Summertime in Kalinovka. Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, Summer 2012.

The oldest spoil pit of Horlivka in bloom. Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine, Summer 2012.

In a bus – "Marshrutka" from Horlivka to Donetsk, Autumn 2012.

PHOTO: EVA IEVGENIIA BABENKO

Echoes of **peace**, *lives of* **war**

WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF BELONGING IN DONBAS

by **Eva Ievgeniia Babenko**

abstract

Drawing on five narrative interviews with women from Ukraine's Donbas, this article explores how belonging and national identification shift across three temporalities: everyday life before 2014, the outbreak of war in 2014, and the full-scale invasion in 2022. Using grounded theory coding, it traces how conflicting Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects are experienced through domestic routines, media consumption, and encounters with state institutions. Before 2014, regional pride and Russophone familiarity distanced Ukrainian narratives, until war shattered this normality and forced difficult, morally charged choices. After 2022, respondents describe intensified fear, betrayal, and a reconfiguration of home and belonging, while distinguishing survival from political loyalty under occupation. The article argues that identity in Donbas is neither binary nor linear, but a gendered, emotional, and relational process shaped through everyday practices and retrospective moral evaluation. By centring women's voices, the study complicates top-down accounts of nationhood and shows why reconciliation must address mistrust, recognition, and personal repair and dignity.

KEYWORDS: Donbas, Russo-Ukrainian war, women, everyday nationalism, nation-making, reconciliation.

For decades, the Donbas region has stood at the intersection of confronting Ukrainian and Russian nation-building projects, contested political loyalties shaped by propaganda and disinformation, and layered forms of belonging. Situated within the Ukrainian and Russian state project, Donbas nonetheless maintains a deeply ingrained regional identity.[1] Since the outbreak of war in 2014, and especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, questions of who belongs to the Ukrainian nation, who is of the Kremlin-promoted concept of the "Russian world",[2] and how the people of Donbas position themselves have become central to political and scholarly debate. Yet these struggles over nationhood unfold not only in official discourse or geopolitical analysis, but also in everyday life – in family conversations, media habits, moral judgments, and strategies of survival. This article focuses on how women from Donbas narrate these transformations in identity and belonging through the years of war in the East of Ukraine.

This article centres women's narratives to examine how belonging in Donbas is reshaped across three key temporal moments: *Life before 2014, the rupture of war in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of 2022.*

RECENT STUDIES on Ukrainian nation-making and war memory have examined state discourse, media narratives, and geopolitical strategy,[3] yet comparatively fewer analyses focus on gendered experiences of belonging in occupied Donbas.[4] While the war has generated extensive corpus of scientific research, much of it focuses on elites, state projections, and military developments, whereas this study foregrounds lived experience of the ordinary women.

Feminist scholarship has long shown that nations are structured through gendered relations, reproduced in everyday life through care practices, emotional labour, and routine social interactions.[5] In wartime, gendered expectations surrounding safety, responsibility, and family intensify these dynamics. Women often mediate between state authority and household survival, making them key interpreters of political violence. Focusing on women's narratives, therefore, allows us to trace how national belonging is negotiated through relational responsibilities and moral positioning under conditions of uncertainty.

Drawing on five in-depth narrative interviews conducted in 2024 with women who remained in occupied territories, relocated within Ukraine, or moved abroad, the article explores how identity unfolds as a temporal and relational process. The aim of this study is not statistical representativeness but analytical depth, achieved through maximum variation sampling.[6] Using grounded theory techniques,[7] the analysis identifies recurring patterns in how respondents interpret key events, evaluate their experiences, and make sense of shifting wartime contexts.

I argue that identity in Donbas cannot be understood as a fixed or binary position, like "pro-Ukrainian" versus "pro-Russian," "victim" versus "collaborator", but as a gendered and emotionally charged process that constantly evolves in unfolding circumstances. Women's recollections of pre-war "normality", their interpretations of 2014, and their reassessments after 2022 reveal how belonging is continually re-evaluated in light of fear, responsibility, loss, and retrospective moral judgment.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the article contributes to debates on nation-making in Ukraine by demonstrating how identity formation unfolds through everyday practice rather than solely through state projects. It also speaks to broader discussions of reconciliation by showing that fractured belonging is not only a political question but a deeply personal one.

Theoretical framework

Scholarship on gender and nation-making has long demonstrated that nations are not neutral political communities, but gendered constructions embedded in everyday practices, symbolic boundaries, and expectations. As Yuval-Davis[8] argues, women serve simultaneously as biological reproducers of the nation, cultural carriers of its traditions, and markers of its moral boundaries. Feminist scholarship further shows that national projects rely on gendered divisions of labour, emotional responsibilities, and norms of respectability that shape who is recognised as a legitimate member of the national community.[9] These processes become especially visible in wartime, when narratives of protection, sacrifice, and vulnerability place differentiated expectations on men and women, shaping what counts as appropriate loyalty and belonging.

"WOMEN OFTEN MEDIATE BETWEEN STATE AUTHORITY AND HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL, MAKING THEM KEY INTERPRETERS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE."

While classic theories of nationalism emphasise political institutions, collective memory, and elite mobilisation,[10] feminist approaches highlight how nationhood is reproduced not only through official discourse but also through everyday routines, caregiving practices, and emotional labour that sustain family and community life. This perspective aligns with everyday nationalism,[11] which examines how national identities emerge through habitual practices and "micro-boundaries" structuring daily experience. A feminist lens extends this by showing how such practices are themselves gendered and shape opportunities for agency and mobility, particularly under conditions of insecurity.

WAR INTENSIFIES these dynamics. Feminist peace and conflict studies demonstrate that war reorganises social relations, redistributes responsibilities, and reshapes emotional bonds, producing both new attachments and forms of distancing.[12] Women's experiences of fear, displacement, and moral responsibility become central to how political violence is interpreted and experienced, particularly by those who remain in the war zone, and how national belonging is renegotiated. In such contexts,

identity is best understood not as a fixed position but as an ongoing, gendered negotiation shaped by uncertainty and shifting authority relations.

This article adopts a feminist everyday perspective to examine how women from Donbas interpret key events from 2014 to 2022. Their narratives illustrate how gendered expectations structure moral judgments, kinship obligations, and perceptions of the state, as well as everyday practices of maintaining or challenging national boundaries. While this study does not assume that male narratives would necessarily differ in substance, it demonstrates that women's wartime positioning is consistently mediated through socially structured expectations of care, responsibility, and moral accountability. By conceptualising nation-making as a dynamic and gendered process shaped by narrative interpretation, the article provides an analytical framework for interpreting the shifting identities emerging from the interviews.

To guide the analysis, the article draws on three interconnected analytical lenses that structure the interpretation of the interview material. First, gendered nation-making[13] directs attention to how symbolic, reproductive, and moral expectations shape women's positions within competing national projects. Second, everyday nationalism[14] shows how daily routines and domestic interactions make belonging visible in practice. Third, narrative and emotional meaning-making[15] highlights how women organise past experiences and present dilemmas into morally coherent stories.

These lenses function as sensitising concepts rather than predefined categories, enabling a grounded interpretation of how women from Donbas navigate rival Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects across more than a decade of war.

Research design and sampling

This article is based on five in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews conducted between February and April 2024 with women originating from the Donbas region. The purpose of the study is not to produce statistically representative findings but to develop an analytically rich understanding of how women narrate transformations in belonging, identity, and meaning between 2014 and 2022. The sample was therefore constructed through a combination of maximum variation[16] and theoretical sampling.[17] The participants were selected to represent diverse wartime trajectories, including remaining in occupied territories, relocating to Ukraine-controlled areas, and migrating abroad. This variation makes it possible to trace how different positionalities and experiences of war shape processes of narrative meaning-making.

Narrative interviewing

Narrative interviewing was chosen because it foregrounds participants' own interpretive frameworks and allows them to organise their experiences temporally, emotionally, and morally.[18] Interviews began with a single open prompt (*"Tell me about your life in Donbas and how it has changed over time?"*) and developed through follow-up questions aimed to stimulate elaboration, clarification, and reflection. Rather than seeking factual verification, the interviews focused on how respondents themselves constructed events, relationships, and the turning point of 2014. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, was conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, according to participants' preference and was audio-recorded with informed consent.

Analytic strategy

The analysis combined narrative sensibilities with grounded-theory techniques,[19] used to identify recurring patterns of meaning rather than to generate a formal theory. Through cycles of open and focused coding, I wrote analytic memos that traced how participants interpreted key events, justified moral positions, and made sense of shifting identities. Particular attention was paid to the temporal organisation of narratives, how respondents contrasted "before 2014", "after 2014", and "after 2022", as well as to the emotional tones of fear, attachment, anger, and loss that were embedded in their accounts. Codes and memos were revised multiple times to ensure that the analysis remained close to participants' language and avoided the imposition of predefined categories.

"MEMORIES OF LIFE IN DONBAS BEFORE 2014 EMERGED AS A CRUCIAL REFERENCE POINT FOR THE WOMEN'S LATER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE WAR."

Participants

A total of five interviewees participated in the study. The interviewees differed in age, education, family situation, and wartime trajectories, including displacement and continued residence in occupied territories. All names are pseudonyms.

Ella (55) holds an MA in Languages and is married, has an adult daughter. In 2014, she initially sought refuge in Ukrainian government-controlled areas of Donbas but later relocated to Russia due to increasing hostility toward people from occupied territories. After 2022, she and her husband obtained temporary protection in Finland, where they currently reside. Her relatives and close friends remain in occupied Donbas.

Lisa (33) holds an MA in Media Communications and is engaged. In 2014, she left Donbas due to safety concerns linked to her reporting and documentation of Russian military presence in her hometown. Her family remained in occupied territory until 2022. She obtained Internally Displaced Person (IDP) status in Ukraine and later relocated to Germany under temporary protection.

Maria (34) holds an MA in Business Management and is married. Shortly before the outbreak of the war in 2014, she moved to Finland for studies, where she encountered Russian narratives about the war in Donbas. She holds IDP status in Ukraine;

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The very first battle forces ATO on Savur-Mohyla, June 2014.

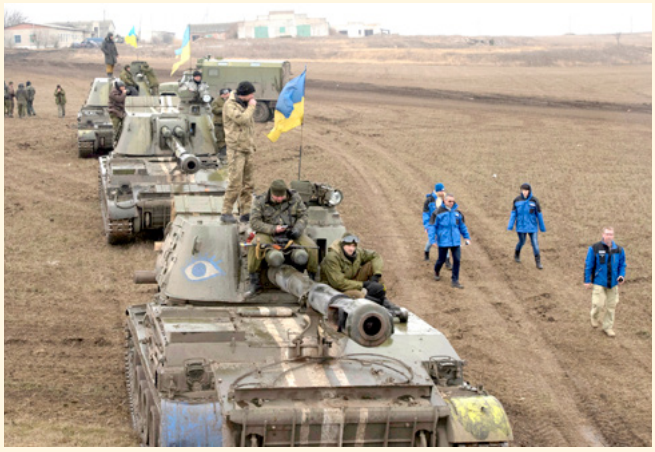


PHOTO: OSCE SPECIAL MONITORING MISSION TO UKRAINE.

Ukrainian troops in the Donbas, March 2015.

part of her family continues to live under occupation. She resides in Finland as an independent artist.

Nelli (51) has professional training in psychology and is divorced, has a teenage son. In 2014, she fled her hometown during the initial takeover but later returned from Ukraine-controlled territory due to financial and family responsibilities. She holds IDP status in Ukraine and currently lives and works in the self-proclaimed "DPR".

Adele (34) holds an MA in English and Ukrainian language and literature. In spring 2014, she worked as a journalist covering the "Russian Spring" in her hometown and neighboring cities. She was forced to leave after receiving threats linked to her pro-Ukrainian position. She obtained IDP status and lives and works in Kyiv, while her family remains in the occupied territory.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central due to the sensitivity of discussing life under occupation, displacement, and political persecution. Participants were recruited through personal networks in Ukraine and within the Donbas diaspora following careful assessment of potential safety risks. Interviews with residents of occupied territories were conducted via secure communication channels, and the research design was reviewed to be compliant with trauma-informed interviewing to ensure that questioning minimised distress. Additional procedural information concerning digital security and transcription is provided in the accompanying methodological note.[20]

Before 2014

Memories and everyday identity in Donbas

Memories of life in Donbas before 2014 emerged as a crucial reference point for the women's later interpretations of the war. These recollections were not only atmospheric descriptions of the past; they functioned as an emotional and symbolic baseline against which subsequent experiences of war, occupation, and displacement were evaluated. It turns out that returning to this period meant revisiting a world remembered as stable, predictable, and structured by familiar routines – even when marked by political indifference, limited mobility, or economic uncertainty. This "normality" was repeatedly invoked to underscore the contrast with the chaos, moral ambiguity and fragmentation that followed the outbreak of war in 2014.

Normality here refers not simply to the absence of war, but to a routinised stability in which national belonging remained largely implicit. Everyday life revolved around work, family obligations, and local networks, leaving political identification mostly unarticulated. In this sense, belonging operated as a background assumption embedded in habitual practice, an example of what everyday nationalism describes as the reproduction of nationhood through routine, "unmarked" interactions. The rupture of 2014 did not create identity from nothing but rendered previously taken-for-granted frameworks visible and contested.

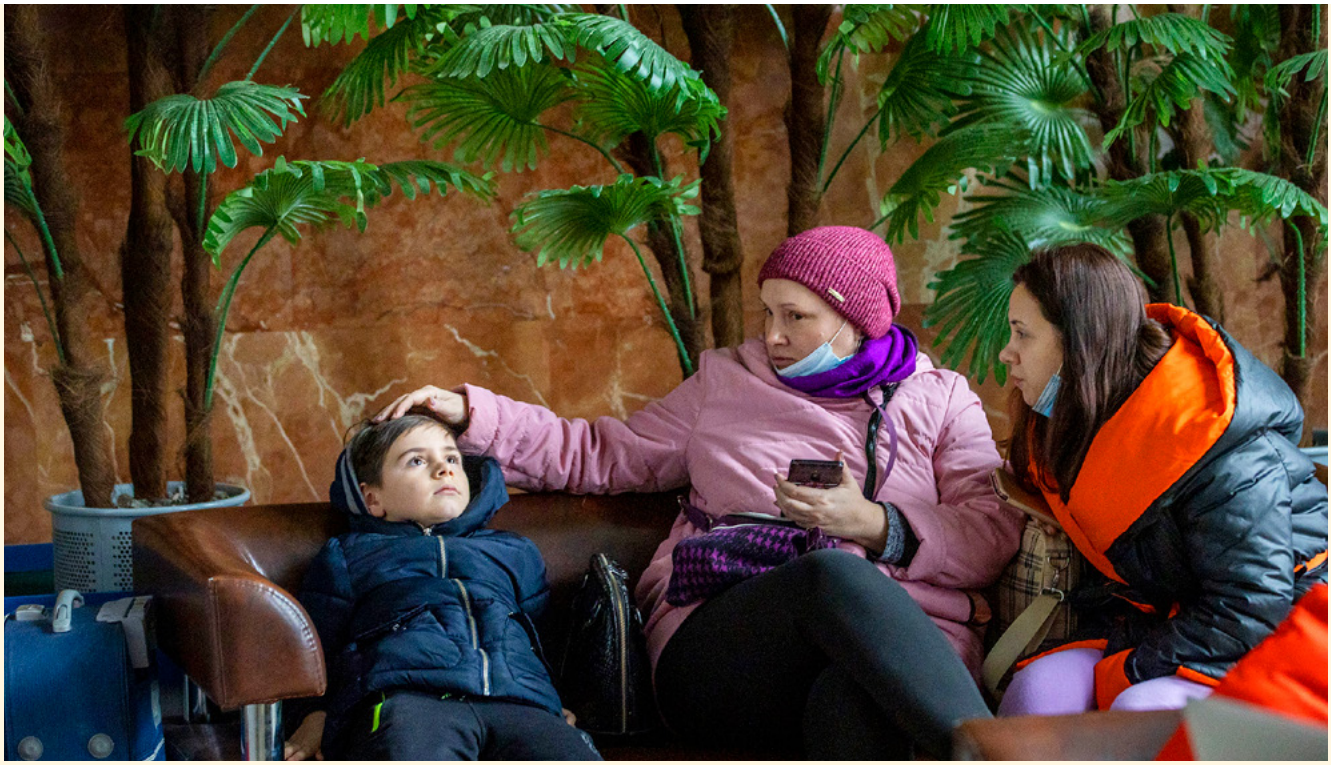
A DOMINANT THEME across the interviews was the pervasive presence of Russian cultural and media influence in everyday life. Ella noted that:

> **Russian TV and culture were a big thing. If the TV was on, it was always on a Russian channel, always Russian news, and a Russian view of the situation."**

Maria similarly reflected that Russian television had shaped her perception of public life long before the war:

> **I didn't watch much Ukrainian television because Russian TV was very engaging and relaxing. Now I understand its real purpose: they just wanted to make you indifferent to any difficult topics.**

These accounts resonate with existing scholarship on the cultural russification of Donbas[21] but the interviews also reveal a distinctly gendered dimension of this media environment. Women frequently described themselves as curators of the household's informational space, deciding which channels played in the



A view of a train station as people who want to go to Kyiv from Kramatorsk in the Donbas region continue to wait, following Russianfull-scale invasion in Ukraine, on February 25, 2022 in Kramatorsk, Ukraine. PHOTO: AYTAC UNAL/GETTY IMAGES

background and what media children were exposed to. In this sense, everyday media consumption became intertwined with gendered responsibilities for care, routine, and the reproduction of a taken-for-granted social order.

At the same time, Ukrainian cultural and political narratives held a secondary or peripheral place in many respondents' pre-2014 lives. The Ukrainian language, in particular, was often experienced as formal, bureaucratic, or externally imposed, rather than as a meaningful component of everyday belonging. As Nelli recalled:

> **When Donbas was part of Ukraine, all the documents were in Ukrainian. I saw it rather as a burden. Nobody understood why we needed it. I speak and write Russian now. It's more 'natural' to me.**

Likewise, Adele described how her decision to study Ukrainian language and literature required repeated justification within her social environment:

> **I chose to study the Ukrainian language and literature, and it was very much disliked. I had to explain my decision to many of my relatives and friends. They couldn't simply believe that I just liked it.**

These accounts suggest that engagement with Ukrainian language and culture was not simply uncommon, but often perceived as socially marked, politically charged and requiring explanation, positioning Ukrainianness as marginal within the everyday cultural landscape of pre-2014 Donbas.

SUCH RECOLLECTIONS underline that for many residents; Ukrainian identity was less a felt cultural affiliation than an administrative reality. In the absence of frequent travel across Ukraine, exposure to other regional cultures or engagement with Ukrainian politics, these women's everyday worlds remained deeply local. Nelli highlighted this sense of isolation explicitly:

> **I haven't been much in Ukraine and other regions; I just didn't need to. I was in Kyiv a couple of times, but it was a long time ago. On the other hand, people from the West of Ukraine also didn't visit us much.**

The women also spoke of a strong regional pride associated with Donbas's industrial identity.[22] Rooted in mining, metallurgy, and working-class solidarity, this pride formed an important axis of belonging that often-overshadowed national categories. Maria described this sentiment as characteristic of her childhood environment:

> **People around me lived their lives like there was nothing around. They didn't travel much; they just worked and did what they had to. All this 'political stuff' going around was unclear and had limited importance – they were above it.**

Reflecting retrospectively, Maria contrasted this perceived stability with what she described as the uncertainties of post-Soviet Ukrainian politics, noting that:

> **It was much easier for people from my town to lean towards the 'stability' of Russian colonialism than the 'chaotic' democracy of Ukraine.**

Women frequently invoked the industrial ethos not simply as background context, but as a formative element of local identity,

shaping expectations about social order, hierarchy, and the role of the state.

The interview data also revealed internal stereotyping within Ukraine, which further contributed to a sense of alienation from Ukrainian national projects. Adele captured this dynamic vividly when recalling stereotypes she encountered outside the region:

> **People told me I don't look like someone from Donbas. I asked them, 'What should I do? Squat on a bench and call you names every other word?'**

Ella remembered similar experiences:

> **Oh, you're from Donbas?! Sorry, we don't have jobs for separatists.**

Such encounters reinforced the perception among Donbas residents that they were viewed as culturally other, producing emotional distance from broader Ukrainian identity even before the outbreak of war.

BEFORE 2014, political neutrality was prevalent among the respondents. Several women described themselves as politically neutral in the early months of the war, not because of sympathy for any side, but because work obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and economic survival left little time or emotional capacity to follow unfolding events. For many respondents, neutrality emerged less as an ideological position than as a condition structured by gendered labour-balancing paid employment, family care, and household stability in a rapidly deteriorating environment. In this sense, political detachment reflected not indifference but the constraints of everyday responsibility, as the neutrality described by Ella and Nelli was shaped by a practical orientation toward everyday survival rather than an explicit political stance.

Ella summarised this indifference directly:

> **I was neutral. I didn't care.**

Nelli echoed this, linking her lack of political awareness to the pressures of everyday life:

> **I didn't have time to follow the news, I just worked a lot, so I had no clue why the Yanukovych regime was bad.**

Such accounts suggest that neutrality was a condition shaped by gendered responsibilities and socioeconomic realities. This condition was further reinforced by a media and informational environment in which political developments were fragmented, contradictory, or presented as distant from everyday concerns.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that pre-2014 Donbas identity was grounded not in nationalist commitments but in a combination of heavily russified culture, industrial pride, limited exposure to the rest of Ukraine, and gendered practices and routine. These overlapping layers of belonging formed a dense emotional and symbolic landscape that later shaped how the women interpreted the outbreak of war in 2014, how they assessed the legitimacy of Ukrainian and Russian nation-making projects, and how they negotiated their own loyalties and identities within the shifting context of conflict.

2014 as the Point of no return

Shifting identities, emotional shock, and early confrontations with nation-making

While memories of Donbas before 2014 were grounded in routine and familiarity, all five respondents described the first months of the conflict as a total disaster – an unexpected collapse of the normal world they had taken for granted. The emotional tone of their narratives shifted sharply from calm recollection to shock, confusion, disbelief, and, in some cases, fear or moral outrage. This moment stands out not simply as the beginning of war, but as the point at which previously stable understandings of self, community, and state authority were suddenly destabilised.

"THE EMOTIONAL TONE OF THEIR NARRATIVES SHIFTED SHARPLY FROM CALM RECOLLECTION TO SHOCK, CONFUSION, DISBELIEF, AND, IN SOME CASES, FEAR OR MORAL OUTRAGE."

For several respondents, the earliest weeks of the conflict were experienced as surreal. A recurring theme was disbelief that violence could take root in their hometowns. Maria recalled how the first news of separatist activity seemed fundamentally incompatible with her mental picture of Donbas people "lived their lives like there was nothing around. They didn't travel much; they just worked and did what they had to.", which made open conflict seem implausible and likely short-lived.

Similarly, Adele, who was reporting on events at the time, remembered that she "believed that we would be liberated soon, as it happened in Slovyansk." An expectation grounded in the assumption that whatever was unfolding would be brief and reversible. Lisa expressed a comparable sentiment when reflecting on the period:

> **I swear I was sure that it would all be over in two months.**

These recollections illustrate how everyday routines produced a sense of stability in which political developments appeared insignificant and unlikely to disrupt ordinary life.

Disbelief, however, coexisted with rapidly diverging interpretations of what was happening. The women's narratives show how personal disposition, prior political awareness, and sources of information shaped early reactions to the unfolding events.

Two participants – Lisa and Adele already had relatively clear political commitments and were therefore more attuned to signs of Russian involvement.

Lisa described how her own observations contradicted local narratives of spontaneous uprising:

> **I knew that in my small town, nothing was happening because of the people's will, so I ran to find who those 'protestors' were.**

This early awareness placed her in physical danger and contributed to her decision to leave Donbas in 2014. Adele similarly recalled that her pro-Ukrainian stance quickly made her a target:

> **I was forced to leave because my life was threatened due to my pro-Ukrainian position and my family was subjected to blackmail.**

For other respondents, confusion, emotional numbness, and the pressures of everyday life initially limited the capacity to interpret unfolding events politically, making early developments appear temporary or reversible rather than transformative. Several women described themselves as politically neutral in the early months of the conflict, not because of sympathy for any side, but because the demands of work, exhaustion, and everyday responsibilities left little time or energy to follow unfolding events closely. In this sense, neutrality emerged less as an ideological stance than as a condition shaped by gendered labour and care responsibilities within the household.

"ALL RESPONDENTS RECALLED THE FIRST MONTHS OF THE OCCUPATION AS EMOTIONALLY CHARGED AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY DISORIENTING."

For many respondents, this practical neutrality was closely tied to gendered responsibilities within the household, where maintaining stability for children, partners, or elderly relatives often took precedence over explicit political engagement.

Both Ella and Nelli characterised this period not as a moment of political awakening, but as one in which the routines of survival left little space for reflection. In retrospect, this early neutrality was often revisited with feelings of guilt or self-reproach, not because it had been experienced as wrong at the time, but because later events retroactively altered how earlier decisions were emotionally evaluated.

These retrospective reassessments reveal how women's moral positioning was closely tied to gendered expectations of responsibility not only toward the nation, but toward family and community. Political passivity was later reinterpreted as personal failure, even when it had originally functioned as a strategy of stability and protection.

> **I had to do more to protect my homeland/ I didn't do enough / I wasn't a conscious citizen; it's a shame that I was so indifferent./Ella**

These retrospective reflections show how the experience of war reshaped earlier memories of neutrality, transforming what once appeared as ordinary disengagement into a source of moral self-evaluation.

> **I was working, and working, working a lot, it was my way to say that I will live my life despite everything. /Nelli**

Her account illustrates how everyday labour functioned as a strategy of survival, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of normality while suspending explicit political alignment.

Lisa described a similar sense of dissonance when witnessing Russian soldiers occupy her hometown while local residents repeated official Russian narratives:

> **Russian soldiers occupied my city[...] but I was just a bystander.**

For her, this moment produced feelings of guilt and fear, along with a sudden sense of political responsibility she had not previously articulated.

THESE CONTRASTS reveal a clear pattern: the onset of war in 2014 did not create identity positions from scratch, but rather amplified pre-existing dispositions – whether political engagement, indifference, or passive acceptance of local narratives. Yet even among those who initially felt disengaged, the rapid escalation of violence forced an earlier and more direct confrontation with political reality than many had anticipated.

The occupation also triggered a heightened awareness of regional stereotypes and inter-Ukrainian mistrust. Respondents described how certain narratives- encountered both in everyday interactions and through media reinforced the sense that residents of Donbas were perceived as culturally backward, politically unreliable, or insufficiently Ukrainian.

ADELE RECALLED that the stereotypes she had encountered outside the region even before the conflict took on a heavier meaning after 2014, as suspicions of separatism or complicity became increasingly common:

> **I was furious to hear that people I knew and respected could say, right in front of me, that these Donbas atrocities were running around the country like rats. Am I a rat as well?**

For some, the emotional weight of 2014 was sharpened by moments of intimate betrayal and moral shock. Maria's experience captures this sense of disbelief. While studying abroad, she en-

Early autumn evening in the neighborhood (of the auhor/photographer). Autumn 2012. PHOTO: EVA IEVGENIIA BABENKO

countered Russian propaganda not as distant rhetoric but voiced directly by someone in authority. She recalled:

> **I was studying at a Finnish university, and my Finnish dean seriously told me that Russia would take my homeland, where we belong, back to Mother Russia. Like [...] really?**

All respondents recalled the first months of the occupation as emotionally charged and psychologically disorienting. Certain dichotomies, traced more explicitly in the sections that follow, were already present at this stage: "War was impossible / war was unavoidable," "Maidan saved us/Maidan was the point of no return," and "Ukraine abandoned us/Ukraine will liberate us". These polarities did not simply reflect broader political discourses, but rather, they captured the internal fragmentation unfolding within individuals as they confronted a conflict that demanded new moral and political alignments.

> **Ordinary Donbas people tried to ignore Maidan for as long as possible, even though there were politically active people on both sides. Then everything escalated, and unfortunately, most people were completely unprepared for what was happening. That's why, I think, Russia was able to succeed. People were so afraid of the transformations our country was undergoing./Ella**

THE ONSET OF WAR in 2014 also marked the beginning of divergent identity trajectories. Lisa, Adele, and Maria aligned themselves firmly with Ukraine early on, interpreting the conflict as a struggle over sovereignty and truth.

> **I was ready for what's coming. I knew Russians won't leave us alone, because they are not an empire, not a country without Ukraine. I saw from a distance how my home country is evolving into something modern and even pioneering, so I sent money to my mom and told her to be ready by February 2022./Maria**

Ella and Nelli remained within the occupied territories for a longer period, developing narratives shaped by their immediate environment, limited mobility, and interactions with state institutions – first Ukrainian and later "republican."

> **We need to understand what they went through-it's pure hell. People forgot how to live normal lives. They're filled with rage and fear because their hopes were never realised. They wanted prosperity but ended up in poverty. They wanted more but had less. They wanted the best for their children, but those children grew up in unrecognised republics. Everyone knows now that counting on Russia and abandoning Ukraine was a huge mistake. Eventually, some people started saying that it was better when they were part of Ukraine, but for them, it's hard to admit that. It's easier to listen to the propaganda and blame everything on Ukraine. They wonder, why hasn't Ukraine liberated us? Maybe it is true that they always hated us?/Ella**

This narrative reflects the tension between lived hardship under occupation and the persistence of competing political explanations for that hardship.

What united these otherwise different narratives was the

sense that 2014 suddenly demanded moral, political, and emotional choices for which many women felt unprepared, not because of indifference, but because everyday routines, gendered responsibilities, and a fragmented informational environment had previously allowed identity to remain unexamined. The war cut through families, workplaces, and communities, forcing individuals to choose a side and position themselves long before they had developed the conceptual or emotional tools to do so. This moment is thus essential not only as a historical marker, but as the point at which identity ceased to function as an unconscious background assumption and instead became a deeply felt, often painful, personal question.

After 2022:
Shock, awakening, and the reconfiguration of belonging

For all five respondents, the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 represented not only a new stage in the war, but a profound emotional and cognitive shock – one that forced a re-evaluation of earlier beliefs, positions, and the meaning of home. If 2014 destabilised identity, 2022 shattered what remained of the earlier interpretive frameworks, leaving the women confronting a reality that exceeded previous narratives of neutrality, routine, or regional specificity.

Across the interviews, the emotional tone intensified significantly. The women described fear, disbelief, a shift in moral pattern, and again a deep feeling of guilt linked to the impossibility of foreseeing the scale and direction of violence within the informational and emotional constraints of the time.

Ella recalled how her assumptions about the war collapsed almost instantly:

> **I didn't expect it to come to this point. I didn't believe it was possible. I lived in Russia back then, and I trusted the Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood. Again and again, I feel guilty now about it.**

Her earlier misconceptions (as she calls them) became a source of emotional burden once the brutality of the invasion reshaped how earlier positions were retrospectively understood. For her, 2022 constituted an existential awakening – a moment when neutrality, once experienced as a survival strategy, could no longer be sustained emotionally.

Nelli experienced a similar shock, intensified by her proximity to occupation authorities and the sensory reality of war. She recalled living through shelling, fear and moments that demanded immediate choices:

> **I lived through shelling, through fear, through situations where I had to make choices. I understood that nobody is protecting us.**

This sense of abandonment – combined with an emerging awareness of how Russian narratives had shaped her environment for years – triggered a painful reassessment of the past:

> **It hurts to admit how much we believed in Russian TV. It hurts even more to see what it led to.**

For Lisa and Adele, who had recognized the risks earlier and left Donbas in 2014, the full-scale invasion brought a different form of experience, an overwhelming confirmation of fears they had previously warned others about. Yet even this confirmation did not lessen the shock. Adele described the moment bluntly:

> **I thought I had seen enough in 2014. I thought I understood what Russia is capable of. I didn't. Nobody did.**

Her narrative illustrates how previous political clarity did not shield her from the magnitude of the invasion, which for her marked the definitive collapse of any remaining ambiguity surrounding national belonging.

Maria, who had been living abroad since before the war, described 2022 as the moment when physical distance and emotional proximity collided:

> **From abroad, you see everything clearly and painfully at the same time. The whole identity debate suddenly becomes your personal story again.**

Her position in the diaspora introduced new layers of guilt and responsibility, intensifying her sense of identification with Ukraine despite years of physical absence from the region.

IN INTERVIEWS, the theme of betrayal surfaced repeatedly – betrayal by Russia, by certain neighbours or relatives, by local authorities, and sometimes by one's own earlier assumptions. Where 2014 produced confusion, 2022 produced a form of moral and emotional clarity that many respondents described as harsh and irreversible. The respondents described how the full-scale invasion dissolved any lingering belief that the conflict could be understood through local grievances, Soviet nostalgia, or regional identity alone.

Ella expressed this shift vividly:

> **I realised that I was wrong. Completely wrong. This is not a misunderstanding. This is aggression, invasion, destruction. I'm Ukrainian, and Russia is bombing my homeland.**

For her, the invasion reshaped how earlier neutrality was understood, opening space for a new form of identification with Ukraine – not ideological, but deeply emotional.

Meanwhile, Nelli's re-evaluation was shaped by her continued life under occupation, where administrative systems, social benefits, and information channels had long been reorganised according to Russian rules. She explained how the distribution of Russian passports was experienced locally:

> **When the 'DPR' started giving out Russian passports, many took them because they needed pensions, treat-**

> **ment, and food. It was not loyalty. It was survival. Now, Russia is mobilising our men because we have their passports. Why?**

This distinction between survival and loyalty became central to how she interpreted the choices of people around her – and to how she understood her own complicated relationship with the state structures imposed by occupation. Her decision illustrates how everyday survival strategies often blur the boundary between pragmatic adaptation and perceived political loyalty.

The shock of 2022 also exposed generational divides. Adele noted:

> **The older generation believed in stability. They didn't believe Russia could go this far. The younger ones, especially those who moved away, saw it differently.**

These generational differences reflect broader patterns in Donbas, where Soviet socialisation, media consumption, and lived experience have shaped divergent responses to the war. Importantly, the full-scale invasion also triggered a profound reconfiguration of national belonging. For some respondents, the full-scale invasion of 2022 revived Ukrainian identity, making it emotionally charged and personally meaningful. For others, identity remained entangled in complex obligations, family ties, and survival strategies. Yet none of the women remained unchanged after 2022.

"FOR SOME RESPONDENTS, THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF 2022 REVIVED UKRAINIAN IDENTITY, MAKING IT EMOTIONALLY CHARGED AND PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL."

A PARTICULARLY STRIKING dimension of the post-2022 break was the way the invasion reshaped the women's sense of home. Maria explained:

> **The town where I grew up is gone. Not yet physically, maybe, but emotionally. What is there to return to? Everything feels empty.**

Her reflection captures how the destruction of belonging did not necessarily require physical annihilation, despite some of the towns being destroyed, but unfolded through the erosion of emotional attachment and the loss of a meaningful future orientation toward place.

This sentiment, home as a place transformed beyond recognition, appeared across the interviews, reflecting a shared experience of loss that transcended political alignment.

Finally, the narratives reveal how 2022 forced a transformation in how the women understood themselves not only politically, but also morally and personally. Some confronted their earlier neutrality; others reinterpreted decisions made under stress, others found their identities reshaped through activism, professional engagement, or transnational life. Importantly, none of these shifts was linear or simple. Identity after 2022 emerged as a complex, emotionally saturated process shaped by fear, guilt, hope, responsibility, and an acute awareness of the stakes of nation-making.

The women's accounts show that the full-scale invasion did not simply deepen the conflict; it reshaped the emotional, moral, and symbolic terrain upon which identity was built. In this sense, 2022 was not a continuation of 2014; it marked a fundamentally new beginning, one that compelled the women to re-examine their past, re-evaluate their present, and reimagine their future belonging.

Identity, stereotypes, and nation-making during the Russo-Ukrainian war

The three empirical sections demonstrate that identity in Donbas evolved through distinct temporal phases, each shaped by gendered everyday experience. Before 2014, national belonging functioned largely as an unexamined background to daily life, embedded in routines of work and local social relations, and rarely articulated as a political position. The outbreak of war in 2014 disrupted this taken-for-granted normality, forcing women to confront political categories and moral expectations for which many felt unprepared, often resulting in confusion and misrecognition, though the immediacy of loss and displacement was uneven and did not affect all lives in the same way. Following the full-scale invasion in 2022, identity was reassessed more explicitly and emotionally, which shaped how women interpreted events and negotiated their sense of belonging over time.

BEFORE 2014, the respondents' accounts highlight how regional identity, cultural Russophonia, and limited mobility formed an environment in which Ukrainian national narratives were present but emotionally distant. Women's pre-war everyday responsibilities, domestic routines and work obligations reinforced this distance. Neutrality thus emerged as a practical position, rather than an explicitly political one. These insights align with scholarship that conceptualises identity as situated and relational, rather than fixed or ideological.

The onset of war in 2014 brought this "normality" into crisis. Some respondents immediately interpreted the unrest as externally driven, while others struggled to make sense of rapidly changing events. Crucially, this moment exposed pre-existing tensions within Ukraine, including stereotypes that painted Donbas as culturally backward or politically unreliable. Several women described experiences of being labelled or mischaracterised outside the region well before the war. During the war, these earlier experiences acquired renewed emotional salience, influencing how respondents understood their place within the Ukrainian nation.

The onset of war – confusing for some, clarifying for others – thus marked the first point at which identity became an active and often painful question.

The full-scale invasion in 2022 intensified these processes. Whatever emotional or interpretive distance existed in 2014 largely collapsed after February 2022. The scale of violence forced all respondents, regardless of previous position, to reassess earlier assumptions. For some, this meant confronting previous neutrality or disbelief. For others, it reactivated tensions between personal loyalty, regional belonging, and national identification. The shift from "routine life" to existential threat generated new emotional frameworks within which identity was reconsidered – fear, guilt, grief, and moral clarity became central to political positioning.

A strong theme across all narratives is the distinction between survival and loyalty. Decisions concerning documents, employment, or mobility under occupation were rarely expressions of political identification; rather, they reflected attempts to navigate constrained local realities shaped by fear, dependency, and responsibility for others. For women in particular, these decisions were often tied to caregiving obligations, like securing pensions for elderly parents, accessing healthcare for children, or maintaining household stability. The distinction between survival and loyalty thus unfolded through gendered forms of accountability, where compliance with occupation authorities could coexist with emotional attachment to Ukraine. These findings also complicate top-down explanations of nation-making by demonstrating how state narratives from Ukraine and Russia intersect with lived experience. The respondents were clearly aware of state messaging, yet their acceptance, rejection, or reinterpretation of it depended heavily on personal trajectories, generational experience, and emotional responses to violence. Identity formation thus unfolded as a negotiation between structural pressures and personal meanings, an interaction between what is imposed from above and experienced from below.

"WHATEVER EMOTIONAL OR INTERPRETIVE DISTANCE EXISTED IN 2014 LARGELY COLLAPSED AFTER FEBRUARY 2022."

TAKEN TOGETHER, the women's stories suggest that the temporal reconfiguration of identity in Donbas has produced not clarity, but moral burden. As earlier assumptions were unsettled, women were compelled to re-evaluate their own positions and past actions in light of violence, loss, and prolonged uncertainty. Decisions made under conditions of fear, limited information, and responsibility for others – whether to stay or leave, to remain silent or speak out, to accept documents or refuse them – were often revisited retrospectively through feelings of guilt, doubt, or self-reproach. At the same time, these narratives resist simple moral judgment: actions that might appear politically meaningful from the outside were frequently understood by respondents as acts of survival rather than expressions of loyalty. In this sense, identity after rupture emerges as emotionally charged and morally ambivalent, shaped by the tension between responsibility for oneself and others and the impossibility of clear moral positioning under conditions of war.

By bringing women's narratives to the centre, this article demonstrates how gendered everyday experience contributes to the understanding of contested nationhood in Donbas. The accounts illuminate how individuals interpret the pressures of war, navigate competing political narratives, and reconstruct identities across multiple ruptures. They also underscore that the future of Donbas, whether within Ukraine or under a different political configuration, depends not only on state agendas but on the slow, often painful work through which individuals and communities reassess who they are and where they belong. These voices, rarely heard in political debates, are indispensable for imagining a future that acknowledges both the complex realities of the region's past and the lived consequences of its present.

Conclusion: Reconciliation as a personal struggle

The narratives examined in this article suggest that reconciliation in Donbas cannot be understood solely as a political or territorial question. For the women interviewed, it emerges primarily as a personal and moral process shaped by how identity has been lived, negotiated, and re-evaluated throughout years of war. The possibility of a shared future depends not only on formal settlements but also on whether individuals can live with their past choices and with the uncertainty surrounding how those choices may be judged by others and by themselves. In this sense, reconciliation appears less as a discrete future event than as an ongoing struggle to reconcile personal memories, losses, and moral evaluations.

The analysis also demonstrates that identities in Donbas have evolved unevenly across the ruptures of 2014 and 2022. Some respondents describe a clear alignment with Ukraine and express optimism about eventual reintegration, believing that support for occupation authorities remains limited. Others view the future with greater anxiety, particularly regarding how their everyday survival under occupation may be interpreted after the war. As Nelli reflects:

> **If Ukraine returns and I stay, I am afraid that they will punish me because I have been living in Donbas all this time.**

In such narratives, the simple fact of remaining becomes morally charged and open to retrospective reinterpretation.

Long-standing stereotypes and experiences of misrecognition further shape these concerns. Respondents described how encounters with institutions and public discourse sometimes reinforced perceptions that residents of Donbas were viewed with suspicion or distrust. Such experiences demonstrate that

belonging is shaped not only through political alignment but also through everyday encounters that signal recognition, dignity, or exclusion. Decisions to stay, leave, comply, or withdraw are therefore often driven less by ideological commitment than by immediate practical and emotional considerations.

TAKEN TOGETHER, the findings demonstrate that national belonging in wartime Donbas emerges as a fluid and negotiated process rather than a simple binary between Ukrainian and Russian identities. War did not simply create new identities but forced individuals to reinterpret earlier routines, relationships, and assumptions about the state.

From this perspective, the aftermath of war is unlikely to represent a clear moment of resolution. Rather, it will involve a prolonged process in which individuals renegotiate their relationships to the state, to their communities, and to their own past decisions. Reconciliation, therefore, extends beyond political agreements or territorial arrangements. It unfolds through the quieter and often invisible work of rebuilding trust, managing memories of loss, and learning to inhabit identities reshaped by years of conflict. Women's narratives indicate that the legacies of war will remain deeply personal and long-lasting, shaping how belonging, trust, and coexistence are imagined in Donbas for years to come.

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