The War in the Donbass: Impacting Pro-Russian Sentiment

Background
Since leaving the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the early 1990s, Ukraine has been torn between two paths: welcoming closer relations with Russia and welcoming closer relations with the West. Generally speaking, those who prefer closer relations with Russia reside in the eastern parts of Ukraine – mainly Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv, which all have a higher percentage of ethnic Russians. In 2014, there were massive protests in Kiev over the cancellation of a trade agreement with the European Union that would hurt Ukraine’s relationship with Russia if pursued and President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych. The protests culminated in a revolution and Yanukovych was overthrown. Pro-Western Petro Poroshenko was elected as president later in 2014. Shortly after the revolution, Russia annexed Crimea, an administrative region in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol. In the same month, Russian-backed separatist protests began in Donetsk and Luhansk (collectively called the Donbass). An armed conflict broke out between the protesters and the Ukrainian government, and Russia sent military forces to aid the protesters. It has been referred to as the “War in the Donbass.” It is ongoing, and Russia and Ukraine both refuse to give up their claim to Crimea. The aim of this project is to assess where and how Ukrainians’ attitudes towards Russia have changed over the last 21 years. Specifically, it will look at the correlation between the areas close to the conflict region and their attitudes towards Russia before, during, and after 2014.

Methodology
To assess the views of Ukrainians towards Russia, I used election data by administrative region (oblast) from the Ukrainian Central Election Commission. The basis for deciding the favorability towards Russia was the declared political parties and of the presidential candidates’ political parties. If the candidate was running as a representative of their own new political party, their opinions towards Ukraine joining the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as well as towards the Euromaidan revolution, were used to assess their views. After gathering and cleaning Ukrainian election data from 1998 to 2019, the election data by oblast was joined with a shapefile of Ukraine for each year of elections. The conflict point data was downloaded and then x, y coordinates were geocoded to accurately represent the points on the map. Then, spatial join was used to join the number of conflict events in an oblast to the shapefile. The percent change in support for pro-Russian parties was tracked from 1998 to 2010, the earliest data I have to the peak of support; 2010 to 2014, using to join the number of conflict events in an oblast to the shapefile. The percent change in support for pro-Russian votes from 1998 to 2010, the earliest data I have to the peak of support; 2010 to 2014, from the war with the highest overall support for pro-Russian candidates to the year Russia annexed Crimea and Sevastopol and the war in the Donbass began; and 2014 to 2019, 2014 to the most recent election.

Discussion
One of the limitations of this project was that the only reliable data I could access was election data. The election data may not be a perfectly accurate representation of pro-Russia views in Ukraine, since votes may have been influenced by other issues. However, public opinion polls were not representative of each oblast, only the entirety of the country, and did not have data on Donetek and Luhansk. This project shows how the war in the Donbass as well as the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol devastated pro-Russian views in Ukraine in 2014. However, the results also demonstrate how despite all currently being involved in a war in the Donbass and Russia annexing two regions of Ukraine, pro-Russian views among Ukrainians have increased in every oblast except for Dnipropetrovsk in the past five years, including areas that are not under Russian occupation. One reason for this may be the humanitarian aid that Russia has provided to Ukraine. The relevance of this can be applied more generally as a study into humanitarian aid as a method of increasing sentiments towards a particular entity. Further research into this topic could explore the relationship between the provision of humanitarian aid in conflict and border regions and its impact on pro-Russian and pro-Western sentiments in the impacted regions.

Results
Before 2014, the eastern oblasts of Ukraine had favorable views towards Russia and supported closer ties to Russia, specifically Donetsk and Luhansk. In the peak of support for pro-Russian political parties and candidates in Ukraine, the pro-Russian candidates won over 50% of the votes in 11 out of 27 oblasts, indicating strong pull from just under half of the country to form a stronger relationship with Russia than the West. During the 2014 election, 9 of these 11 oblasts lost over 40% support for pro-Russian candidates (the other two oblasts were Crimea and Sevastopol, which were both annexed by Russia and therefore were not able to participate in the Ukrainian elections). The Odessa oblast, which suffered an attack as a part of the conflict, dropped support for pro-Russian candidates by 59% from 2010 to 2014. Interestingly, support in Kiev City dropped the least out of all of the oblasts with conflict events. Only 36% of pro-Russian candidates in Kiev City were lost to pro-Western candidates and parties, despite having six conflict events, which is five more than the Odessa oblast. There were two other oblasts whose support for pro-Russian candidates fell by over 40%, Transcarpathia and Zhytomyr, but these oblasts are in the western regions of Ukraine, far from the conflict.

The two oblasts where the majority of the conflict is taking place, Donetsk and Luhansk, both had a -49% change in their pro-Russian votes in 2014, but both have seen an increase in pro-Russian votes in 2018. Donetsk has had an increase of 15% in votes for pro-Russian candidates since 2019 and Luhansk has had an increase of 18%. Overall, there was a significant decrease in pro-Russian votes in the 2014 election compared to the 2010 election. However, while the percentage of pro-Russian sentiments has not yet reached its peak again, it is increasing.

References:
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