantage of this Soviet mentality. […] He could take advantage of ›совковость‹ in Donbas.[73] […] You know, ideologically seen, in 20 years, the main population of Donbas would already have been different people. They wouldn't be strong patriots of Ukraine, but they would no longer have nostalgia for the Soviet Union. They would no longer look to Russia […] they wouldn't be nostalgic about uh the great power of the nuclear state. That wouldn't be interesting for them anymore. Because people at least got access to TV and the internet, they have already started to travel more, they have already seen another world. However, mostly the youth and creative people have seen this […]. There were only few such people in Donbas. […] After the occupation, all of them left. Like I did for example. […] And there remained only,

73 I5 used the term of Soviet mentality first and switched directly to the term of ›совковость‹, which cannot be directly translated, but which can be understood as »Soviet mentality«.

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you know, such Soviet people whose minds are full of the Soviet Union. But in 20 years, there would have been very few such people there [so that a Russian occupation would not be successful in the future anymore, author's note.«

In addition, interviewee I5 also stresses economic reasons for Donbas residents to support the secessionist movement in the region:

I5: »Just as events of the Russian occupation started, many Donetsk citizens were uh happy about Russian troops coming. They just did not understand what awaited them. I tried to convey the people that they start to […] to think with their brains. Well, uh but Russian propaganda told the people that they would live like in Moscow. That they would have salaries and pensions like in Moscow; in short, they would live richly. Uhm and people who uh are not able to think carefully and analyze deeply, they believed this Russian propaganda. They welcomed the Russian troops. They supported the creation of the so-called DNR. Well, they just did not understand uh that they uh would lose everything. I, for example, I understood all that very well because I had [been in Russia, outside of Moscow, author's note]. […] I understood well that the majority in Russia lives very poorly. […] We… I had the deep suspicion that it would be like in those poor (1sec) villages and poor regions of Russia and that for us it would be even worse. Well, generally it has become like this. This means that now there is uh a very high level of poverty; people have neither jobs, a salary, nor ordinary nutritional products. The worst products are imported from Russia, what the people in Russia don't eat themselves, don't buy and eat; everything is brought [to DNR and LNR, author's note]. You know, you can only throw them away. […] They are sold for a very high price. Really expensive. And now Donetsk, it became very poor. […] This means that, through special funds, Russia finances the so-called DNR because by itself it cannot survive economically.«

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In this quote, interviewee I5 stresses that Donbas residents believed the Russian propaganda of better economic prosperity in return for joining Russia. In contrast, interviewee I5 had experienced the economic problems and social inequalities in Russia himself and therefore tried to warn his fellow citizens about the economic challenges the region would face following secession from Ukraine and acceding Russia. He closes his argumentation by stressing that the current situation in DNR and LNR proves his assessment.

The impact of Soviet nostalgia on national belonging as well as the success of the separatist movement in the Donbas unfolds when we consider that Soviet nostalgia has long been linked to a pro-Russian orientation among Southern and Eastern Ukrainians (cf. Giuliano 2018: 164) and accounts for backing for separatism among Donbas residents (cf. Kozachenko 2019: 3).

Embedding the findings in a broader societal context, we find that Soviet nostalgia has been decreasing in Ukraine, especially in the aftermath of the events of 2014 and the Russian attack on Ukraine in spring 2022. While approximately 19 percent of the Ukrainian population wanted to restore the Soviet Union in 2000, which increased to 20 percent in 2005, this share decreased to 13 percent in 2016, 10 percent in 2021 and 3 percent in autumn 2022 (cf. Razumkov Center 2022). A positive image of the Soviet era had long prevailed more among Southern and Eastern Ukrainians, the elderly, women, and those with a lower educational as well as income level (cf. Rating Group Ukraine 2015 and 2016). In contrast, 53 percent of the Ukrainian population stated that they did not want to restore the Soviet Union in 2000, a figure which grew to 65 percent in 2016, 69 percent in 2021, and 87 percent in late 2022 (cf. Razumkov Center 2022). While this tendency was not uniform across all Ukrainian regions in the first years after Ukraine's independence (cf. Rating Group Ukraine 2015 and 2016), it has become the consensus among the Ukrainian population by now, most likely due to the ongoing Donbas conflict and its escalation into Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022. This underpins Zhurzhenko's (2014: 250) thesis of a two-speed nation-building in Ukraine. 93 percent of Western and 89 percent of Central Ukrainians do not want the USSR to return, compared to 72 percent in the South and 81 percent in the East sharing this opinion in 2022 (cf. Razumkov Center 2022). Interestingly, even the elderly who expe-

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rienced the Soviet Union themselves and therefore could have positive memories about the Soviet past reject the USSR's restoration. The opposition to the restoration of the USSR increases the lower the age group: While 74.5 percent of Ukrainians aged 60 and over are against it, this share grows to 95 percent of Ukrainians under 30 (cf. ibid.). Strikingly, even Ukrainians who speak primarily Russian do not want the USSR to return (79 percent, compared to 90 % of those who speak Ukrainian) (cf. ibid.). Therefore, the display of Soviet nostalgia in the interviews mirrors its past greater relevance among Eastern Ukrainians, but also demonstrates its decrease nationwide, especially among younger Ukrainians. Age plays a major role in explaining Soviet nostalgia in my data as older respondents share more positive memories than younger ones. Soviet nostalgia will thus most likely further fade out with the younger generations and with the continuation of Russian military activities in Ukraine.

5.7.1. Discussion of the findings

As outlined in the second chapter, the evolvement of national belonging is a dual process which includes demarcation from ›others‹. My analysis shows that Russia and the EU are the primary ›others‹ against which Ukrainian national belonging has to be defined. Demarcation is drawn either in the direction of ›*enmity*‹ or ›*friendship*‹. While Russia is portrayed as Ukraine's enemy, the EU is viewed as a friend. This evaluation goes hand in hand with a specific *anti-Russian and pro-European foreign policy orientation* among the IDPs interviewed, which mirrors the broader societal attitude towards both geopolitical actors.

Russia, Ukraine's historical ›other‹, is portrayed as Ukraine's enemy despite both countries' long-lasting close cultural, economic, political, and historical ties. The analysis in this chapter as well as in the previous ones shows that the Ukrainian–Russian relationship is asymmetrical. The negative image of Russia is grounded in negative experiences in the past and its geopolitical aspirations of restoring its former strength and glory, which are a risk for Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. As a consequence, the armed conflict in the Donbas is not regarded as an internal conflict or civil war, but as a conflict with Russia, which is held respon-

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sible for the conflict. Against this backdrop, further cooperation with or even accession to a common political entity with Russia is rejected.

On the contrary, the EU is viewed as Ukraine's friend. This positive image is mainly founded on democratic commonalities between Ukraine and the EU—in contrast to Russia, which is perceived as undemocratic and authoritarian. A positive image of the EU goes hand in hand with a pro-European foreign policy in the sense of further cooperation with it up to accession to it. However, the foreign policy preference towards the EU seems to be mainly a strategical decision as the EU appears to be the best alternative to the threat Russia is posing to Ukraine. Thus, a pro-European foreign policy orientation serves to demonstrate distancing and political/economic emancipation from Russia in order to reduce Russian influence and strengthen Ukraine's national belonging. At the same time, a pro-European attitude most likely reinforces the image of the ›democratic Ukraine‹ (see also chapters 5.5 and 5.6).

Hence, the foreign policy orientation is twofold in its character: We can see an antagonism between Russia and Ukraine. Russia treats Ukraine not as a sovereign and independent nation, but as its own. At the same time, Ukraine has traditionally been seen as backward by Russia (see chapter 5.4 on culture, for example). However, Ukraine is emancipating itself from Russia by revaluing itself and devaluing Russia, as analyzed in the chapter on culture, for example. The emancipation is also taking place politically as cooperation with or even accession to Russia and its partnership organizations is rejected, while cooperation with or even accession to the EU is appreciated. Therefore, Ukrainian belonging can go with a positive image of the EU due to their shared, positively associated commonalities, like democratic principles.

Comparing the interviews, my analysis shows that an *anti-Russian and pro-European foreign policy orientation is not a universal indicator of self-identification* as Ukrainian for all interviewees. This becomes visible as only one of the interviewees strongly favors more cooperation with the EU up to Ukraine's accession to it. Nonetheless, two more respondents view the EU positively even though they might not approve of Ukraine's accession to the EU, but at least further cooperation between both. In the case of the Muslim Crimean Tatar interviewee, he criticizes the EU for

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decisions which are against the religious values he upholds (e. g. same-sex marriage) and the subsumption of core European values as human rights under economic interests. It seems he does not believe in Ukraine's accession to the EU, which would be against European economic interests with Russia. In the case of the ethnic Russian interviewee, he might not strongly advocate Ukraine's accession to the EU within the interview, but the sub-text of his statements indicates a pro-European foreign policy orientation, nonetheless. At the same time, an anti-Russian foreign policy orientation is clearly visible with three interviewees, among them the Muslim Crimean Tatar and even the ethnic Russian interviewees. Hence, the interviewees share an anti-Russian foreign policy orientation, which may go hand in hand with a pro-European foreign policy orientation. Strikingly, the interviewees demonstrate a picture of Russia and the EU, mainly without having had their own experiences abroad. This demonstrates the strength of narratives which are crucial for national belonging.

The relevance of foreign policy orientation as markers of belonging unfolds when the asymmetric Ukrainian–Russian relationship and its historical evolvement are taken into account. Russia's framing of the conflict in the Donbas as ›having the duty to protect its Russian compatriots‹ (see chapter 5.3 on language), the ethnic Russian as well as Russophone population abroad, relates to Russia's state ideology of the ›Russian World‹. In short, Russia views Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians to be one and the same people, namely ›Eastern Slavs‹, due to their common roots in the medieval state Kievan‹ Rus (see chapter 2). This worldview developed during the Russian Empire and continues to be persistent in contemporary Russia. From this perspective, Ukrainians are not considered to be a distinct people or nation but a subordinated branch of the Russians. Against this backdrop, Russia's geopolitical aspirations of taking over Southern and Eastern Ukrainian territory up to Ukraine's integration into the Russian Federation can be legitimized by Russia by referring to the past, as this region had belonged to the Russian Empire from the end of the 18th century until the founding of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic after WWI (cf. Kappeler 2014: 377). Such an ideology can provide Russia the legitimization to interfere in the affairs of other countries with a Russian(-speaking) minority and to expand territorially. In

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this light, a foreign policy preference for Russia among Ukrainians would mean accepting such an asymmetrically developed relationship to Russia with the long-term consequence of probably losing their own nation-(state) for accession to the Russian Federation or reviving a neo-Soviet Union, most likely under Russian leadership. Consequently, a foreign policy preference towards Russia cannot be compatible with a form of Ukrainian belonging that stresses Ukraine's uniqueness and values its independence. In contrast, a foreign policy preference for the EU is compatible with Ukrainian belonging as any form of contact with the EU is perceived as less asymmetric than that with Russia, so that the Ukrainian nation(-state) as well as its national belonging are not tackled but can be preserved. Finally, rejection of further ties with Russia and closer cooperation with the EU simultaneously seem to be the key to Ukraine's future from the point of view of Ukrainian belonging.

Nevertheless, not all Ukrainians share an anti-Russian attitude, especially not when they display Soviet nostalgia. Soviet nostalgia can be defined as positive memories about the Soviet past, particularly about economic benefits, social protection and stability, and the morality of Soviet values. My analysis demonstrates that Soviet nostalgia is more common among Southern and Eastern Ukrainians as the southeast had belonged to the USSR longer than Western and Central Ukraine and is more common among the older population, who experienced the Soviet Union themselves. My analysis indicates a link between someone's memories about the USSR and identification with Ukraine: A negative view of the Soviet Union goes hand in hand with Ukrainian belonging, while a positive view of the Soviet past strengthens one's ties to Russia. Research shows that Soviet nostalgia can account for someone backing separatism in the Donbas. However, a positive view of the Soviet past can align with a strong sense of belonging to Ukraine and orientation towards Europe. In addition, an ethnic Russian background is not a predictor of (strong) Soviet nostalgia. Lastly, Soviet nostalgia is rapidly decreasing among Ukrainians. This tendency has not been uniform across all Ukrainian regions for long, but has become the consensus in the Ukrainian population due to the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian conflict over Ukraine's eastern and southern territories. This underpins Zhurzhenko's (2014: 250) thesis of a two-speed nation-building in Ukraine.

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Transferring these findings to the societal level, we can see how the interviews mirror broader societal opinion: If we compare data before and after 2014, as Ukraine's turning point, support for accession to the EU is growing, whereas support for joining Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) decreased between 2013 and 2019 (cf. Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2019): Support for accession to the EU grew from roughly 42 to 53 percent, while support for the accession to the EEU decreased from 31 percent to roughly 13 percent (cf. ibid.).[74] Thus, support for closer ties with the EU was not high among Ukrainians before the Euromaidan movement 2013/14 or the subsequent Crimea and Donbas conflicts.[75] At the same time, the share of Ukrainians who do not support neither of the two economic unions grew from roughly 14 to 24 percent (cf. ibid.). However, rejection of Russia does not necessarily go hand in hand with support for Ukraine's EU-accession, but can also go with the idea of a non-aligned status for Ukraine.

However, support for the EU versus the EEU varies across the regions[76] (cf. ibid., Haran and Zolkina 2014)[77]: Support for joining the EU was higher among the population in the West (approx. 71 %) and Center (approx.

74 The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology presented a similar statistic for the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Journalist Schminke (2023), working for Euractiv, a news portal focusing on topics related to the EU, presents a diagram based on their statistics.

75 At the same time, support for the idea of joining neither of the Unions grew from 13.5 to 24 percent in these years (cf. Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2019). In addition, a majority of 59 percent of the Ukrainian population favored »friendly relations between Ukraine and Russia, with open borders without visas and customs, while remaining independent states« in spring 2014—around the time of the outbreak of the Donbas conflict (cf. Rating Group 2014). Around 31 percent advocated a relationship with closed borders and customs and visa regulations (cf. ibid.). This share grew due to the Donbas conflict.

76 We need to consider that Ukraine's borders have changed since the outbreak of the Donbas conflict in 2014. The borders did not change in the official sense, but from a practical point of view. The establishment of the two people's republics DNR and LNR in 2014 and Russian occupation since 2022 had an impact on what we understand today as the Ukrainian East and South. Thus, Ukrainian and international opinion polls cannot grasp the former Ukrainian population living under DNR, LNR, or Russian rule today.

77 Two statistics are compared here, from the ›Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation‹ (DIF) in cooperation with the ›Razumkov Center‹ in 2013 and from the DIF and the ›Kyiv International Institute of Sociology‹ (KIIS) in 2019 (cf. Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2019, Haran and Zolkina 2014: 4).

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60 %) in 2019, than in the South and East, which have been more torn between both options. Nonetheless, support for the EU increased in the East too from roughly 21 percent in 2013 to 34 percent in 2019, whereas support for the EEU with Russia decreased from about 50 to 27 percent. In the South, support for the EU remained stable at around 32 percent, whereas support for the EEU decreased from 40 to 24 percent between 2013 and 2019. The preference for staying out of both Unions also increased in both regions from roughly 14 percent in 2014 to around 30 percent in 2019.

In the aftermath of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the approval rating for EU accession among the Ukrainian population grew from around 58 percent in 2021 (cf. Schminke 2023) up to 81 percent of the population in 2023 (cf. International Republican Institute 2023: 19). After months of debating, the EU granted Ukraine official candidate status in June 2022, which sets various reforms as the condition for accession with no »fixed date« for the country's full membership (cf. Gwyn Jones 2023). »This is the first time the European Commission has green-lighted formal accession talks before a country has fully met all pre-conditions but Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine has injected a sense of urgency into the traditionally sluggish process of approving new EU members« (ibid.). At the same time, Georgia and Moldova, which also have a history of territorial disputes with separatist groups and Putin's regime, were granted official candidate status (cf. ibid.). However, the EU approval rating decreased from 85 percent in February 2023 to 80 percent in late 2023 (cf. ibid). Only one to two percent of Ukrainians prefer joining Russia's Customs Union (between 2022 and 2023) (cf. ibid). Between 10 and 14 percent would prefer other partnerships than the EU and Russia's customs union (between 2022 and 2023) (cf. ibid). Between 4 and 6 percent of the Ukrainian population find it difficult to choose between cooperation with the EU or Russia (between 2022 and 2023) (cf. ibid). Strikingly, the majority in all regions now supports the country's accession to the EU, and the approval ratings have aligned among all regions: While 84 percent of Western and 82 percent of Central Ukrainians prefer the EU, the approval rating is at 81 percent in the South and at 72 percent in the East (cf. ibid: 20). The highest approval rating for further cooperation with Russia remains among the Eastern population at 4 percent, while

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it is around 1 to 2 percent in the other regions (cf. ibid). This underpins once again Zhurzhenko's (2014: 250) thesis of a two-speed nation-building in Ukraine.

Behind these statistics we can see that Ukrainians hold an increasingly negative view of Russia and a positive image of the EU due to the conflict. Whereas 84 percent of the Ukrainian population thought positively about Russia before 2014, only 32 percent had a positive image of Russia in 2019 (cf. Huang and Cha 2020)—more and more Ukrainians see Russia now as the aggressor behind the Crimea and Donbas conflict as well as in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. However, this perception is not (yet) uniform across the country: whereas a majority in the West and Center (at least 70 %) view Russia as the aggressor in this conflict, support for this view is lower in the South (50 %) and East (40 %) (cf. Rating Group 2019). Thus, even if directly affected by the conflict, not all Ukrainians consider Russia to be Ukraine's enemy, as it is also shown in my analysis. Among others, a strong attachment to Russia or an ethnic Russian background could be among the reasons for favorable views on Russia. At the same time, 79 percent of the Ukrainian population held favorable views of the European Union (cf. Wike et al. 2019: 53). This share has most likely grown in recent months due to the EU's military support for Ukraine in the war with Russia. At the same time, the EU's hesitancy to help more, faster and with its own troops has most likely also increased criticism of the EU among Ukrainians. Interestingly, the strong appreciation of the EU cannot be linked to their perceived support in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war since 2022 as only 7 percent of the Ukrainian population state that the EU has provided the most support for Ukraine. In contrast, the US, Poland, Great Britain, and even Germany are seen as the main supporters (cf. International Republican Institute 2023: 15f).

Hence, the preference for the country's future alongside the EU has become consensus in the country as approval rates are also growing in the East and South, although at a slower speed than in the West and Center. Another consensus seems to be the rejection of further cooperation with Russia. This seems to underpin Zhurzhenko's (2014: 250) thesis of the Eastern and Southern Ukrainians catching up with the Western and Central population with regard to their identification with Ukraine. In

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a nutshell, the pro-Russian foreign policy orientation among Ukrainians decreased significantly because of the loss of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbas, for which Ukraine considers Russia responsible (cf. Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2019).

The interviews contain only scant information about how the interviewees see the US and NATO. This result is striking as both are the only relevant international political/military actors which could offer Ukraine security from Russia. Interviewee I9 expresses appreciation for the US system as she views it as a democratic system which the people have built up themselves in contrast to the political system in Ukraine, which she criticizes in contrast. At the same time, I9 also critically reflects on the US, but sticks to the known rule: the enemy of my enemy is my friend:

> I9: »If uh I have to choose between the powers, like, you know, between aggressive Russia and America, American intervention is closer to me, even its military ones. Well, what they do around the world, uh their position is closer to me, […] I understand why they always supported Israel, […] I understand, well, that side which they [the US, author's note] support in wars, is always closer to me. But they are mainly in confrontation with Russia; well, that's why for me it's generally easier to love them, the Americans. Because Russia is our enemy, you know it's like uh the enemy of my enemy.«

Interviewee I5 expresses thankfulness for US support for Ukrainians, especially Muslims, but also criticizes the current US government (and others like the EU, see sub-chapter on the EU) as they place their economic interests above political values like human rights:

> I5: »The USA before and after Trump, that's two different US. When in the past the US uhm uh looked like a country which defended democracy, rights, and freedom. When, for example, somewhere uh in Ukraine Muslims had problems, we uh could be firmly confident that uh we could complain to, for example, uh human rights organizations, international state bodies, among others, the embassy of the United States of America, which uh in fact assured

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> that they would defend rights and freedom. But what the US has turned now into and continues to turn into is not understandable. Of course, USA has always had a tense relationship to Muslim countries […]. And under the conditions of uh Russian occupation and the war with Russia, and the will of Russia to occupy Ukraine, uh we as Ukrainians, as Muslims, we always appreciated the support of the USA and European Union. Now such a situation is happening that everyone wants to be friends with Putin and Russia.«

Concerning public opinion in Ukraine, Ukrainians' attitudes towards the US have been positive generally and improved after the Russian invasion in spring 2023: While 57 percent of the Ukrainian population considered the US to be a Ukrainian-friendly country in spring 2021, this figure increased to 88 percent in March 2022, and remained high at around 90 percent in 2023 (cf. Rating Group 2023). The population sees the US as being in first position of the top five countries to provide the most support for Ukraine in countering Russia's ongoing military aggression, followed by Poland, Great Britain, Germany, and the EU (cf. International Republican Institute 2023: 15f). The interviewees partly mirror this, but their critical assessment of the US and its role in the Donbas conflict stands out.

Statistics show that the Donbas conflict and its escalation into war in 2022 strengthened the population's pro-NATO attitude. Polls conducted between the beginning of the 2000s and 2013, before the Euromaidan and the events that followed, found low support among the Ukrainian population for Ukraine's NATO membership. Approval of Ukraine's accession to NATO was at first torn in summer 2002: Whereas 32 percent advocated accession to NATO, 32 percent were against it (cf. Razumkov Center 2009, Anisimova 2023). NATO's approval ratings oscillated in the following years between the lowest approval rating of 15 percent in winter 2004 and around 20 percent in 2009 (cf. ibid.). The share of those opposed to NATO oscillated between 32 percent in summer 2002 and 64 percent in June 2006 (cf. ibid.). Hence, Ukrainians were against the country's accession to NATO for a long time. The low approval or high opposition rates can be explained with the population's negative image of NATO: Accord-

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ing to the Gallup Poll Institute, Ukrainians viewed NATO as more of a threat (40 percent) than as a partner for protection (17 percent) in 2009 (cf. Ray and Esipova 2010). »Like [in] othe[r] […] former Soviet countries, Ukrainians' views of NATO are largely explained by their country's relations and cultural ties to Russia, which opposes NATO expansion« as it sees it as a threat (ibid.). The closer Ukrainians are culturally and geographically to Russia, which is mainly the case for Southern and Eastern Ukrainians, the more likely they perceive NATO as a threat and thus oppose Ukraine's accession to this military alliance (ibid.). However, Ukrainians' attitude towards NATO changed gradually after the outbreak of the Donbas conflict in 2014: The share of Ukrainians supporting their country's accession to NATO increased from 34 percent in March 2014 to 48 percent in March 2015 (cf. Rating Group2015) to 59 percent in April 2022 and 79 percent in September 2023 (cf. International Republican Institute 2023: 21). In contrast, the share of Ukrainians opposing their country's accession to NATO decreased from 43 percent in March 2014 to 28 percent in March 2015 (cf. Rating Group 2015) to 14 percent in April 2022 and 5 percent in September 2023 (cf. International Republican Institute 2023: 21). The country has long been divided on the country's accession to NATO, but this has found another consensus among the population due to the ongoing Donbas conflict and its escalation into Russian–Ukrainian war in spring 2022: A majority support the country's accession to NATO in all Ukrainian regions, from 64 percent in the East, 74 percent in the South to 82 percent in the Center and 86 percent in the West (cf. ibid.: 22). At the same time, only three percent of Ukrainians see NATO as one of its main supporters, in contrast to the US, Poland or the UK, for example (cf. ibid.: 15f). Thus, Ukrainians' pro-NATO attitude is not founded on the perception of how much NATO can support Ukraine today, but most likely of its security promise for the future. Strikingly, the interviewees in this study did not focus much on the US or NATO. To critically reflect on this, I have to admit that the transcripts reveal that I rarely asked about these two actors.

In this light, the armed conflict most likely strengthened people turning away from Russia and, to a lesser extent, their foreign policy orientation towards the EU as part of their (increasing) sense of belonging to

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Ukraine. Overall, strong Ukrainian national belonging excludes an orientation towards Russia, as the decrease in approval for the EEU displays, given that Russia is blamed for the conflict from the Ukrainian side and both countries' asymmetric relationship. In this context, Kulyk highlights that a negative view of Russia does not necessarily go with alienation from the Russian people, as a majority of Ukrainians maintain a positive attitude towards Russians, even among the respondents who strongly self-identify as Ukrainian (cf. Kulyk 2016: 600f)—as exemplified by my data. Hence, as Kulyk stresses, national belonging in Ukraine will not necessarily be anti-Russian in the future (cf. ibid.: 606). In contrast, a foreign policy preference for the EU is compatible with a strong sense of Ukrainian belonging.

The attractiveness of the EU lies in its democratic values, such as freedom, civil rights, rule of law, and tolerance, and attracts mainly Ukrainians of a younger age, those with more education, and the middle class (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 260). In contrast, Russia's attractiveness lies in the common cultural values between Russians and Ukrainians and their common past and appeals mainly to Ukrainians of an older age, those with less education, those who are nostalgic about the Soviet past, as well as those who consume Russian mass culture (cf. ibid.). Both findings are visible in my data. The case of an ethnic Russian interviewee demonstrates that an ethnic Russian background does not necessarily go hand in hand with a sense of Russian belonging, but can be combined with both a pro-Ukrainian and pro-EU orientation. Thus, the question arises as to what makes an ethnic Russian Ukrainian develop a sense of Ukrainian belonging? Embedding this finding into a broader context, Elise Giuliano states that only a minority of the Donbas population, slightly less than one third, and among them less than half of the ethnic Russian population (45 %), supported the region's secession from Ukraine and, linked with this, the formation of the DNR and LNR (cf. Giuliano 2018: 158f, 166). At the same time, 33 percent of ethnic Russians in the Donbas opposed the region's secession from Ukraine (cf. ibid.). Consequently, ethnic Russian Ukrainians are not necessarily Russia's ›compatriots‹ who support secession from Ukraine, as is represented by the ethnic Russian interviewee in this study.

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Another striking case is the Muslim Crimean Tatar interviewee. Despite having favorable views on the EU, he does not clearly advocate accession to the EU, as discussed in detail in this chapter. Nonetheless, his case has significance, especially on the broader societal level, given the fact that the Muslim organization he feels attached to has a clear pro-European attitude laid down in the ›Ukrainian Muslims Charter‹ (Islam in Ukraine 2016: paragraph 14):

> »Ukrainian Muslims support and promote economic and cultural cooperation of Ukraine with countries of the Islamic world, and with Western countries, because they believe that European integration of Ukraine will improve protection of freedoms and rights of its religious minorities.«

From the perspective of reformist–nationalist Ukrainian Muslims, closer cooperation with or integration into the EU is clearly linked with protection of religious minorities and distance from Russia. Thus, the (reformist–nationalist Ukrainian) Muslim faith is compatible with a pro-Ukrainian and pro-European attitude.

To summarize, foreign policy orientation reveals its relevance as a marker of belonging considering the inclusion–exclusion duality of national belonging. A comparison of the interviews shows that Russia and the EU are the primary ›others‹ against which Ukrainian national belonging is defined. Whereas Russia is portrayed as the enemy, the EU is depicted positively, and cooperation with the European state community appears as key to Ukraine's future in the face of the armed conflict, for which Russia is held responsible by Ukraine.

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5.8. Volunteering: For the Sake of Ukraine

The super-categories which were derived from the data have so far aligned with the theoretical discussion on what constitutes national identity or belonging. The super-category of activism, however, demonstrates the risk of overlooking important facets of the research object when focusing too much on the theoretical discussion when analyzing data. With regard to the theoretical discussion on national identity and belonging (see chapter 2), it seems that scholars of national identity do not conceptualize activism as a distinct marker of belonging. The same applies to the (quantitative) studies on national identity in Ukraine.

Against this background, the super-category of activism was developed, which extends the previous research with an aspect which appears to have been researched little in studies on Ukrainian identity or belonging so far: *What relevance does activism have as a marker of belonging,* especially in the context of the armed conflict in the Donbas?

In contrast, scholars of belonging stress at least three aspects which can be used to illuminate my findings theoretically: loyalty, commitment, and readiness to sacrifice one's life. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) conceptualizes it, belonging is the feeling of *commonalities* between a group of human beings which is manifested through *attachment*s evoking *mutuality* among group members. Whereas attachments symbolize the (im) material linkage within a group, for example through citizenship, mutuality represents the expectation of »reciprocity, loyalty, and commitment« of those belonging to the same community due to them sharing commonalities (ibid.: 5). Yuval-Davis (cf. 2006: 202) stresses in this context the specific case when belonging is contested or even threatened as it motivates people to sacrifice their lives as well as those of others for the sake of their nation.

Commitment is understood here as activism in the sense of a politically motivated action which goes beyond conventional politics (cf. Martin 2007: 19f). A variety of forms of activism exists, ranging in shape from conversations to protests and from nonviolent to violent action (cf. Martin 2007). Activism is linked to challenging the current political system and its leaders, practices, policies, and decisions (cf. ibid.: 19f). Against this

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background, it is usually those with less power who undertake activism with the aim of achieving certain political and social goals or change (cf. ibid.). Activism is mainly carried out collectively (cf. ibid.: 20f), for example through a small group (e. g. a local citizens' initiative), bigger organizations (e. g. Amnesty International), or even a social movement (e. g. Euromaidan movement 2013/14 in Ukraine). Citizens' commitment in the sense of activism becomes most apparent with their readiness to fight for their country and thereby to sacrifice their own lives (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006: 202) or to kill others (cf. Anderson 2005a: 8) when their belonging is contested or even threatened (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006: 202), like in the face of the current war in Ukraine. This relates to a sense of patriotism based on the legitimacy of the respective state and evidence of a political nation's existence (cf. Reznik 2023: 330).

Comparing the interviews, the data indicates the relevance of activism for an individual's self-identification as Ukrainian in the sense of a *practical, visible expression of belonging and thus loyalty to Ukraine*. The armed conflict has thereby strengthened the relevance of activism as a marker of belonging.

My analysis results in three subcategories: The first subcategory highlights how *activism serves as a practical expression of one's belongingness to Ukraine*. The second subcategory deals with the specific case of *pro-Ukrainian activism among the Muslim community* in Ukraine. The last subcategory explores the extreme case of *sacrificing one's own life*.

Activism as a practical expression of one's belonging and loyalty to Ukraine

In the case of interviewee I5, his activism is clearly linked to the outbreak of secessionist aspirations in his home region of Donbas:

> I5: »When the revolution of dignity started, well, I took part in the events of the Maidan here in Kyiv and there in Donetsk (1 sec) […]. Well, and uh when the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas started, I was, in fact, here in Donetsk. I saw with my own eyes everything that happened. I took part in rallies and supported the integrity and unity of Ukraine against separatism, against Russian

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> occupation of Ukrainian regions. […] Because I honestly speak out against Russian politics, against Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas.«

In this quote, he summarizes his activist commitment: He was engaged in the Euromaidan movement (also called »Revolution of Dignity« by him), both in Kyiv and in the Donbas, and was politically active later against the separatist movement in the Donbas. He stresses in this context that he »honestly speak[s] out against Russian politics, against Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas«. As a consequence, interviewee I5 had to flee his home region due to the persecution of pro-Ukrainian activists under the new authorities in the Donbas (see also the subchapter on Russia being Ukraine's enemy). His approach to activism has to be understood from two other perspectives: his understanding of citizenship and pro-democratic attitude. In relation to the chapter on democracy, interviewee I5 explains that, to him, citizenship means participating in politics. Although he mainly points out the right to vote as a means of political participation, he most likely also thinks of (conventional, democratic means of) non-parliamentary political commitment as he stresses a link between citizenship and an »active position in Ukraine« having an influence on Ukrainian politics.

In contrast, interviewee I9 became politically engaged only after fleeing separatism in her own city. She mentions being engaged in a political party now and seeking to run in the local elections in autumn 2020 to become a local deputy. The linkage between Ukrainian belonging and pro-Ukrainian activism becomes prominent in her following statements:

I9: »I try to uh make a kind of contribution to building Ukraine because what is happening worries me a lot. I think that people here uh are very inactive, are not able to take responsibility for- for their own future into their own hands, and from this, problems (emerge). I spend a lot of personal time on improving something uh in our city, and also in the country, meaning, influencing some processes, at least some, to go at least on some rallies to show kind of support or non-support, to protest […] I strive now, I try to show by my example that you need to be an active society to improve something here. Because uh no one will do anything

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for you. […]. I will run in local elections uh […] as a cand- candidate for local deputy. Well, because I, I want to influence; I don't want any further kind of benefits, but, but uh I feel such a great, you know, responsibility, probably because of my child […] uh when I started to be interested in politics, in what had remained after the Soviet Union, the condition of the country, I had, you know, a bit of claims to my parents like, you know, they are the older generation who handed it over to us, meaning, why didn't they do anything about it? Meaning, they handed it over to us like that, and I uh, you know, (my) higher aim is to improve something here so that my child can live comfortably in this country. I feel responsibility.«

I9: »I want to go into politics, […] I want to influence uh to take up a position somewhere, […] want to influence political processes, want to do something for the country uh officially, […] uh I want to represent some kind of deputy, be a deputy, or some kind of uh, I want to uh, yes, want to help build Ukraine.«

Interviewee I9 considers political commitment to be a personal contribution to the country's nation-building and well-being. She explains her political commitment by stressing two motivations: First, she is worried about Ukraine's current condition. In this context, she stresses the importance of being a citizen who actively contributes to the country's well-being and future, instead of being passive, as nothing will change if one does not participate actively. She frames this »taking responsibility«. Second, she emphasizes the feeling of responsibility involved in being an active citizen for the sake of future generations, like her own child. She therefore criticizes older generations for how they ›handed over‹ (Soviet) Ukraine. Her political commitment has changed from activism in the extra-parliamentary opposition to aspiring to an official political position, most likely to increase the impact of her political commitment. Similarly to interviewee I5, pro-Ukrainian activism is part of her self-identification as Ukrainian. The importance of pro-Ukrainian activism for her self-identification as Ukrainian further unfolds when we consider that she addresses her political commitment in her self-presentation at the beginning of the interview.

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Muslim pro-Ukrainian activism

Interviewee I5 is an example of the intersection between national and religious commitment as he views his activism as a service to strengthen Ukrainian belonging among Muslims in the Donbas, a region for which he diagnoses a low sense of Ukrainian belonging in general (see chapter 3 and subchapter 5.7 on Soviet nostalgia):

> I5: »That's why, in fact, when I returned back to [the Donbas region, author's note] in 2012, as a RELIGIOUS FIGURE I tried to educate my Muslims differently. I tried to pull them out of the Soviet consciousness and to instill them with Ukrainian consciousness. I honestly want to tell you that I like Ukraine a lot. I love Ukraine. […] After returning to CITY, uh though, I tried my best to accustom our Muslims of Donbas to the fact that they aren't Soviet people anymore, but already feel Ukrainian, and as citizens of Ukraine, to loving their country.«

To understand this quote, in which he explains his commitment in the Donbas, thereby stressing his belongingness to Ukraine (›I honestly want to tell you that I like Ukraine a lot. I love Ukraine.‹), we need to illuminate his relationship with and perception of the Donbas, his home region:

> I5: »When I lived in Donetsk [oblast], I could only poorly imagine uh what Ukraine means, how she is. Because being in Donbas, is, for example, like being a frog living in a morass. It does not know more than its morass. Well, it does not know that there are mountains somewhere, that there are forests somewhere, that there is sea and are oceans somewhere. It lives in its morass and that's all. The people in Donbas lived like that. They lived very poor lives. What do I mean with ›poor‹? The fact is that they had enough to live. But to travel around the world, to see other countries, to see other cultures, they did not have enough for that. Here, also the mentality of people (plays a role). The mentality of the people from Donbas is very Soviet. That's why when someone has money, he will not spend it on traveling, on seeing the world, on get-

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> ting to know another culture. He will spend it to buy an expensive house, to buy an expensive car, to buy expensive clothes, to buy some piece of jewelry and accessories, you know. Meaning the people needed to collect treasures around themselves. That's why Donetsk's citizens were not poor but did not even travel around Ukraine. […] And that's why people from Donbas did not even know Ukraine.«

In this quote, interviewee I5 reflects on his experience of leaving the Donbas to live abroad and later of working in a big city in Central Ukraine. He uses the metaphor of Donbas residents being »frogs living in a morass, but not knowing more than its morass«, including himself. In this context, I5 criticizes Donbas residents for being ›poor‹: On the one hand, he criticizes them for being materialistic in their consumption as they focus on expensive cars, houses, etc., but do not spend their money on traveling to see Ukraine. On the other hand, he observes their weak ›Ukrainian consciousness‹, while still being Soviet in their mentality. Among other reasons, he explains their low Ukrainian sense of belonging with not knowing their own country. In this light, we need to see the previous quote.

Interviewee I5 also explains the low Ukrainian consciousness using the region's Soviet past:

> I5: »The level of the national consciousness was very low. People did not regard themselves as either Ukrainian or anything else. They regarded themselves as Soviet people. That's why their ties with Ukraine were only because they had Ukrainian passports, that's all, and had Ukrainian money in their pockets. Understanding oneself as part of the culture, part of the history of Ukraine, (understanding) her as a united political nation, that did not exist in Donbas. People were very Soviet.«

In this quote, interviewee I5 criticizes that Donbas residents had stronger ties to their Soviet past and thus contemporary Russia than to Ukraine, to which they were only connected by their Ukrainian passports, but not at heart. Referring to the chapter on Soviet nostalgia, we see here how inter-

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viewee I5 explains the Donbas conflict: Russia is said to have successfully taken advantage of the persisting Soviet affiliation among the Donbas residents, which has hindered the development of a sense of Ukrainian belonging among them.

The relevance of activism in his case becomes prominent in the light of his Crimean Tatar and Muslim background. Considering that Crimea and the Donbas are the main home regions for Muslims and Crimean Tatars (cf. Yarosh 2019: 167), they are affected the most by the loss of Crimea and the armed conflict in the Donbas. On the one hand, they are among the internally displaced (cf. ibid.: 168f). On the other hand, the situation has deteriorated for both minorities living under the new authorities (see chapter 5.6 on democracy). In this light, his activism seems to be a practical means of expressing his belongingness and thus loyalty to Ukraine. The armed conflict in the Donbas has further intensified his activism, as his interview shows: When asked about his future, he emphasizes that he will continue his political commitment for the sake of the country and especially its Muslim population—no matter what his job is or where he lives in the future, as there are multiple ways to be politically committed to Ukraine.

The relevance of political commitment among Muslims and Crimean Tatars like interviewee I5 unfolds when the position of the reformist, pro-Ukrainian Muslim community represented by the UMMA, which the interviewee feels strongly attached to, is cited (n. d.: section 7, paragraph 4: »Islam and Patriotism«).

> »The idea of patriotism, that is love for the Motherland, […] is allowed by the Sharia; it does not contradict the principles of Islam—as long as it does not threaten one's individuality, that is, national, racial, or other intolerance. Muslims understand citizenship primarily as a social community, not as exclusive blood ties. […] Defense of the homeland is a Muslim's civic duty because it serves the interests of protecting his honor, property, and family. […]«[78]

78 This statement was translated from Ukrainian into English. The original text states: »Ідея патріотизму, тобто любов до Батьківщини в межах, дозволенних шаріатом, не суперечить засадам ісламу — поки не загрожує асабією, тобто національною, расовою чи іншою нетерпимістю. Громадянство мусульмани розуміють передусім

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In this quote, the UMMA points out several aspects that are important for the illumination of activism among the (Crimean Tatar and) Muslim community in Ukraine: First, it is stressed that patriotism is allowed by Islamic law. Second, an inclusive understanding of the Ukrainian nation is highlighted, which is not curtailed to ethnicity (see also chapter 5.2 on ancestry), and thereby opposition to intolerance is stated. Third, participation in defending one's homeland is considered to be a Muslim duty, though it is not defined further what form commitment, in this case, could or should take. In this case, Pro-Ukrainian activism is a way for Muslims to demonstrate their belonging and loyalty to Ukraine in the face of the conflict in their home regions of Crimea and the Donbas, which historically have strong(er) ties with Russia than Ukraine (see chapter 5.7). In addition, Muslim pro-Ukrainian activism has most likely to be understood in the light of the deteriorating civil rights and liberties in the secessionist Donbas, which affect pro-Ukrainian activists, Muslims, and Crimean Tatars especially (see the chapters 5.6 on democracy and 5.7. on Russian-Ukrainian relations).

Sacrificing one's life for the sake of Ukraine

The most radical form of (nationalist) activism is to sacrifice one's own life when one's own belonging is contested or even threatened (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006: 202), as applies to Ukraine since the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014. Among the interviewees, one interviewee strongly expresses his readiness to take up arms to defend Ukraine:

> I10: »I love Ukraine. […] Well, and if such a necessity arises, I will defend Ukraine. […] This means that I will take weapons and defend the borders of Ukraine. […] Well, but if such a necessity comes up, I will defend Ukraine.«

як соціальну спільність, а не виняткові кревні зв‹язки. […] Захист Батьківщини — громадянський обов‹язок мусульманина, бо служить інтересам захисту його честі, власності та сім‹ї. […].«

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Although interviewee I10 does not seem to have been politically engaged before, activism also plays an important role in his belongingness to Ukraine: He stresses that he would take up arms to defend Ukraine if needed, and he is politically engaged in a refugee camp for Ukrainian IDPs from the Donbas, where he fled with his family to. Although it is debatable if he would really take up arms, as he fled from the Donbas instead of joining (pro-)Ukrainian forces, this statement still demonstrates how he expresses belongingness to Ukraine. Once he really commits himself to the defense of Ukraine, this commitment will be a practical, visible expression of belonging and loyalty to Ukraine.

The relevance of activism in his case further unfolds when considering his family biography. As we know from the chapter on ancestry, his parents are Russian labor migrants, so his family is most likely ethnic Russian, considering that the Soviet nationality regime was based on descent (see chapter 5.2 on ancestry). In the context of the conflict, he has (had) the choice of fleeing to Russia or staying in Ukraine. While interviewee I10 criticizes the Ukrainian government(s) for its (their) lack of support for IDPs, he stresses that Russia supports refugees, like his brother's family. Russia has been receiving refugees from the Donbas since the beginning of the conflict, supporting them with shelter, work, social security benefits, especially pensions, and the possibility of citizenship, as Roth (2014) from the New York Times identified. This offer does not seem to apply only to ethnic Russians, but to all Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Interestingly, his brother took the chance and left to live in Russia, but he decided to stay in Ukraine. The following statement underpins once again his belongingness to Ukraine rather than to his ethnic homeland of Russia and his need to express this:

> I10: »Well, and somehow, we have many relatives there, so he went there. But I didn't go there. Well, and I didn't plan to go. Because I like Ukraine. I love Ukraine. Well, here I feel good. Well, and if such a necessity comes up, I will defend Ukraine.«

Considering his ethnic Russian background, it seems that Ukrainians like him can struggle to demonstrate their belongingness and thus loyalty to Ukraine as they do not share markers of belonging most linked

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to Ukraine, like Ukrainian ethnicity or the language. With regard to the analysis in the language chapter, such Ukrainians need other markers to underline their belongingness: like a pro-democratic political attitude, an anti-Russian foreign policy preference, or activism. However, the difficulty lies in the visibility of markers of belonging, which complicates the issue of national belonging for all Ukrainians who do not share the most visible markers of belonging that are most associated with Ukraine, like Ukrainian ethnicity or the language.

5.8.1. Discussion of the Findings

Considering the comparatively weak theoretical conceptualization of activism as a marker of belonging, the findings in this study contribute to the theoretical discussion in general and the discussion about Ukrainian belonging in particular by raising the question of the role of activism as a contemporary marker of national belonging.

Comparing the interviews, *pro-Ukrainian activism plays a role as a marker of belonging* for almost all the interviewees but is not a universal one. The relevance of pro-Ukrainian activism unfolds in the light of the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas as its function lies in *visibly demonstrating belongingness and loyalty to Ukraine* and concurrently *distance to Russia,* which Ukraine holds responsible for the Donbas conflict. Pro-Ukrainian activism takes place in manifold forms and degrees of intensity, from commitment at demonstrations, in social movements to conventional political as well as military engagement. The motives are diverse, ranging from responsibility to contribute to nation- and state-building to strengthening Ukrainian belongingness among one's fellow citizens and fighting against separatism or Russian occupation. The armed conflict in the Donbas and its escalation into Russian–Ukrainian war in spring 2022 has *strengthened pro-Ukrainian activism* among the population and thereby its relevance as a marker of belonging. This becomes apparent with interviewee I10 and more clearly with interviewee I9, who both started to be politically committed following the conflict's outbreak in 2014. Interviewee I9 stresses herself that 2014 was a turning point in terms of both her political commitment and her sense of Ukrainian belonging:

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I9: »Maybe someone had this maturation, you know; they perhaps actively participated in one of the other Maidans which we had. […]. But then I was uh younger, […] I have always supported the right side, but I didn't participate so actively […]. I only walked there with small ribbons, uh but I (stuttering) wasn't deeply interested, I was not too affected, so to say. That's why (breathing in) maybe someone matured earlier. I matured at these events.«

This text passage reveals that interviewee I9 was not politically engaged prior to 2014. It seems that she feels the need to justify her absence. First, by stating that she was too young and thus neither interested in the last social movements in Ukraine nor affected by their political circumstances. Second, by stressing that even without participation, she has always supported the ›right‹ side, meaning the side of the activists behind both social movements. Consequently, the events of 2014 most likely not only strengthened her affiliation to Ukraine generally, but also provoked the necessity for her to take action for Ukraine in particular, when considering her growing activism.

Considering that Ukraine holds Russia accountable (cf. Fischer 2019: 18), the conflict and its escalation into war have amplified people's need to visibly express loyalty and belonging to Ukraine. This is most prominent in the cases of ethnic minorities in Ukraine. Interviewee I5 demonstrates how activism and Islam are intertwined from a nationalist perspective as Ukraine is considered to be the home and protector of Muslims and Crimean Tatars from a pro-Ukrainian Muslim perspective (see also chapter 5.6 on democracy) so that pro-Ukrainian activism is even regarded as a Muslim duty. Interviewee I10 demonstrates that Russian(-speaking) Ukrainians are not necessarily Russia's compatriots but can also choose Ukraine instead of their ›ethnic homeland‹ Russia. In this light, it becomes apparent that activism can be an important marker of belonging for those not who do not correspond to the dominant ethnicized understanding of the Ukrainian nation or when they lack visible markers of belonging, such as language. Thus, the conflict seems to have brought the population together despite its ethnic and religious differences.

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The relevance of activism among the population unfolds further when we take into account the criticism of state institutions which failed to prevent the loss of Crimea and Donbas, as expressed by interviewees I5 and I9. Interviewee I5 illustrates this well by explaining that it is not the Ukrainian state but Ukrainian citizens who are defending Ukraine, especially by taking up arms to resist Russian attempts at occupation:

> I5: »And [Russia, author's note] did not expect that Ukraine would put up such strong resistance. The resistance in 2014/2015 was not provided by the Ukrainian state, but by Ukrainian inhabitants: volunteer battalions, volunteers. When there was no one to fight, the ordinary people took up weapons and went to fight. And that's why Russia could only occupy a very small territory compared to what it had planned to occupy. But in the end, they did not succeed. […] Because there were so many people who resisted. Not because of the Ukrainian state, because if we had relied on the state bodies, then for sure Russia would have occupied us. Because our state bodies only do (something) if our Ukrainian society starts to force them to; then they start to do something. But if it had not been for uh the will of civil society, the will of the Ukrainians, Russia would have occupied as much as they wanted. Because the state bodies did not fight at all for Crimea. They did not fight for Crimea at all.«[79]

With regard to the chapter on historical memory, the emphasis on taking up arms underpins the narrative of Ukraine as a freedom-loving country with a historic struggle against the imperialist threat of Russia. Interviewee I9 displays a strong fighting spirit, which she attributes to the whole society. This emphasis demonstrates a high level of unconditional patriotism, considering the risks that military activism entails.

79 Interviewee I5 not only stresses here that Ukraine lacked a well trained and equipped army, but also criticizes President Poroshenko's (2014–2019) refusal to answer militarily to the loss of Crimea, as this would have left Ukraine exposed on its eastern border, where Russia had assembled significant military units and technology (cf. Watts 2014).

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I9: »[N]ow people are very afraid that Russia will capture us; they won't capture us. If they capture us, there will literally be bloodshed, but they won't capture us, we won't give up. There are a lot of people who won't give up and that's all. And as I said, for us it's a normal sacrifice, even to sacrifice our own lives; we are a nation that sacrifices for our freedom.«

If we embed the findings in a broader societal context, the conflict has strengthened activism as a source of Ukrainian belonging. Natalia Shapovalova, a policy analyst on Eastern Europe, points out that both the Euromaidan and the armed conflict gave a boost to civic activism in Ukraine, especially to grassroots activism in urban areas and with regard to people's motivation to run in local elections (cf. Shapovalova 2019). A study by the International Republican Institute (2023) states that approximately 39 percent of the Ukrainian population was involved in volunteer activities in 2023, while 59 percent were not engaged.[80] Volunteer activities are especially high in the Center (38 %) and West (36 %), followed by the South (31 %) and East (21 %) (cf. ibid.). This study finds no bigger difference in volunteering between women and men, as 33 percent among both genders do volunteer (cf. ibid.). Volunteering is more common among younger Ukrainians: While 40 percent of Ukrainians aged 18–35 and 36 percent aged 36–50 are involved in volunteering, only 27 percent of Ukrainians older than 51 are involved in volunteering (cf. ibid.).

The conflict's escalation in 2022 is said to also have further strengthened the role of activism in Ukrainian society, especially of military commitment (cf. Reznik 2023). »Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was met by unexpected resistance and resilience in Ukrainians« who continue to fight for Ukraine's independence (ibid.: 329). This also applies to the conflict's outbreak in 2014. Research shows that willingness to take up arms for the country's sake is high among Ukrainians, but with temporal highs and lows, from approximately 60 % in 1996, to 56.5 % in 2006, to 40 % in 2011 and 57 % in 2020 (cf. ibid.: 337). At the same time, refusing to fight decreased from 30 % in 1996 to 26 % in 2020, with low

80 One percent stated they had difficulties answering or did not answer. The remaining share of one percent remains unclear in the statistics from the International Republican Institute's poll of 2023.

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points in 1996 (11 %) and 2006 (25 %) (cf. ibid.: 337). Linking the statistics to socio-political circumstances, we can interpret an increase in willingness to fight for Ukraine due to the events of 2014 and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since February 2022. On the eve of the Russian–Ukrainian war, about 50 percent of Ukrainians stated they were ready to defend Ukraine against Russia—in one form or another (cf. ibid.: 339). The majority (25 %) preferred to support the country with non-military assistance like money, blood donations, and civil volunteering, whereas only around 8 % are willing to join the army and approximately 14 % to join volunteer forces at the front (cf. ibid.: 339). This indicates lower support for state institutions compared to civil society (cf. ibid.: 338). 17.5 percent stated that they are not actively committed but just try to survive, and 3 percent wanted to leave the country before the war's outbreak (cf. ibid.: 339).[81] In his study, Ukrainian sociologist Oleksandr Reznik shows that men are more willing to take up arms for the country's sake than women and that readiness to fight is moderately greater among younger citizens and is slightly greater among educated and wealthy citizens (cf. ibid.: 339)—either in the army or in volunteer forces. The willingness to fight is greater among Central and Southern Ukrainian citizens (cf. ibid.: 342). The South and Kyiv are among the regions most affected by the war, even though the South traditionally counts as pro-Russian (cf. ibid.: 342). This seems to indicate a growing sense of Ukrainian belonging in this region, which is congruent with studies on Ukrainian belonging in the aftermath of the conflict's outbreak (see chapter 3). In addition, a readiness to fight is greater among those with a pro-NATO attitude and linguistic attachment to the Ukrainian language (cf. ibid.: 339, 342). A preference for non-military action is greater among female and older citizens as well as those with less education and those living in the Donbas who have a negative attitude towards the country's accession to NATO and a linguistic attachment to the Russian language (cf. ibid.: 342).[82]

81 Around 13 % do not believe the invasion will take place, and 18 % are undecided on what to do (cf. Reznik 2023: 339).

82 Linguistic attachment does not mean linguistic practices, as language practices themselves did not affect an individual's willingness to fight for their country (cf. Reznik 2023: 340).

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However, in quantitative as well as qualitative studies, we can only examine verbal willingness, not actual behavior. Nevertheless, Ukrainians' resistance to Russia's offensive war on Ukraine demonstrates that there are an immense number of citizens ready to take action for the country's sake (cf. ibid.: 343). This is particularly striking as research stresses that the citizens' willingness to fight for their country is greater in solid democracies or autocratic states but not in democracies in transition with weak institutions and a weak economy, like Ukraine (cf. ibid.: 329). At the same time, research emphasizes that citizens' willingness to fight is greater in »less materially, democratically, and technologically developed societies« and lower in those with a high level of security, wealth, education, life expectancy, technology with post-materialist emancipatory values, and a democratic system (ibid.: 332). Ukraine can be categorized more in the first than in the latter category. In addition, research shows that constant confrontation with neighbors who question their legal existence can strengthen citizens' military commitment to their country, like in Islamic countries, the Philippines, India, Taiwan, or Israel (cf. Reznik 2023: 331f)—which demonstrates exceptions to the previous thesis. In addition, ongoing conflicts and external threats are said to further strengthen the citizens' willingness to fight for their country (cf. ibid.: 333). Ukraine is another case of constant confrontation questioning its existence, which recently escalated from a local armed secessionist conflict into a war of aggression against Ukraine by the Russian regime. Moreover, national pride is another factor in the willingness to fight (cf. ibid.: 332f), which was complicated by social cleavages in the country for a long time (see chapter 3).

However, activism relies on volunteers who »share their ideas, time, and resources« for the common cause in their free time (cf. Shapovalova 2019), which emphasizes that it is a question of having the means to be politically committed. Thus, activism cannot be a general marker of belonging. Nonetheless, the emphasis on personal commitment to Ukraine in the interviews mirrors the general trend of growing civic activism in Ukraine and, thus, of the increasing relevance of activism for contemporary Ukrainian belonging, especially as a visible marker of belonging. According to Kulyk (2018: 8), the new experience of having to defend one's country increases people's identification with Ukraine, as is visible in the data in this study.

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