



Analytical Update: Ukrainian Sentiment

By Laurie Ann Mylroie, Ph.D.
RIWI Editorial Fellow
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In the two weeks since The RIWI Corporation (RIWI) published its [September 10 Ukraine study](#), Russia has continued its slow-paced assault on Ukraine. Its actions and rhetoric never quite rise (at least in the mainstream media) to the level of mobilizing collective Western outrage, but, nonetheless, constitute a steady aggression—ongoing for seven months, since Special Operations Forces seized Crimea in March. RIWI's September Ukrainian sentiment data suggests that the country as a whole opposes the Russian aggression, while sentiment in the East is fluid, with a significant percentage of the population undecided about the best course for the future.

RIWI's Ukraine data capture (September 4-10) followed a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive against rebels in the east, which was reversed in mid-August, when Russian forces entered the fray. Within two weeks, rebels stood on the outskirts of the port city of Mariupol, raising fears that they intended not only to capture the city, but even to establish a land bridge to Crimea. German Chancellor Angela Merkel asserted that the fighting was not an internal Ukrainian affair but a "[conflict between Ukraine and Russia](#)." However, Western reaction was limited. Western powers affirmed their intent to stop Russian aggression beyond Ukraine at a NATO summit (September 4-5), but showed themselves prepared to do little for Ukraine itself, beyond imposing new sanctions on Russia.

The options of Ukraine's government were, thus, limited when it met in Belarus with the rebels and Russia under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). On September 5th, Kiev signed an agreement with them, calling for an immediate cease-fire; prisoner exchange; amnesty for the rebels; a "special law" for the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts; and humanitarian relief in the conflict zone. Yet from the start, the cease-fire was shaky and intermittent. Moreover, [some 1,000 Russian troops remained in Ukraine](#), with 20,000 more on the border, are able to cross into Ukraine at will.



In this climate, RIWI's data generally revealed stronger support for Kiev than Moscow throughout the country. In response to the question, "Do you think Russian President Putin is ever honest when he asks for a ceasefire?" 65.0% of all respondents said 'no', while 17.2% said 'yes', with the remainder undecided. In the non-Eastern regions of Ukraine, a majority of 67.3% said that Putin is never honest when asking for a cease-fire; 15.6% said he was; and 17.1% were undecided. In the East, a plurality of 45.7% said 'no'; 31.2% said 'yes'; and 23.1% were undecided.

The relatively large percentage of undecided in the East was a repeated feature of these data, and, in combination with the higher percentage of pro-rebel/Russian sentiment, suggested a different picture in the East than in the rest of Ukraine. In the East a majority—54.3%—thought that Putin was honest in asking for a cease-fire or were undecided. Thus, in their majority, Eastern residents were not hostile to Russia's position.

Similarly, in response to the question, "Should Ukraine be part of Russia?" 62.9% of those in non-Eastern regions said 'no'. In the East, 40.0% said 'no', and only 26.4% said 'yes', but 33.6% were undecided. In other words, the East was, on close examination of the RIWI data, open to becoming part of Russia. The same pattern was repeated with the questions: "Should ownership of the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk be negotiated with Russia?" and "Should a separate new Eastern state be created in Ukraine?"

This pattern of Eastern Ukraine dissimilarity in its opinion, and its repetition, corroborates the validity of RIWI's data. RIWI data reveal that the East is not just somewhat less supportive of Kiev than the rest of Ukraine, it is *significantly* different, as one might expect. While majority opinion in the East does not actively support the pro-rebel/Russian position, neither are Easterners opposed to the Russian position.

Borne out through the RIWI data, other questions revealed even clearer differences between the East and the rest of Ukraine. A majority in the non-Eastern regions—56.9%—said that the United States should provide arms and munitions to Ukraine. A plurality in the East—43.3%—said it should not. In response to the question, "Should Ukraine stop fighting on its own?" 59.3% in non-Eastern regions said 'no', while 45.4% in the East said 'yes'.

However, just as the large number of undecided in the East suggests an openness to the pro-rebel/Russian position, the same figures suggest an openness to the pro-Kiev position, even on sensitive issues implying continued conflict and hardship for civilians. In the East, 30.9% said 'no,' when asked, "Should Ukraine stop fighting on its own?;" 23.8% were undecided. Asked, "Should the U.S. provide arms and munitions to Ukraine?," 35.9% said 'yes', while 20.8% were undecided.



Since the RIWI data collection, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has visited Canada and the United States. The U.S. has provided non-lethal support to Ukraine's military, but Mr. Poroshenko made an impassioned appeal before the U.S. Congress for lethal aid: "One cannot win the war with blankets. Even more, [we cannot keep the peace with a blanket.](#)" However, U.S. President Barack Obama declined his request.

Does President Obama believe that the Western powers can manipulate economic sticks and carrots to dissuade Putin from further aggression and induce him to abide by the cease-fire agreement? This position is at odds with what 56.9% of non-Eastern Ukrainians say they want – US arms and munitions – from President Obama. As President Obama told the United Nations,

["We will impose a cost on Russia for aggression..."](#)[W]hile small gains can be won at the barrel of a gun...a different path is available—the path of diplomacy and peace... The recent cease-fire agreement in Ukraine offers an opening to achieve that objective. If Russia takes that path—a path that for stretches of the post-Cold War period resulted in prosperity for the Russian people—then we will lift our sanctions and welcome Russia's role in addressing common challenges."

The fighting [in Eastern Ukraine has diminished](#), but it can resume at any time. History shows that leaders like Putin are not accountants, doing cost-benefit analyses of their policies. For the past seven months, ever-increasing sanctions have not dissuaded Putin. Winter is coming, handing Russia a powerful new weapon—the prospect of manipulating natural gas supplies. The Western powers may well find that their relatively conciliatory posture toward Russia has produced no solution, but merely compounded the problem. What's more, this conciliatory posture stands at odds with what the RIWI data say the people of Ukraine want and need.



Laurie Mylroie is RIWI's Editorial Fellow. Her analyses of RIWI are independently conducted.

Laurie is an experienced analyst with a focus on the Middle East and broader Islamic world. She taught at Harvard University as an Assistant Professor of Government and as an Associate Professor at the U.S. Naval War College in its Strategy and Policy Department. She later did policy analysis at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and other institutions. Most recently, Laurie served in Iraq and Afghanistan, where she provided population sentiment analysis for the ISAF command.

Laurie's books include *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (with Judith Miller). The book was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and translated into 13 languages. *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War Against America* was a *Washington Post* Book World, "Expert's Pick." Former CIA Director, James Woolsey, hailed *Study of Revenge* as "brilliant and brave," and Vincent Cannistraro, former Chief of Counterterrorism Operations, CIA, described it as "one of the most brilliant pieces of research and scholarship in this area that I have ever read." Her articles have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Boston Globe*, *The National Interest*, *Newsweek*, *The New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*.

Laurie received her BA from Cornell and her PhD from Harvard University.

For further information, contact:

Sarah Lieberman, Director of Communications

sarah@riwi.com

+ 1 416 205 9984