Political Dynamics in Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Perspectives

May 2025

PONARS EURASIA
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

eBook Coordination: Mikhail Alexseev

Editor: Keary Iarussi and Mikhail Alexseev

PONARS Eurasia
Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES)
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E Street NW, Suite 412
Washington, DC 20052
Tel: (202) 994-6340
www.ponarseurasia.org

Table of Contents

Part IV. Military Power and Geopolitics

Conclusion

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Introduction

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 938
August 2025

Mikhail Alexseev[1]
San Diego State University

This book is about Ukraine. It is based on decades of expert analysis. Yet with the ascendance of "America First" leadership in Washington in 2025, the first question to ask of any research on global affairs is: Why should Americans care?

Consider this: What will happen to the United States if Vladimir Putin wins in Ukraine? The answers, I am afraid, are not only disconcerting but border on disturbing, although not necessarily in commonly discussed ways. To begin with, by subjugating Ukraine in any form, Putin would show that the U.S. is no longer the world's top power, that it is a paper hegemon, as he has claimed all along, that it is incapable of protecting allies or brokering fair and just deals, and that it can be challenged, pushed around, and beaten. Deny it as one may, the message will be unmistakable for all state leaders, multinational corporations, terrorist groups, and transnational crime networks: The U.S. has failed the test of will for global leadership. Weakening the U.S. is one of Putin's dearest, long-held ambitions and will resonate with his quarter-century-long anti-American indoctrination of Russian society.

Second, with only a few years since the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, yet another demonstration of U.S. impotence would come at a time of deconcentration of military power at the global level—a well-documented circumstance that enabled and emboldened challengers such as Napoleon and Hitler to launch global wars over the last five centuries. We ought to keep in mind that Putin's invasion of Ukraine followed a sustained military buildup by Moscow that lasted for more than two decades, which was far in excess of what was needed to invade a smaller, weaker neighboring state and which was focused particularly on missile and naval capabilities with global reach. The Ukraine war also followed significant military buildups in China and elsewhere. The upshot: The U.S. share of the world's key global capabilities has dropped from around 60–70 percent during the Cold War (according to George Modelski in "The Study of the Long

[1] Mikhail Alexseev is a professor of political science at San Diego State University and has been conducting survey research in Ukraine in collaboration with the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology since 2015.

Cycles") to around 40–50 percent by 2022 (according to *The Military Balance 2021* by the International Institute for Strategic Studies), counting strategic naval, air, and missile forces. This takes us precariously closer to the 30-percent concentration level, a tipping point for global wars of the past half millennium. It means we are in a more dangerous period now than during the Cold War. For that reason, Putin poses a greater threat to U.S. global interests than Stalin or any Soviet leader did.

Third, a Russian victory in Ukraine would make nonsense of cornerstone international norms like sovereignty and territorial integrity, essentially showing that we are now in a world where might is right, where the rules of the game do not matter. Putin winning would demonstrate that nuclear deterrence can be turned on its head, used in the service of aggression instead of defense. It makes thinkable a hitherto implausible scenario where, as U.S. relative power declines further, Russia seizes U.S. companies' oil assets anywhere (as the Wagner group attempted to do in Syria) or takes islands off the coast of Alaska, with the Kremlin then waving the nuclear cudgel to deter our attempts to retake them. Do we wish to contemplate living in a world where we might face such a challenge?

Fourth, Putin's subjugation of Ukraine would be a victory of tyranny over freedom, a defeat of American values. Putin would draw attention to the fact that Ukrainians' willingness to embrace and defend the values that Americans hold dear did them no good, that adherence to First Amendment freedoms does not make a nation strong, and that it pays to suppress both political and religious freedom, as Moscow has done, to put religion under state control as it was under communist rule, to suppress private and public evangelism, and to strip Protestant churches of their property. To put it bluntly, by winning in Ukraine, Putin would make a mockery of our Constitution (not to mention the big party he will throw to celebrate it).

Finally, we should care about Ukraine's politics and society if we want our own government to make better foreign policy and learn from past failures. Wrong assessments on Ukrainian society's capacity to mobilize in the face of a brutal, all-out invasion goes a long way to explaining the West's failure to act fast and decisively to stop Putin. Indeed, it goes a long way to explaining Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in the first place. Russia's military command supplied the invading troops with parade uniforms and sent tanks in massive columns as if preparing for a victory lap through Kyiv, not for a grueling war of attrition. The Kremlin propaganda broadcast into Ukraine brimmed with confidence that the Ukrainian military would surrender wholesale and that Ukrainian society would accept new, Moscow-installed leaders. Meanwhile, the Biden administration offered to help Volodymyr Zelensky to flee the country and, in the runup to the war and in its early phases, discounted the utility of military assistance, except support for a putative insurgency, as if Russia's takeover of Ukraine was a

foregone conclusion. If the Kremlin had sensed that this is how Biden assessed the prospects of a Russian invasion, Putin would have been only further emboldened and had more reason to brush aside Washington's warnings of catastrophic sanctions. (At the time of this writing, Putin is dragging his feet on accepting Donald Trump's sensible proposal for a comprehensive 30-day ceasefire, which speaks to Putin's belief that Russian guns can overwhelm the Ukrainian people's will.)

We do not claim that this volume is a crystal ball onto Ukrainian politics and society, but the following chapters will certainly strengthen any analysis of the situation in the region, including possible outcomes of the Trump administration's vigorous efforts to bring the war to an end.

This book offers insights on the key question on which the success or failure of these efforts hinge, namely: If Russia does not cease hostilities until its demand of depriving Kyiv of de facto sovereignty is met, how capable is Ukraine of continuing its spirited resistance against Russia's invasion in the long term? After all, if the Russian forces overrun Ukrainian defenses and Kyiv falls, most of what is discussed below will become irrelevant. That, in itself, is something useful to think about, concentrating the mind on the gravity of the situation. The urgent task of carefully studying it and applying adequate solutions to sustain Ukraine's sovereignty thus becomes painfully, darkly obvious.

On the totality of evidence and arguments in this volume, Ukrainian society will most likely be the key factor in deciding this central question. Contextualizing his study of Ukrainians' willingness to endure hardship, Serhii Dembitskyi points out, "No country after World War II has had to engage in such an exhausting, protracted interstate war against an enemy that significantly surpasses its capabilities and resources and attempts to occupy it and take away its sovereignty." Indeed, Ukrainians' will to fight back against Russia has been their greatest trump card, offsetting Russia's size and resource advantages. Under relentless, mass Russian attacks, Ukraine has adroitly leveraged limited international military assistance, fluid battlefield tactics, technological innovation, and industrial developments. How strong will this card remain, and for how long? To know, what should we be watching?

Dembitskyi's analysis not only raises the possibility that 2024 could have been a turning point in Ukrainian society's willingness to endure the privations of war, but it also shows that explaining past trends and anticipating future ones will be contingent on four specific conditions at the international and, mostly, the domestic level in Ukraine (no spoiler alert—you will find these conditions explicitly discussed in the chapter). His analysis, based on survey data, compares

head-to-head psychological factors (nine dimensions of stress) versus social factors and explores how the factors may be mutually contingent.

His and several other chapters serve as a warning to interpret topline survey results from Ukraine with substantial caution. Drawing on a unique six-wave, three-panel series of surveys running from November 2021 to November 2024, Henry Hale and I flesh out various factors on which Ukrainians' views of the war's prospects and possible ways to settle it are most likely to be contingent. Although we find a softening of commitment to victory, we note that these and other surveys do not probe how Ukrainians see the likelihood of an end to Russia's attacks in the event of a ceasefire or even a peace deal. Our focus group evidence suggests that, based on how this question is answered, "We are more likely to see periodic resets of the will to fight, albeit with greater acknowledgements of costs and risks, in a more somber mood."

Volodymyr Kulyk, in his chapter, breaks down the perceptual and social underpinnings of Ukraine's national identity and, like the Alexseev and Hale study, raises the question of whether the crucial indicator of Ukraine's will to fight back against Russia is ultimately not views on hardship, victory, and territory, but expressed commitment to political freedom and identification with Ukrainian citizenship. Surveys and focus groups from these two chapters suggest the remarkable endurance of this commitment throughout the war, and Kulyk underscores another cogent marker—the predominant feeling among Ukrainians that "Ukraine above all" quintessentially means "freedom above all."

Another major factor to monitor in Ukraine is quality of governance. The book offers a profound, richly sourced exploration of the role of local communities, *hromadas,* in fostering what the authors of the relevant chapter, Oleksandra Keudel, Andrii Darkovich, and Valentyn Hatsko, define as "collective crisis governance." Readers can see for themselves how important this factor is in Ukrainian society's resilience. This study helps explain how the overwhelming, enduring commitment to democracy in Ukraine, as documented in other studies, can coexist with what those same studies say is declining public trust in Ukrainian government institutions since Russia's 2022 invasion. It also resonates with Dembitskyi's analysis of the importance of public perceptions of the quality of governance for sustaining people's willingness to endure hardship.

Oxana Shevel's chapter prompts us to extend this line of analysis and consider in what ways state-church relations in Ukraine might drive how Ukrainians view governance and affect the sustainability of the war effort. Hers is a multifaceted analysis offering granular yet perhaps critical details on how Kyiv has handled and may in the future navigate the unique challenge of balancing an "existential

war and a religious-political doctrine that denies the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state and nation."

Yuriy Matsiyevsky's chapter, on Ukraine's political economy, provides a fresh take on this routinely overlooked variable, arguing that "Zelensky's strategy selectively rewards or punishes oligarchs based on their stance on the war with Russia." Matsiyevsky concludes that this strategy significantly differs from Putin's modus operandi, which is based on the "systematic elimination of rivals for personal enrichment." This is important to consider when assessing the risks that economic relations with Moscow entail, particularly as key figures in the Trump administration tout the prospects of lucrative business opportunities with Russia.

As chilling reminders of the horrendous, systematic violence that has befallen Ukraine on Putin's orders, the contributions by Kristina Hook on Russian war crimes in Ukraine and Andrey Makarychev on Russian biopolitical propaganda in Russian-occupied territory are indispensable reads for any serious analysis of the central question of what may drive Ukrainian resilience and determination to keep fighting. Forgetting or neglecting Russia's atrocities is a sure way to be blindsided in assessing what Kyiv may accept in any potential settlement and whether any Ukrainian leaders who make major concessions to Russia would survive in power. The fact is that Ukrainians witness Russian atrocities and suffer from them all the time. The horrors they know of or have learned about firsthand, from the death and torture dungeons of Bucha to the bombed-out maternity hospital in Kyiv and the public burning of Ukrainian books in Kherson, send a clear message: It is better to fight on than to surrender to the Russians. The Hook and Makarychev chapters evoke a disturbing analogy, prompting readers to consider whether Ukrainians see their nation's plight as akin to that of a political prisoner—forced to choose between, on the one hand, torture and, on the other, betrayal of their principles and friends.

Add to this Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff's analysis of the material and symbolic value of Russian-occupied territory to Ukrainians, well-grounded in comparative studies of international relations and the realities on the ground in Ukraine, and one wonders whether any of the known international peace efforts—coming from Washington, Beijing, Istanbul, or Johannesburg—offer any real hope for achieving a lasting settlement.

Looking at the broader geopolitical and historical context, the two final contributions invite a reassessment of the often uncritically accepted argument that Russia's larger population, bigger economy, and greater military power essentially predestine a military defeat for Ukraine. In particular, Sergey Minasyan's systematic overview of the military and strategic dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war cites estimates that Ukraine may have the capacity to staff its

armed forces longer than is commonly assumed. He also draws attention to the outsized impact of rather basic weaponry in quantity, such as "dumb" 155-millimeter artillery shells, which calls for a more comprehensive evaluation of Ukraine's expanding domestic military production.

Meanwhile, Anar Valiyev and Nigar Gurbanli's examination of Russian peacekeepers' withdrawal in the face of a sweeping and eventually successful Azerbaijani military campaign to retake control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region cautions against dismissing Ukraine's intensifying efforts to put together a coalition of the willing to backstop a potential peace agreement. Valiyev and Gurbanli suggest that deeper cooperation with middle powers could be a viable path for Ukraine to defend itself and even to regain control of Russian-occupied territory. Other chapters indicate that such efforts, beyond having the direct, tangible effect of boosting Ukraine's capabilities, could buoy Ukrainian society's battered willingness to endure.

Examining different components of Russia's current war strategy, Minasyan highlights the urgency of weighing whether Washington's forceful emphasis on diplomacy and bargaining is creating a dangerous asymmetry with Russia's strategy, which, in his assessment, is "more military than political." His research ought to serve as a warning to policymakers in Washington that a Ukrainian loss would not only leave Russia with a significantly stronger military but also validate and embolden the Kremlin's fundamentally anti-American global strategy.

With that, I hope you read the contributions in this volume with an eye to how they inform debates of today's most pressing issues, not only around Ukraine's social and political dynamics, but also around broad U.S. interests and international security.

Part I.
National Identity and Civic Resilience

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

In the Face of the Russian Invasion, Ukrainians Increasingly Embrace Nationalism

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 939
August 2025

Volodymyr Kulyk,[1]
Kyiv School of Economics

One of the declared goals of Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was "denazification," a bizarre term revealing a strong desire to crush all manifestations of Ukrainian nationalism, which Russian propaganda equates to Nazism. In fact, the attitude toward nationalism in Ukraine was ambivalent prior to the invasion, as Ukrainians had not fully overcome the negative meaning of the term from Soviet times, even though they had gradually begun to associate "nationalism" with "national liberation." To be sure, the 2014 Russian intervention in Crimea and the Donbas led many in Ukraine to reconsider their perception of nationalism in general and Ukrainian nationalism in particular. At the same time, the attitude toward the best-known Ukrainian nationalist organizations of the past, the underground Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its guerrilla arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), was mixed, although it was gradually growing more positive. Despite the fact that these organizations fought the Polish, Nazi, and Soviet regimes from the 1930s to the early 1950s, many in post-Soviet Ukraine were still informed by the Soviet representation thereof as Nazi collaborators, all the more so because the authorities in some parts of the country had promoted it long after the breakup of the USSR.

Russia's aggression since 2022 has changed Ukrainians' attitudes toward the Ukrainian nation and nationalism, as well as the Russian state and Russians. Contrary to Putin's expectations, most Ukrainians fully supported armed resistance to the invaders, associating it with supposedly similar instances of resistance in the past, which, accordingly, have come to be viewed in a more positive light. Our study shows that Ukrainian citizens have indeed become less negative toward nationalism. This has narrowed the perceptual difference

[1] Volodymyr Kulyk is a professor at Kyiv School of Economics. The first version of this memo was written within the framework of the author's research project on national identity and anti-Russian sentiment in wartime Ukraine, which was supported by a nonresident fellowship from Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg (Delmenhorst, Germany).

between good patriotism and bad nationalism and driven a new civic meaning of being Ukrainian.

Context and Method

A survey in September 2022 by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) demonstrated a rather positive attitude toward the OUN/UPA, with 43 percent of respondents viewing their "activities during World War II" positively and only 8 percent negatively (the rest were ambiguous or undecided), a drastic change from a 2013 KIIS survey where negative views overwhelmingly prevailed, 42 percent versus 22 percent.

Moreover, in an August 2022 survey by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, fully 67 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "We need a healthy nationalism" (although this figure is not representative of the entire Ukrainian population, because the survey did not include occupied or combat-affected parts of the country). A positive view of past and present Ukrainian nationalism was prevalent even in eastern and southern regions (excluding the Donbas and Crimea, where the survey could not be conducted), which had traditionally been the friendliest to Russia and the weariest of Ukrainian nationalism.

To add nuance—thanks to funding from PONARS Eurasia—I commissioned six focus group discussions, to be conducted by KIIS in various parts of Ukraine. Two focus groups comprised residents of Kyiv, one with those who stayed in the city through the first months of the full-blown invasion (K1) and the other with those who left in late February or early March 2022 but returned after Russian troops were pushed back in early April 2022 (K2). Two other groups consisted of people from Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, which was still under heavy bombardment by Russian forces at the time of the discussions, meaning it was unrealistic for refugees to return to the city. One of the Kharkiv groups was made up of those who remained in the city (Kh1), while the other was those who had fled to other parts of Ukraine or abroad (Kh2). Two final groups consisted of residents of the western city of Chernivtsi (Ch1) and Ukrainians from more threatened regions of the country who had taken refuge in the city (Ch2). With a few exceptions, all participants were between 25 and 40 years of age, with a roughly even gender distribution. All six groups met on August 11–13, 2022.

High Salience of Ukrainian Identity

The first result worth noting is the high salience of Ukrainian identity. Most respondents either explicitly stated that, in their eyes, "Ukrainian" is synonymous with "citizen of Ukraine" or implied that they meant primarily civic attachment rather than ethnicity. Moreover, when asked specifically which identity is more

important to them, being Ukrainian or being a citizen of Ukraine, most people indicated the former, arguing that while citizenship denotes a legal status and a corresponding set of obligations, national identity involves a psychological attachment that would stay with them if they moved to live in another country permanently (some referred to their present experience abroad).

It was only among the Kharkivites who stayed in the city that several people indicated a lower salience of Ukrainian identity versus their local identity, and one participant manifested her preference for East Slavic identity, arguing that the division of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peoples with "common roots" was "artificial" (Kh1, female, 40 years, in Russian). Even in that group, this seems to be an exceptional position; indeed, several other participants stated that Russia's full-blown invasion had shattered their earlier perception of Russians as a brotherly people.

Equally revealing are the answers to the question of what it means to be Ukrainian. Along with the ethnocultural meaning of Ukrainian identity as knowledge of history, respect for traditions, and the use of the national language, many focus group participants referred to elements of civic attachment and engagement, including work for the good of Ukraine, dutiful payment of taxes, donations to the army, and, above all, love of country. Several mentioned love of freedom or, indeed, freeness; in the words of one Kharkivite, "To me, being Ukrainian is first and foremost being free, freedom" (Kh1, female, 48 years, in Russian). It is the love of freedom and readiness to unite in the fight for it that was most often mentioned in response to a question about whether Ukrainians can serve as an example to other nations. As one participant in the Chernivtsi internally displaced person group put it:

> Freedom: the Revolution of Dignity, for example. Freedom: the defense of one's fatherland when the mightier enemy attacks us. And it was like nobody believed in us or gave us any chance [to withstand the invasion]. And reason tells one to surrender, to submit, but no. Freedom above all (Ch2, male, 50 years, in Ukrainian).

Indeed, the successful resistance to the mighty aggressor led many Ukrainians who had traditionally been rather critical of their country to perceive it as successful in many other respects as well, as demonstrated by several participants' references to the abundance of talented individuals and the effectiveness of certain sectors such as agriculture and health care. However, most participants were not ready to call Ukraine a successful country in view of its obvious problems, hence they either referred to external obstacles that prevent Ukrainians from realizing their potential or contrasted competent citizens with subpar government authorities.

Patriotism and Nationalism as Largely Synonymous

The focus groups also demonstrated that, while participants in all groups were much more willing to call themselves patriots than nationalists, many perceived the two terms as largely synonymous—their meaning being similar to the civic understanding of Ukrainianness. The most widespread interpretation of patriotism emphasized attachment to one's country and dedicated work for its good during wartime, understood primarily as fighting on the front line or helping those doing that. While some residents of Chernivtsi and Kyiv justified their self-identification as patriots by arguing that they had not left the country in its time of danger or had returned as soon as their city had become reasonably safe, others, notably among the Kharkivites who remained in the city, rejected this characterization, arguing their behavior was guided by concern for their family rather than for their country.

Few people raised their hand when asked whether they could call themselves nationalists; in some groups, none at all. Explaining why not, Ukrainians from different parts of the country revealed the still-widespread belief that "A nationalist is someone who recognizes only one's own nation and hates others" (Kh1, male, 40 years, in Russian). Some even argued that nationalism is particularly unsuitable for a country such as Ukraine: "I rather cannot call myself a nationalist, because we have a multinational country [and nationalism posits that] nobody has the right to live in Ukraine but Ukrainians" (Ch1, male, 35 years, in Ukrainian).

However, in almost every group, such statements were rebutted by arguments that the equation of nationalism and Nazism is a product of Soviet and Russian propaganda. As one Kyiv resident put it:

> It is just that a lot of propaganda went through us, through the minds of all of us, hence we have an impression that nationalism is something bad, plain awful. And *natsyky* (a popular term for radical Ukrainian nationalists based on the word "Nazi") is the worst that the country has experienced. But in my mind, they are just ardent patriots. To me… Russian propaganda made the words Nazism and nationalism into one, into *natsyky*. Therefore, everybody thinks that Nazism and nationalism are the same (K2, male, 25 years, in Ukrainian).

Another Kyivite argued:

> Nationalism is what makes a group into a people (*narod*), in my view. It is just that [the term] is used by politicians somewhat distortedly. Plus, [there are] the Soviet stereotypes that if it is a Ukrainian nationalist, then it is very bad. If a Jew is a nationalist in Israel, it is good. If it is in America, it is

> normal. In Russia, normal. But Ukrainians are some very scary people. And therefore, we retain this on a genetic level (K1, male, 38 years, in Ukrainian).

Some participants spoke at length about why nationalism is something Ukraine needs and how nationalists do a lot of good for the country. In the words of a Chernivtsi resident:

> Not everyone in Ukraine can be nationalists, but you need to promote the idea of Ukraine, and it is this small percentage of nationalists that will present the idea. That is, for them, it is more important than for an ordinary person; hence they will, so to speak, be on the front line in the fight for Ukraine, for the notion of Ukraine. And if there are no such trailblazing nationalists, then, in principle, the nation is likely to lose its identification little by little, little by little (Ch1, male, 40 years, in Russian).

His words resonate with those of a Kyivite, who emphasized that nationalists have already accomplished a lot in this fight, both by fighting the present enemy and keeping alive the memory of past fighters:

> These people, even taking the example of 2014, these were the first people who began to defend Ukraine [in the Donbas]. And then, when the [large-scale] war started, they were the first people on the front line. Yes, they have a kind of fanatical attitude toward Ukraine, its history, and its language. But these people, they… well, these are the people who are ready to give their lives for Ukraine. There are politicians who exploit the term [nationalism], and there are people who are [nationalists] in their hearts. And this is very well. Because this is not only history, which they cherish and pass on. We have learned a lot from them after 2014 about the OUN, the UPA, and some Ukrainian figures who earlier… were presented in a distorted way (K2, male, 35 years, in Ukrainian).

The attitude toward nationalism was more critical among Kharkivites, probably because of the "anti-nationalist" discourse of the political parties that had dominated local politics in the post-Soviet decades. At the same time, some participants in both Kharkiv groups managed to reflect on the influence of the Soviet past and think beyond it:

> Western Ukraine was brought up in the spirit of nationalism for a very long time. But the opposite [was true] for the Soviet territory. The Soviet person [was taught] that people are brothers, stuff like that. Therefore, for me, nationalism is something alien. But people who adhere to it and do so reasonably, I don't see anything bad in this (Kh1, male, 40 years, in Russian).

One Kharkiv man went as far as to equate the three terms proposed for discussion explicitly and thus to present nationalism in a positive light: "You ask [what is] nationalism, patriotism, Ukrainian. This is all the same. That is, I do not even distinguish these notions… Well, this is simply our love of our nation. You feel this identity with being Ukrainian" (Kh2, male, 43 years, in Russian).

Several other participants voiced their positive view of Ukrainian nationalists of the World War II period, even though they understood that their activities targeted, among other foreign elements, the Soviet regime in Ukraine. When asked by the moderator with whom "the Banderites" fought, an internally displaced person from Kharkiv clearly stated that "They fought for their Ukraine, for their land… In part with the fascists, and in part with the Soviet regime" (Kh2, male, 39 years, in Russian). "Banderites" is a term that was widely used in Soviet and post-Soviet times in reference to members of the OUN/UPA, associating them with the figure of OUN leader Stepan Bandera. Another participant in the same group, in response to a question on how he understood the term "Banderites," ridiculed the Russian propaganda applying it to all Ukrainian nationalists and even all Ukrainians: "These are the Muscovites' cockroaches (*tarhany*). These small [things] crawling in their brain." He thus not only rejected the Russian claims to protect Ukraine's Russian speakers from "Banderites" but also delegitimized the negative attitude toward Ukrainian nationalism, past and present.

Afterward

As the war has dragged on and fatigue and frustration have set in, Ukrainians have lost some of the pride in their country and become less inclined to glorify its achievements, including its struggle against Russian aggressors in the past. This setback is vividly illustrated by a two-wave panel study conducted within the framework of the research project Identity and Borders in Flux: The Case of Ukraine (funded by the British Academy; participants include Olga Onuch, Henry Hale, Gwendolyn Sasse, and myself). The first wave went into the field in July 2023, on the eve of the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive, while the second survey was conducted in November–December 2024, amid anxiety over Ukrainian troops' slow retreat and the incoming US administration's plans to impose a peace deal that many Ukrainians believed would favor Russia. The results demonstrated, in particular, a significant weakening of national pride (the share of those who reported being extremely proud of their Ukrainian citizenship dropped from 74 percent to 62 percent between the two surveys) and a somewhat decreased salience of Ukrainian national identity vis-à-vis other territorial identifications (the share of those who prioritized national identity dropped from 74 percent to 68 percent). In line with this, the percentage of respondents expressing a positive or rather positive attitude toward the "armed struggle of the UPA" decreased from 74 percent to 69 percent. Nonetheless, these figures indicate that a large majority

of Ukrainians still manifest a strong national identity and a generally positive attitude toward Ukrainian nationalism and its struggle against Russian aggression. Despite this mild setback caused by the prolonged and exhausting war, Ukrainians continue to think and behave very differently than what Russia hoped for when it launched the war. They are still united and determined to defend their country and, therefore, opposed to any peace deal that would leave Ukraine truncated, unaligned, and powerless to protect itself from future Russian aggression.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Ukrainians' Will to Endure the War: Psychological vs Societal Factors

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 940
August 2025

Serhii Dembitskyi[1]
Ukraine National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology

The uniqueness of Ukraine's present situation lies in the fact that no country after World War II has had to engage in such an exhausting, protracted interstate war against an enemy that significantly surpasses its capabilities and resources and attempts to occupy it and take away its sovereignty.[2] In this context, the civilian population's will to resist the full-scale invasion is crucial.

Prior research on the willingness to defend one's country against aggressive neighbors, both in a hypothetical military scenario (Rutkauskas, 2018) and during a military confrontation (Reznik, 2023), highlights the significance of civic sentiments, trust in state institutions, and economic factors. In a broader theoretical context, there are two hypotheses that describe the willingness to defend one's country (Andžāns, 2021): (1) More life opportunities and a higher standard of living make one less willing to risk one's life, and consequently, to face the challenges of wartime; (2) the level of national pride and trust in the national armed forces is key to explaining the willingness to defend one's country. These hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

On popular resolve to resist the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Bukkvol points to: 1) the growth of Ukrainian civic nationalism; 2) increased trust in Ukrainian

[1] Serhii Dembitskyi is Deputy Director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and Corresponding Member of that Academy. His research focuses on individual well-being and political culture in Ukrainian society, as well as development of measurement scales for sociological surveys. He has presented his research findings to the Ukrainian government and the Resilience NGO project that works to uphold democratic nation-building in Ukraine and is an investigator with the War and Democracy Longitudinal Study that was made possible, in part, by the National Science Foundation (grant SES 2309901).

[2] Other major interstate wars since 1945 lack at least one of these features. They include: the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts, Six-Day War, Sino-Soviet border conflict, Football War (El Salvador and Honduras), Yom Kippur War, Iran-Iraq War, Falklands War, Soviet-Afghan War, Nagorno-Karabakh wars, Ethiopian-Somali border wars, and others.

political institutions, particularly the Ukrainian armed forces; and 3) the perception that Ukraine is not alone in its struggle (Bukkvoll & Steder, 2023). A RAND Corporation study of the first months of the Russia-Ukraine war (Kepe & Demus, 2023) highlights the importance of actors' social heterogeneity, the spontaneity and informality of resistance networks, and the coordination between civic activists, officials, and professionals. Civic resistance is also viewed as a safeguard for the international security order (Kurnyshova, 2023).

While these studies provide important insights, systematic empirical analysis of the impact of psychological factors is still lacking. At the same time, many studies have already been published that focus on the psychological *consequences* of the prolonged war in Ukraine (Palace et al., 2023; Pisaruk et al., 2022; Kurapov et al., 2023; Dlugosz, 2023; Karatzias et al., 2023; Dembitskyi et al., 2024).

To address this knowledge gap, I test both for the discrete and combined effects of social versus psychological factors on Ukrainians' will to resist Russia's invasion.

Design

I use pooled data from two nationally representative opinion surveys conducted by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine Institute of Sociology (UNASIS) as part of a project on the impact of war stress in territories under Ukrainian government control, as well as pooled data from two other, annual UNASIS surveys in 2021 and 2024.

№	Data collection method, coverage, period	N	Women	Men	Average age
Research project (Stress States of Ukraine's Population in the Context of War: Prevalence, Risk Groups and Ways of Compensation)					
1	CATI/CAWI*, representative survey of Ukraine's adult population (18–69), October 2023	2,767	54.0%	46.0%	42.8
2	CATI/CAWI*, representative survey of Ukraine's adult population (18+), November 2024	413	51.3%	48.7%	49.0
Annual survey (Ukrainian Society)					
3	Self-completion, representative survey of Ukraine's adult population (18+), November 2021	1,800	54.8%	45.2%	47.8
4	CATI/CAWI*, representative survey of Ukraine's adult population (18+), June 2024	4,101	59.2%	40.8%	45.6

Table 1. Summary of Ukraine survey data in the analysis
* Computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) was used to recruit respondents, and computer assisted web interviewing (CAWI) was used to collect responses for the main section of the questionnaire, with the link sent to respondents' smartphones.

Instruments

Our measures are based on the following survey questions around a few themes:

1) *Will to resist*: "Are people you know willing to endure the war hardship as long as necessary, only for a limited time, or not willing to [at all]?"
2) *Psychological causes.* A battery of questions regarding the relevance of wartime stressors (listed below), negative life circumstances, and a so-called SCL-9-NR measurement across nine indicators of psychological distress.[3]
3) *Societal causes*. A question about national-territorial identities and a so-called CI-WPA-5 measurement on attitudes toward the country's position in the war, consisting of five indicators: perceived outcomes of the military confrontation, near-term war scenarios, the capacity of the state and society, the global political landscape, and the anticipated winner of the war.

Results

Ukrainians' will to endure the war changed little from June through November 2024. In both polls, about 40% of respondents said people they knew were willing to endure the war as long as necessary, about 30% only for a limited time, and about 14% not willing to at the current time, with about 14% of respondents unable to answer.

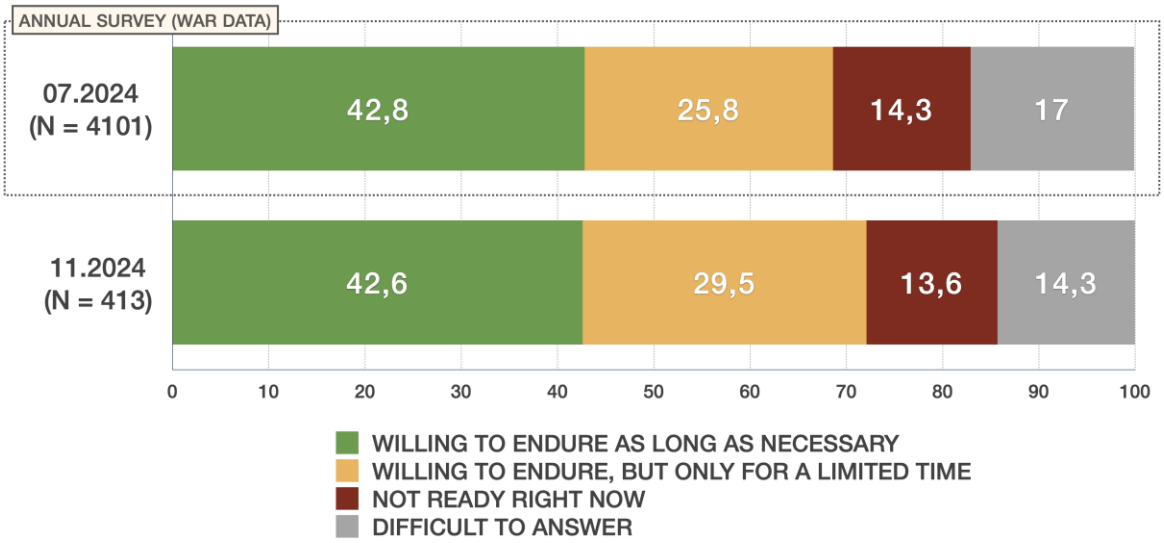


Figure 1. Willingness to endure war hardship remains stable during 2024

[3] The SCL-9-NR is a shortened version of the SCL-90-R test (Derogatis and Fitzpatrick 2004), adapted for conditions in Ukraine, using nine symptom dimensions: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism. Its validity and reliability have been proven with the direct formative model (Edwards and Bagozzi 2000) and with tests in 12 surveys (Dembitskyi, 2016; 2022).

But the salience of all wartime stressors in 2024 increased compared to 2023 (see Figure 2), with the exception of stress induced by media reports, which was noted by four fifths of respondents already in 2023. An increase in salience was statistically more likely than by chance when it came to:

- health problems of respondents' relatives;
- major financial or material losses;
- remembering past stressful experiences and corresponding negative feelings;
- performing one's duties in dangerous conditions;
- conflicts with friends or colleagues provoked by the war.

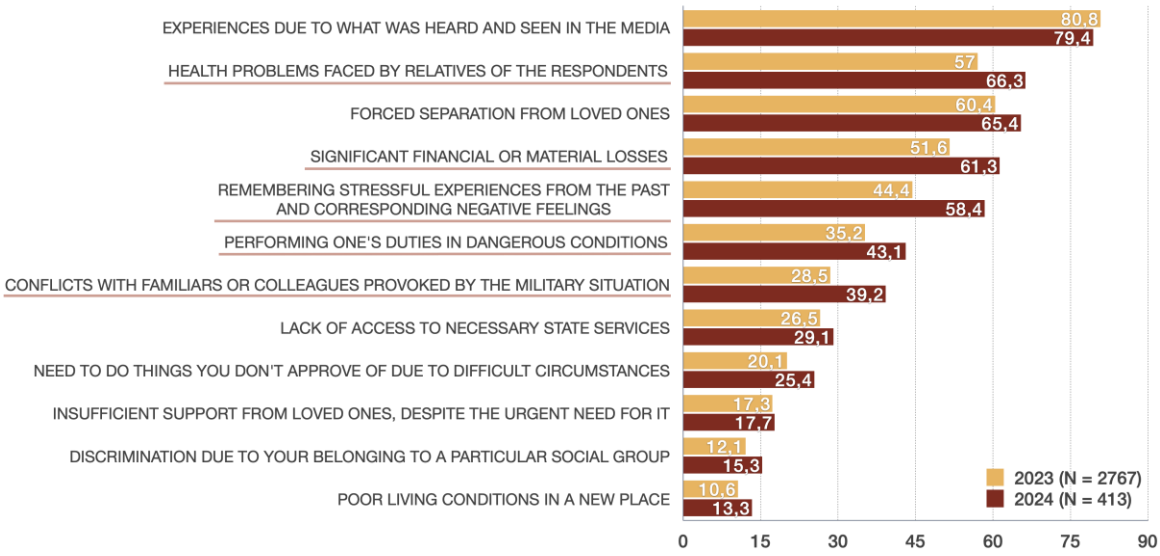


Figure 2. Sources of stress and trauma

Twenty twenty-four proved a turning point, with overall psychological stress levels among Ukrainians increasing significantly compared to the 2020–2023 pattern (see Figure 3).[4]

[4] Based on the SCL-9-NR median value for the general population sample for the "normal (stress) level"; the SCL-9-NR median for subsamples of respondents who experienced significant negative stressors (for example, poor health or a sudden deterioration in life circumstances) for the "increased level"; and the SCL-9-NR median for subsamples of respondents reporting mental disorders (for example, personality disorders, like affective instability or neuroticism) for the "high level" (Dembitskyi, 2022: 323-327).

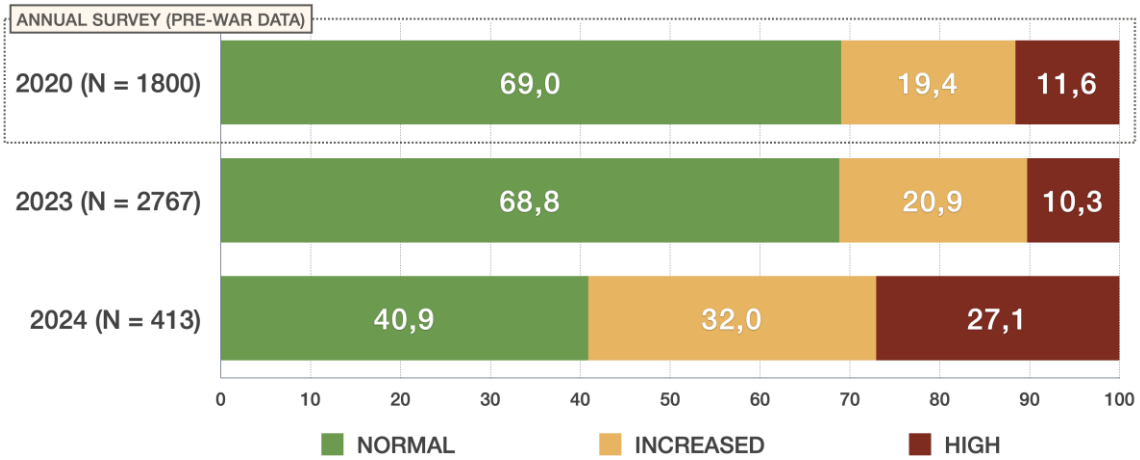


Figure 3. Stress levels among respondents, 2020–2024

Stress and Will to Resist

Stressors significantly related to the will to resist include discrimination due to belonging to a particular social group, significant financial or material losses, poor conditions in a new place of living, and remembering stressful experiences from the past and corresponding negative feelings. An additive index, comprising these four relevant stressors and divided into three intervals, helps us to assess the stressors' impact on the Ukrainians' will to resist.

As expected, we observed the strongest will to endure the war among respondents reporting only one or no stressors. Nearly half of the respondents from the corresponding group exhibit the highest will to resist. Among respondents who indicated two stressors, the deterioration occurs primarily due to an increase in the proportion of those willing to endure difficulties only for a limited time. Among respondents reporting three or four stressors, the proportion of those no longer willing to endure hardship increases significantly and becomes the largest one (see Figure 4).

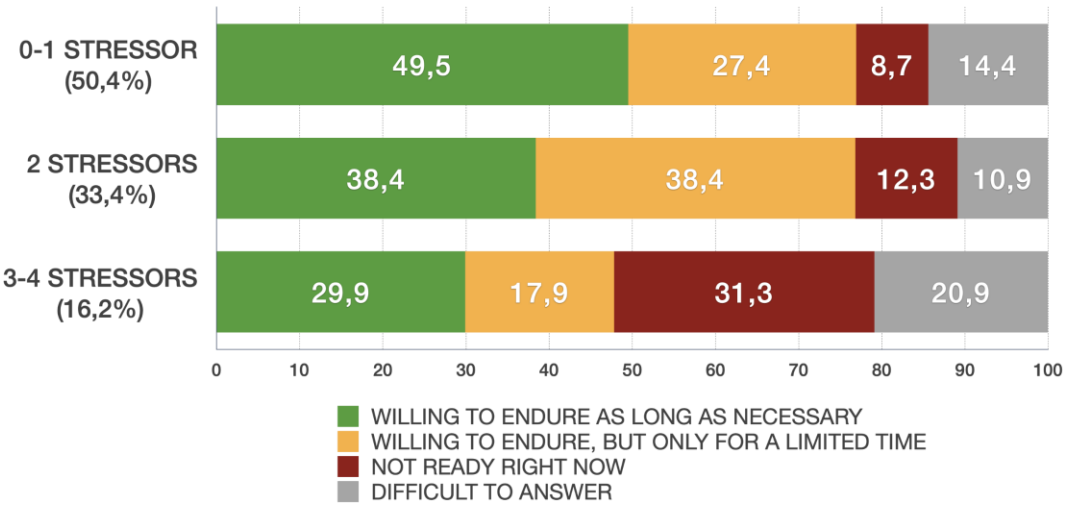


Figure 4. Willingness to endure the war decreases as number of stressors increases

The effects of general psychological distress (SCL-9-NR) are less clear. Only respondents experiencing high levels of distress show weaker indicators of willingness to resist. The other two levels have very similar distributions.

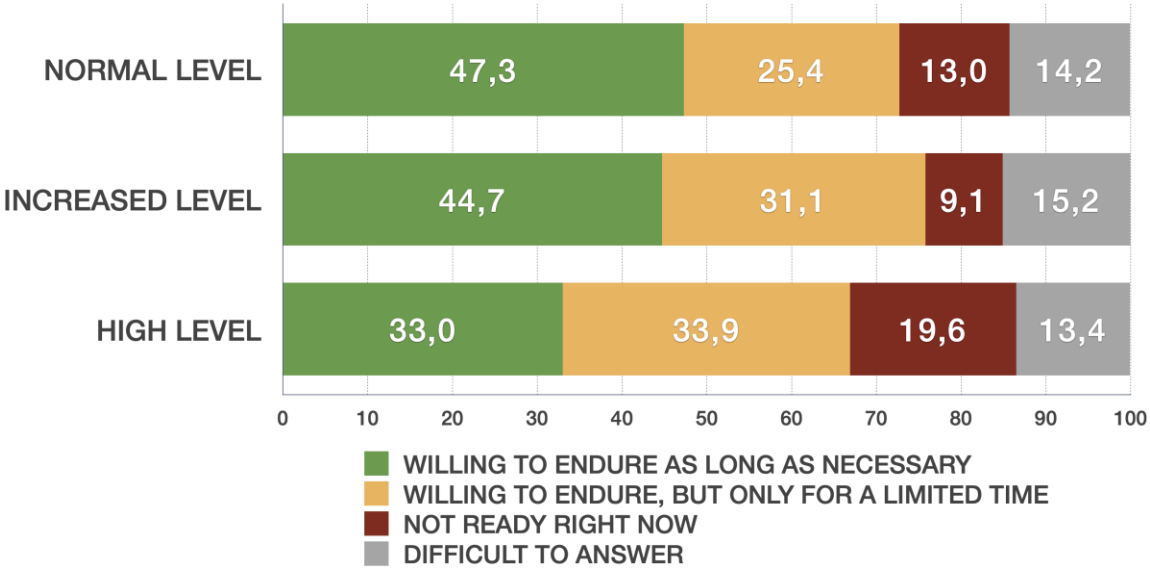


Figure 5 Willingness to endure the war declines as stress level rises

The connections among these three variables can be evaluated as follows. First, wartime stressors impact general psychological distress and the will to resist. Accordingly, there is a weak connection between distress and the will to resist, due to common causes that are only partially identical. My previous study (Dembitskyi, 2020: 204-207) indicated that it should be linked to everyday life

experiences, which have a weak connection to sociopolitical phenomena. In turn, depends more on the sociopolitical factors. (Figure 6).

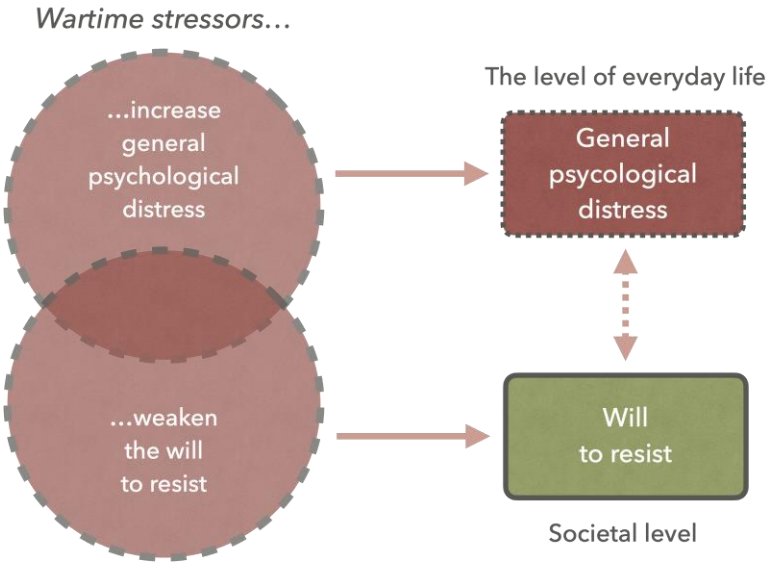


Figure 6. Modeling stress and will to resist

Survey data largely confirms this model, showing the worsening of wartime stress related to daily life experiences in 2024 compared to the prewar baseline (see Figure 7).

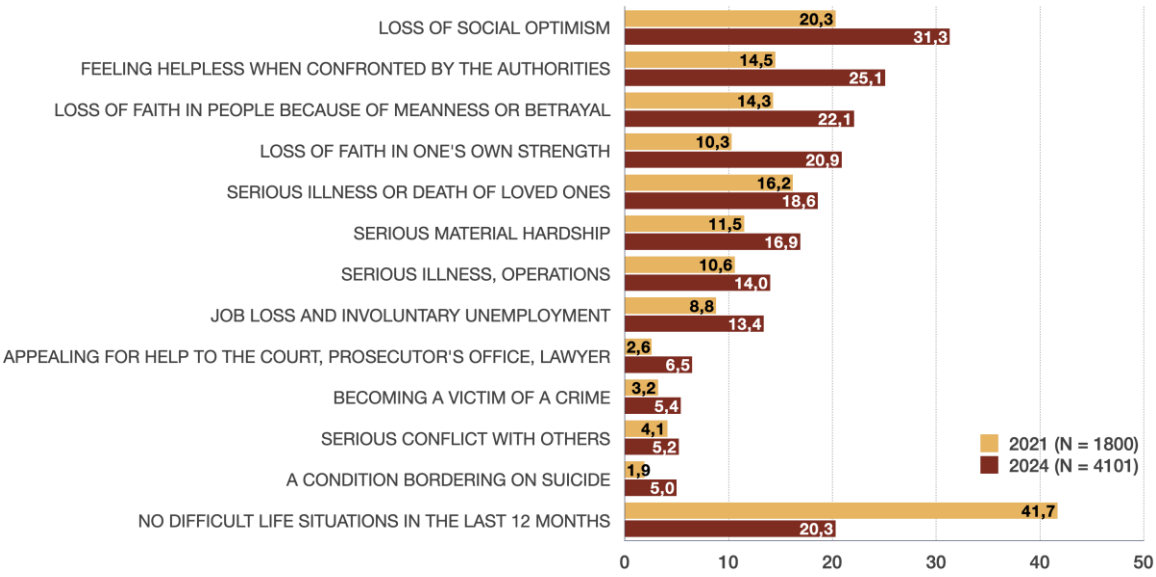


Figure 7. Negative life circumstances affecting stress levels

The biggest impact, in order of statistical significance, was on the following stressors:

- loss of social optimism and hope that the situation in the country will improve (χ^2=175.0, p<.001);
- helplessness when confronted with arbitrariness on the part of the authorities (χ^2=152.2, p<.001);
- loss of faith in one's own strength and reluctance to do anything (χ^2=82.7, p<.001);
- serious material hardship (χ^2=49.5, p<.001).

When discussing their content, we can identify certain parallels with the wartime stressors from the first data set (Table 1: October 2023, N = 2,767). The loss of social optimism and feeling of helplessness regarding the authorities clearly represent the negative impact of social factors on the will to resist. The loss of faith in one's strength, similar to traumatic memories, is psychological. Serious material hardship is similar to significant financial or material losses. The effects of these stressors on the will to resist are generally in line with the results described earlier.

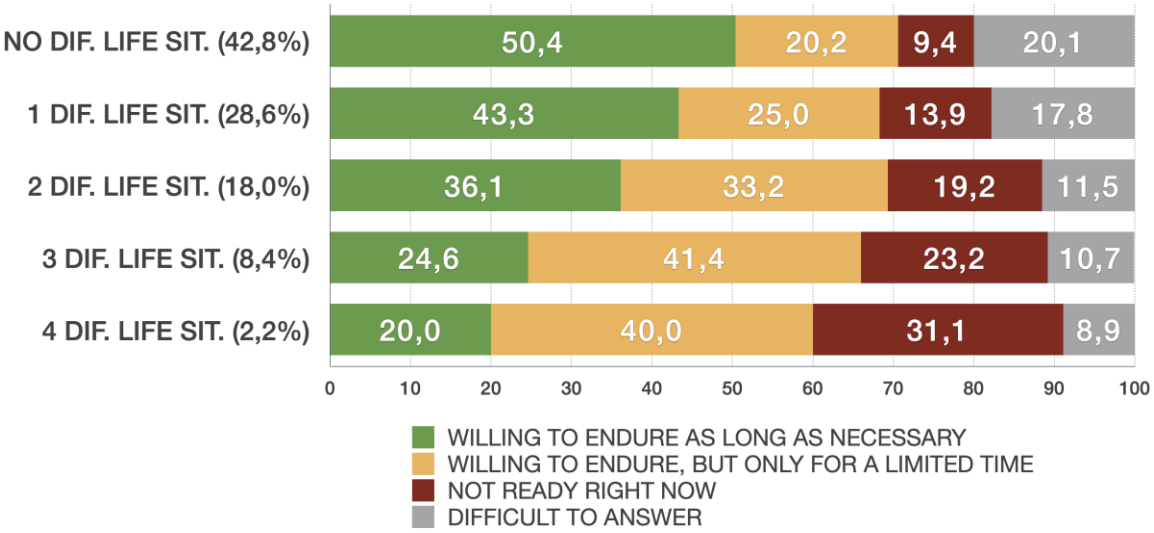


Figure 8. Willingness to endure declines as life becomes harder

The next question is how much the will to resist depends on social factors. As earlier research indicated, group identity, both civic and ethnic, contributes positively to sustaining the will to resist among Ukrainians (see Figure 9). Identification as European also correlated to a strong will to resist.

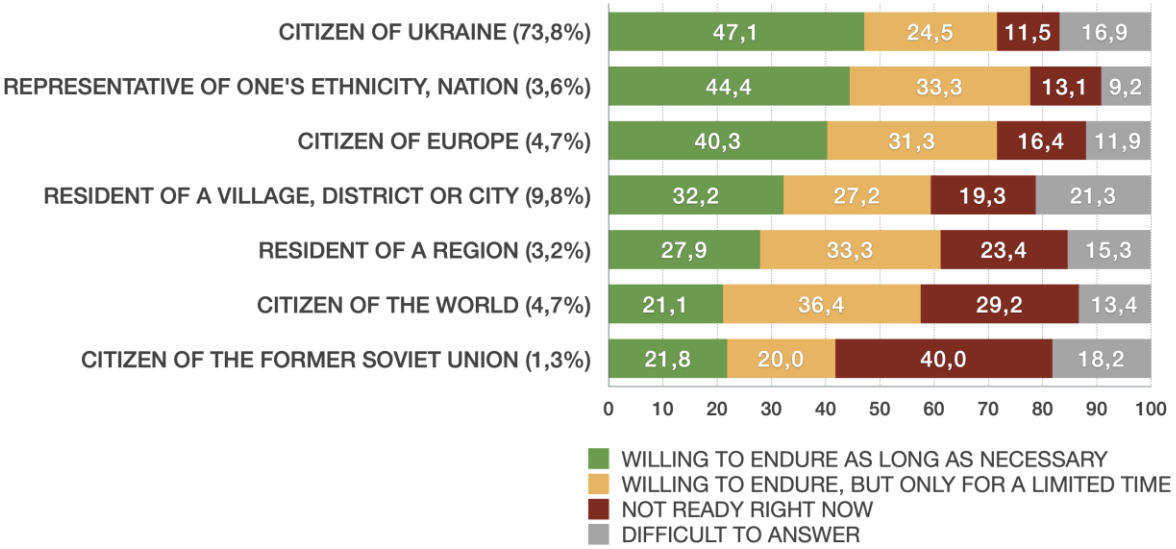


Figure 9. Respondents primary self-identification and willingness to endure the war

At the same time, it cannot be claimed that the will to resist is tied more closely to civic and other identities listed here than to psychological factors. Therefore, it is important to use more specific variables that capture the sociopolitical aspects of the country's life during wartime. I believe attitudes toward the country's position in the war are among the key points, which respondents use for determining the necessity and length of further resistance.[5] Descriptive results speak further to the plausibility of this hypothesis.

[5] Attitudes toward the country's position in the war were determined based on responses to the indicators of the CI-WPA-5 measurement: the values of the corresponding latent variable were calculated, on the basis of which attitudes were identified. Respondents who find it difficult to respond to most of the measurement indicators are characterized as having "uncertain attitudes."

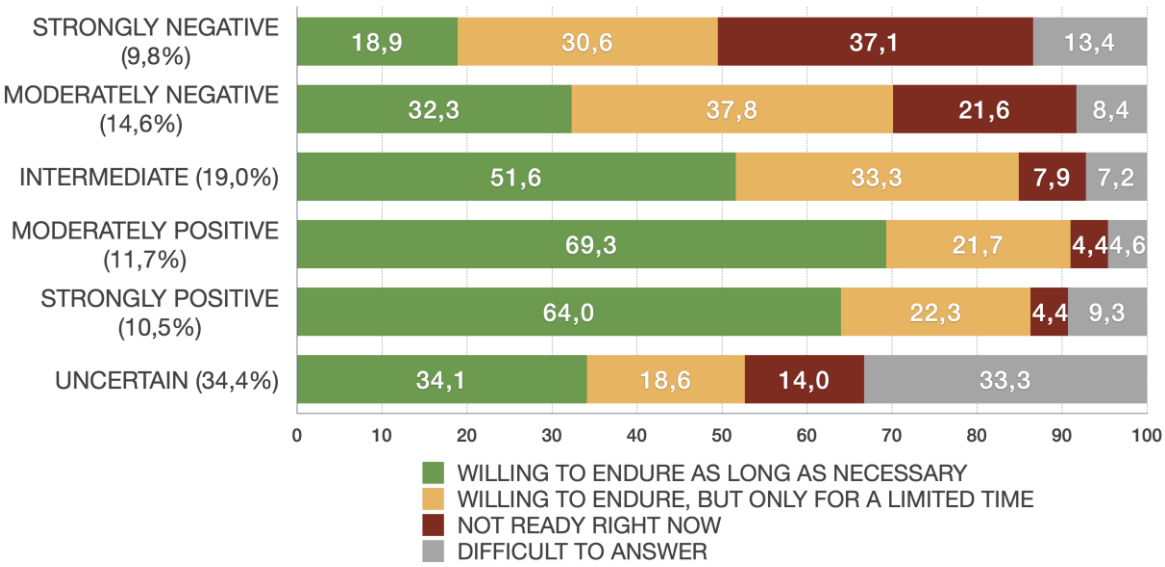


Figure 10. Attitudes toward the country's position in the war associated with willingness to resist

We used logistic regression to examine whether various factors remain significant predictors of the will to resist when analyzed together. The results of the fourth survey are most appropriate for these purposes (Table 1: June 2024, N = 4101), because they include the most complete set of relevant variables.

Will to resist	0 – willing to endure only for a limited time; not willing right now; difficult to answer 1 – willing to endure as long as necessary
National-territorial identities	0 – citizen of Ukraine; citizen of Europe; representative of one's ethnicity/nation 1 – resident of one's region (town); citizen of the former USSR
Attitudes toward the country's position in the war	0 – uncertain 1 – negative: strongly negative; moderately negative 2 – intermediate 3 – positive: moderately positive; strongly positive

Based on binary logistic regression, it can be concluded that all variables not only show statistically significant results but are also conceptually relevant. Overall, these results confirm that attitudes toward the country's position in the war exert the most significant influence on the willingness to resist. Additionally, stressful life circumstances and national-territorial identities continue to be important factors (see Figure 11).

In robustness checks, control variables such as sex, age, and region of residence (west, center, south, east) were tested. None of these factors showed a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable or influenced the results. The multicollinearity test verified that it is not of concern (GVIF <1.1).

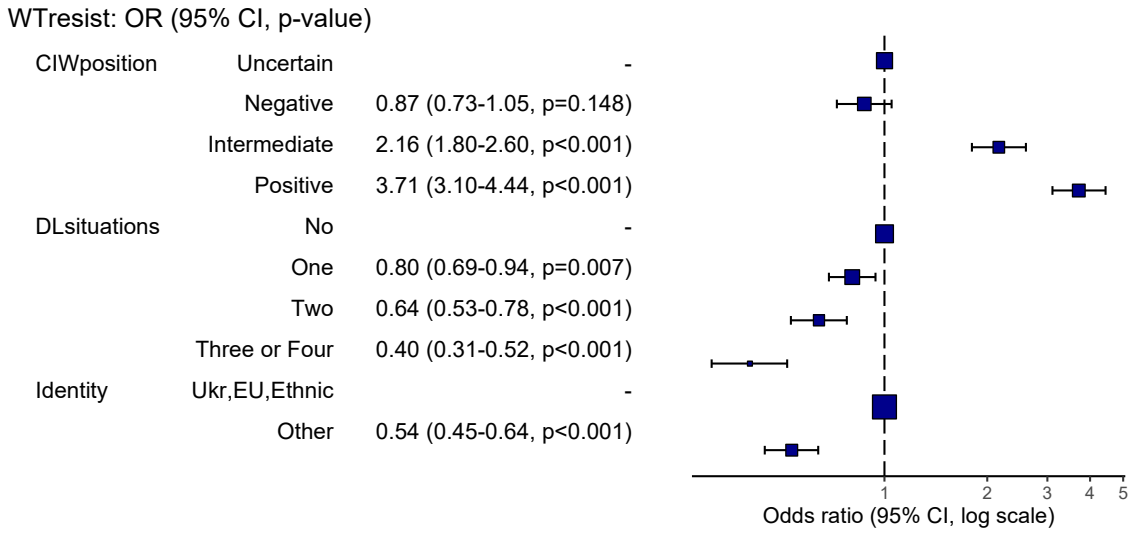


Figure 11. Logistic regression of will to resist on select predictors
Note: Pseudo R^2 for the model: 0.091 (Hosmer-Lemeshow), 0.117 (Cox-Snell), 0.157 (Nagelkerke).
Note: "WTresist" is will to resist; "CIWposition" is attitudes toward the country's position in the war; "DLsituations" is number of difficult life situations; "Ukr,EU,Ethnic" is citizen of Ukraine, citizen of Europe, or representative of one's ethnicity/nation.

Conclusions

The results of the analysis highlight three dimensions that are essential for understanding how Ukrainians' will to resist is formed: pragmatic, emotional, and value based.

The pragmatic dimension is represented by attitudes toward the country's position in the war, explaining about twice as much variation in war endurance than experiencing hardship over the last year and identity explain, combined (based on

Nagelkerke R^2 values). The effects of the latter two dimensions—emotional (hardship) and value based (national-territorial identities)—are about the same.

The substantive features of the variables defining these dimensions highlight the predominance of social characteristics. Therefore, among the competing models introduced at the beginning of this analysis, we have ample reason to focus on the one that explains Ukrainians' will to resist by incorporating both societal and psychological factors. That said, the psychological factors have strong social bases.

With that in mind, it is notable that perceptions of Ukraine's position in the war, in turn, hinge on four critical factors identified in prior research (Dembitskyi 2024: 20-23), only one of which (perceived sufficiency of international support for Ukraine to prevail in the war) is related directly to Ukraine's tangible warfighting capacity. The other three represent intangible factors circumscribing the social and political foundations of Ukraine's resistance: caring about Ukraine's future (essentially an indirect measure of commitment to Ukraine's civic national identity); optimism about the prospects of honest and competent governance; and perceived viability and effectiveness of the Ukrainian state.

This leads to the key conclusion that, while international assistance for Ukraine's war effort remains important, good governance is paramount in sustaining Ukrainians' will to fight back against the Russian invasion. In turn, good governance is likely to boost Ukrainians' commitment to civic national identity, most likely creating an interaction effect. Considering that Ukraine is fighting for its survival against an expansionist autocracy and positions itself as a geopolitical antipode to Russia, a commitment to good governance would entail sustained and improved adherence to core democratic principles, including rule-based, meritocratic allocation of resources and professional appointments, as well as social inclusiveness.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Dilemmas of National Security and Freedom of Religion in Wartime Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 941
August 2025

Oxana Shevel,[1]
Tufts University

Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 marked a watershed in religious politics in Ukraine. With the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) backing the invasion, even casting it as a "holy war," Ukraine's state and society turned against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC)—an Orthodox church in Ukraine in canonical unity with the ROC and in competition with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was established in 2019 as an autocephalous (independent) Orthodox church. The Ukrainian government took a series of measures against the UOC to counter the perceived threat to Ukraine's "spiritual independence" of this allegedly "pro-Russian" church. This memo examines these measures and their reception in Ukraine and internationally. It shows that, while broadly supported domestically, the state policy aimed at limiting UOC activity in Ukraine has proven to be a hard sell internationally owing to concerns about freedom of religion. Ukraine's situation is unique, since it is fighting an existential war and a religious-political doctrine that denies the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state and nation. Meanwhile, in many Western democracies, state interests as defined by the government also often come into tension with religious rights as defined by rights groups. The Ukrainian case thus illustrates a broader dilemma facing democracies: how to balance perceived state and national interests and religious freedoms. Like in Western states, disagreement between the Ukrainian state and international critics of its policy is unlikely to result in the former simply deferring to the latter. Nonetheless, like in Western states, government action is likely to be constrained through international law and engagement with critics.

Religion and politics have long been intertwined in Ukraine, and the quest for political independence—particularly from Moscow—has historically gone together with the quest for an independent church. The start of Russia's aggression in 2014 in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity opened a new era in church-state

[1] Oxana Shevel is an associate professor of political science at Tufts University and director of the Tufts University International Relations program.

relations. With public opinion turning away from Russia on a wide range of issues, from foreign alliances to culture, support for an independent church grew, and in early 2019, as mentioned, the OCU was formed. Then-President Petro Poroshenko was instrumental in the establishment of the OCU, investing political capital to lobby the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to grant a *tomos* (decree) of autocephaly to the OCU and praising that as Ukraine's "second independence." The emergence of the OCU was fostered by elite actions, yet it also reflected a growing popular preference for an independent church.

The OCU, a product of historical circumstances, was portrayed by Russian President Vladimir Putin as a political plot to "divide the Russian and Ukrainian people." Russian state officials blamed the United States for "orchestrating" the OCU *tomos*, and the ROC leadership severed all ties with the Constantinople Patriarchate. Overall, the Kremlin framed the OCU as a grave political and religious threat to Russia. This is because it dealt a severe blow to the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) project, long used by the Russian state and church to promote territorial expansionism. Within the "Russian World" paradigm, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are seen as together constituting a Holy Rus', a unique civilization, superior to and pitted against the "godless" West, and divinely predestined to be united, as they had supposedly been in the ancient Kyivan Rus' state. The prospect of Ukraine's Orthodox joining an independent church was thus seen in Moscow as a grave religious and political affront. Putin's decision to go to war to restore the "natural unity" of Russia and Ukraine—blessed by the ROC as a "holy war"—shows the extraordinary stakes of Ukrainian religious developments for the Russian church and state.

After the OCU was established, the two Orthodox churches in Ukraine competed for parishes and the faithful, and the question of whether the UOC was a "Russian" or a "Ukrainian" church became hotly debated. The UOC's decision to remain subordinated to the ROC and not to participate in the unification council in December 2018 when the OCU was formed, along with the UOC leadership's reluctance to condemn Russia for its aggression against Ukraine (prior to 2022, the UOC leadership was describing the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a "fratricidal" or "civil" war), led to a continuous drop in support for the UOC in Ukrainian society generally and among Orthodox believers particularly (who constitute around 70 percent of Ukraine's population; see Figure 1).

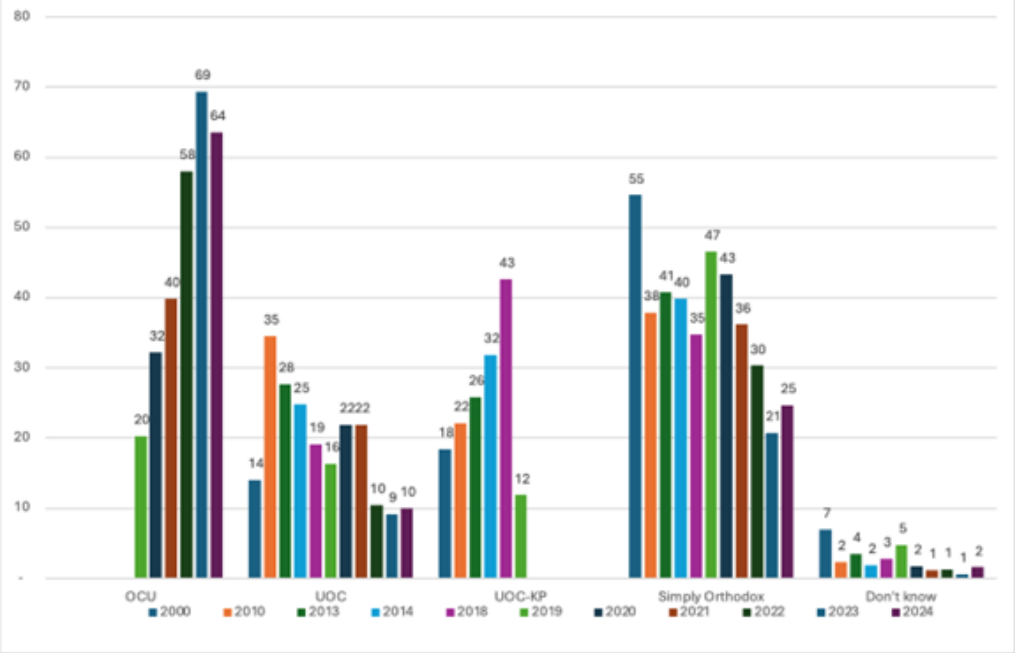


Figure 1. Church identification among self-identified Orthodox, percent
Source: Razumkov Center 2020 (for 2000–2019), 2024 (for 2020–2024)

The start of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency did not lead to major changes in Orthodox politics, even though Zelensky, a secular Jew, distanced himself from religious matters during the election campaign, whereas Poroshenko ran on the slogan "Army, Language, Faith." The full-scale invasion in 2022, however, marked a watershed. The primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy, swiftly condemned Russia's attack, for the first time publicly breaking ranks with his ecclesiastical superior, Patriarch Kirill of the ROC. In May 2022, the UOC held a council (*sobor*) and made several changes to its charter to distance itself from the ROC. Yet for many in Ukraine, these changes did not go far enough to demonstrate that the UOC had truly become a "Ukrainian," rather than a "Russian," church, as UOC leaders insisted.

The debate over whether the UOC actually remains a part of the ROC centers on steps the UOC did *not* take when amending its charter. For example, it retained references to the 1990 edict (*gramota*) that ROC Patriarch Alexy II issued to the UOC, which was defined as a constituent part of the ROC, albeit with a degree of autonomy. In addition, UOC hierarchs, including Metropolitan Onufrii, did not resign from their positions in ROC governing bodies or write to other Orthodox churches to inform them of their newly independent status. Finally, the UOC has yet to publish the amended charter on its website. In January 2023, a government-convened commission of experts unanimously concluded that the UOC had not

severed all ties with the ROC and thus remained a religious institution with a "center of influence in the aggressor state."

Society quickly and decisively turned against the UOC. The share of Orthodox believers who identified with the UOC fell from 22 percent in 2021 to 10 percent in 2022 as identification with the OCU correspondingly grew (see Figure 1). Attempts at parish transfers from the UOC to the OCU spiked: From March 2019 to 2022, transfers slowed to a trickle, but just in the first year after the full-scale invasion 496 parishes left the UOC. Conflicts over parishes sometimes led to violence. Meanwhile, some local authorities reacted to popular sentiments by issuing "bans" on UOC activities. At the end of 2022, 54 percent of Ukrainians nationwide (with majorities or pluralities in all macro-regions) wanted the UOC banned, while another 24 percent opposed a full ban but nonetheless wanted the state to oversee and regulate its activities (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

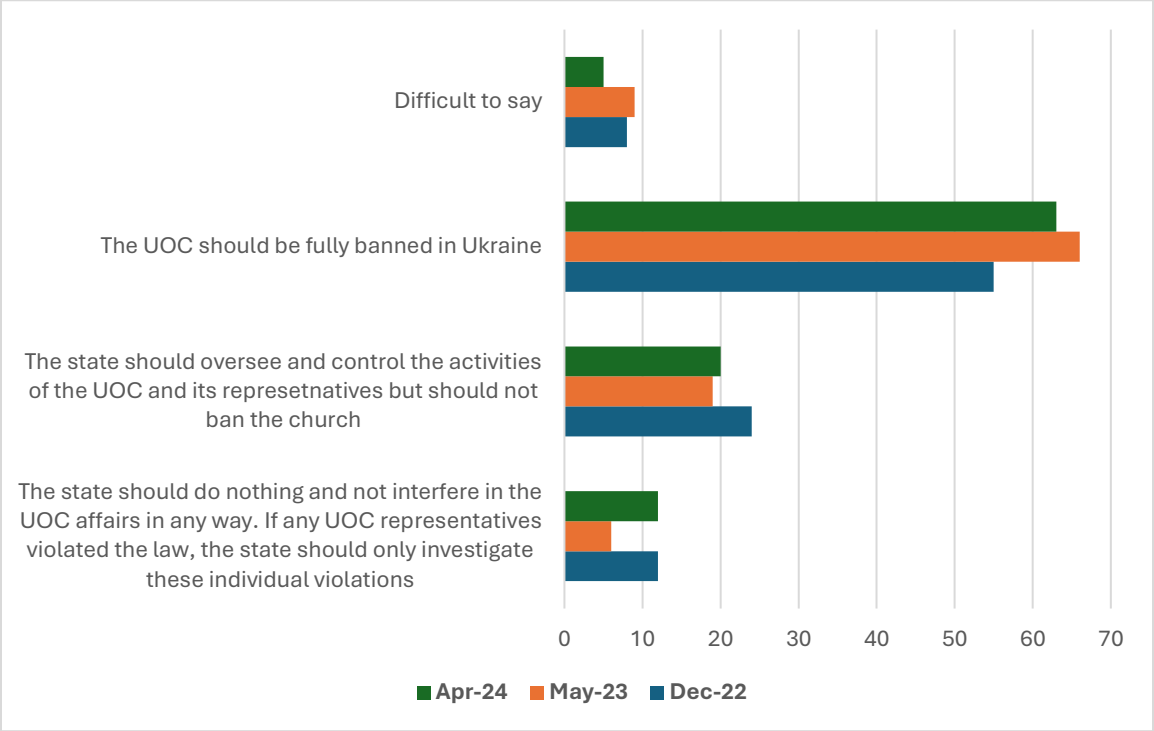


Figure 2. Public preferences for state policy toward the UOC, percent
Source: KIIS 2022, 2023, 2024

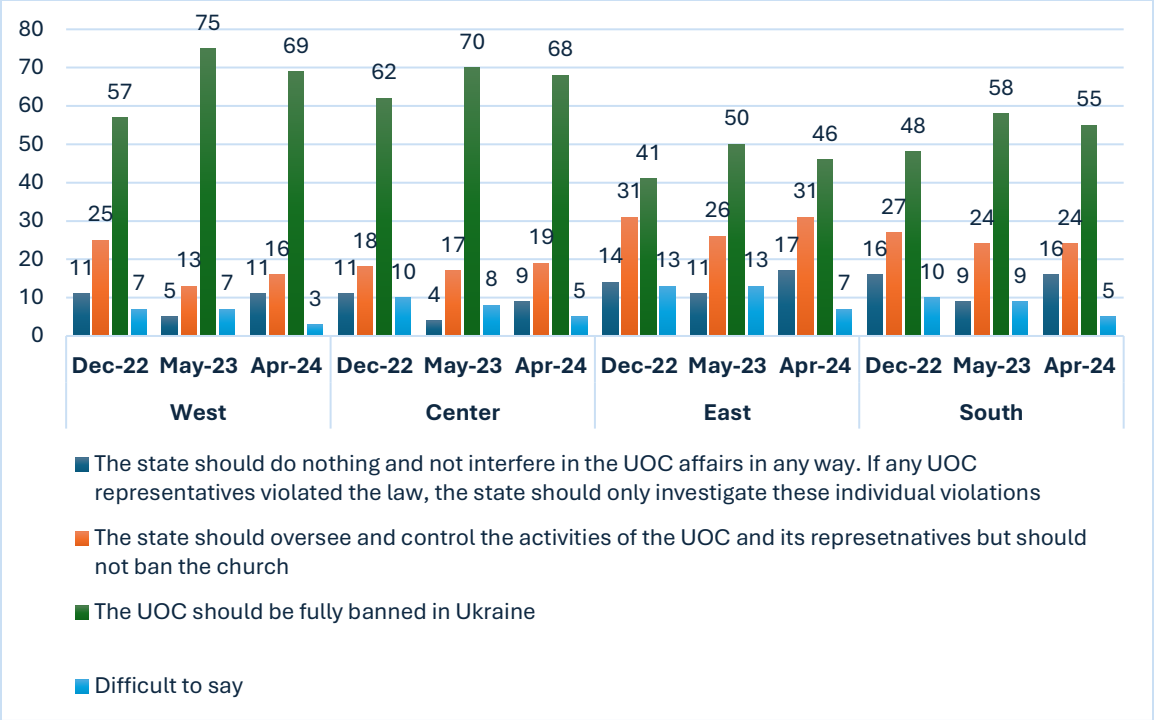


Figure 3. Public preferences for state policy toward the UOC by macro-region, percent
Source: KIIS 2022, 2023, 2024

The Ukrainian central government hesitated on how to respond to the tense situation around control of parishes, shifting societal attitudes, and actions and inaction of the UOC leadership. In the early months of the war, it appeared to reason that taking any measures against the UOC risked societal destabilization. By late 2022, however, the Zelensky administration had changed course. Likely contributing factors were evidence of collaboration on the part of some UOC priests during the occupation of Ukrainian territory, as well as the discovery by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) of Russian propaganda materials on UOC properties. In autumn 2022, the SBU launched investigations of 850 UOC priests and other staff and searched 350 UOC buildings, subsequently reporting that it had found pro-Russian literature "intended for distribution" in libraries of dioceses and church shops, Russian citizens without proper documents, and large sums of cash. In his evening address on December 1, 2022, Zelensky announced new legal measures to ensure Ukraine's "spiritual independence." His adoption of his predecessor and political archrival's slogan illustrates how Russia's invasion shifted the political spectrum in Ukraine completely away from Russia. Zelensky signed a decree endorsing the resolution of the National Defense and Security Council adopted that day, which imposed sanctions against several UOC hierarchs, elevated the status of the government agency on religious affairs (the State Service for Ethnopolicy and Freedom of Conscience, or DESS), and instructed

the government to draft a law compliant with "international norms in the sphere of freedom of conscience" banning the functioning in Ukraine of religious organizations with "centers of influence" in Russia.

In January 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers submitted to the parliament a draft law to amend Ukrainian statues on the activities of religious organizations. Its major thrust was the creation of a legal procedure that would prevent, following judicial review, the operation in Ukraine of religious institutions that are "subordinated to governing centers located in a state carrying out armed aggression against Ukraine." In August 2024, the parliament passed a much revised and expanded version of the law, now titled On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations. It gave religious organizations nine months to sever links with the ROC, which was formally banned, or with other religious institutions located in a state that engaged in armed aggression against or the occupation of Ukraine. It authorized DESS to determine whether such links existed and to notify religious organizations of them. If, after 30 days, the organization does not sever such links, DESS can sue in court to terminate the organization's activities in Ukraine. On January 24, 2025, the head of DESS said his office would begin conducting reviews of individual religious organizations' compliance with the law in May 2025.

Supporters and critics of the law debate whether it addresses Ukraine's legitimate national security concerns, as the Ukrainian government maintains, or whether it violates religious freedom because of the intended "ban" of the UOC. The law's adoption in August 2024 was positively received in Ukraine: In a poll released in early October, 80 percent nationwide supported the law (with strong majorities ranging from 71 percent to 83 percent in every macro-region), 16 percent did not, and 4 percent were unsure. However, the law proved politically costly to the Ukrainian state internationally. Since international human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights do not include national security among valid reasons for limiting religious freedoms, the Ukrainian government has faced an uphill battle to convince international experts that measures affecting the UOC are pursuing "legitimate" goals and are "proportionate" and "nondiscriminatory."

Legitimacy of goals, proportionality of state action, and nondiscrimination are key criteria in international law, yet what counts as legitimate, proportional, and nondiscriminatory is open to interpretation. The Ukrainian government maintains that requiring religious institutions operating on its territory—be it the UOC or any other—to "sever ties with the ROC, which is inseparable from the Russian regime and is actively enabling the war crimes and crimes against humanity that Russia is committing during its armed aggression against Ukraine" has the "legitimate goal" of "put[ting] a stop to ROC actions aimed at the destruction of

Ukrainian statehood, culture, and identity." In making this argument, state officials reference the April 2024 resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which defined the "Russian World" as an ideological tool of Putin's regime used for promoting and justifying the war in Ukraine and condemned the ROC hierarchy, including Patriarch Kirill, for being "complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity conducted in the name of the Russian Federation and the *Russkiy Mir* ideology."

The Ukrainian government further argues that the law does not "ban" Orthodoxy generally or any church specifically but merely requires religious institutions formally to sever all ties with the ROC. Because a procedure for determining whether a religious organization has connections with the ROC is regulated by law and includes a judicial review, the government claims that this is the "least burdensome" set of requirements and meets standards of proportionality and nondiscrimination. Finally, in the Ukrainian government's view, the law does not violate the freedom of conscience of individual Orthodox faithful since "Subordination to the Moscow Patriarchate is not a constituent part of the Orthodox church's teachings." So far, international rights groups do not appear to be convinced by these arguments. In its September–November 2024 report on Ukraine, the UN Office for Human Rights noted that the 2024 law "established disproportionate restrictions on the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief" and that Ukraine "has not demonstrated the necessity and proportionality" of the adopted measures. The Ukrainian government rejected the UN's conclusions "as a distortion of reality."

The dilemma of national security and religious freedom is not unique to Ukraine, nor is Ukraine unique in drawing criticism from international rights groups for policies in this area. Rights groups have found some policies that Western states claim to be necessary to protect fundamental values of society and/or mitigate threats of extremism and terrorism to be "discriminatory" or "disproportionate." United Nations bodies have criticized national security and counterterrorism measures in Western democracies such as Austria, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom for employing "sweeping definitions" of terrorism and "disproportionately and discriminatorily" targeting Muslims. Despite this pushback, Western governments have stuck to many such measures. Proponents and critics of specific measures argue the policies they support fit designations of proportionality, legitimacy, and nondiscrimination, which makes the debate fundamentally about politics and not only, or even mainly, about the law. In a recent exchange with the head of the UN office in Ukraine, the head of Ukraine's DESS asked rhetorically: "Does the Ukrainian state have fewer reasons to limit activities in Ukraine of an organization that wants to see Ukraine destroyed than Western governments do when they impose limits on what clothing their citizens can wear?"

The national security/religious freedom dilemma is unlikely to be solved definitively anywhere. Nonetheless, the range of permissible policies in democratic states is constrained because not every policy can be credibly presented as falling under the criteria outlined in international law. Indeed, this is where the difference between democracies and autocracies becomes evident. In democracies, much of the debate over policy centers on the definitions of key terms, procedural details, and legally guaranteed safeguards. Modifications to policies often follow, like in France, where the headscarf debate resulted in a ban on religious symbols in state schools but not in public spaces. In Ukraine, one of the criticisms of international experts pertains to the unclear definition of the "Russian World" ideology stipulated in the August 2024 law, which prohibits this ideology and allows banning religious institutions involved in its dissemination; however, critics argue that the law's definition of ideology "lacks legal precision," which makes it difficult to apply legally. In response, the Ukrainian government has informed the UN human rights commissioner that it plans to adopt a resolution in 2025 with an exhaustive list of criteria for defining the "Russian World" ideology. The back-and-forth with international critics has also affected the likely legal process for banning religious organizations for failing to sever links with the ROC: DESS has indicated that courts would adjudicate "bans" not of "the church" as a single entity but of each religious community/parish individually.

The dilemma of "spiritual independence" in Ukraine is unlikely to be conclusively resolved anytime soon, but a deeper understanding of all the facts and broader politics shaping this national security/religious freedom case, along with the lessons offered by parallels with Western democracies, would lead to a more comprehensive and accurate picture of how this dilemma is likely to play out in Ukraine and why.

Part II.

Government and Social Forces

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

The Gradual Reemergence of Democratic Politics in Wartime Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 942
August 2025

Mikhail Alexseev[1],
San Diego State University

Henry E. Hale[2],
George Washington University

The unprecedented surge in public support for democracy and trust in government in Ukraine was dramatically on display as the country mobilized to fight off Russia's full-scale invasion (RFSI) in February 2022, but we know less about the ebb and flow of public opinion as the war has ground on since then. Long highly critical and cynical of most of their political institutions, Ukrainians rallied around them in 2022. Not just the military and civil resistance forces, but the police, parliament, president, and even media have all benefited from what social scientists sometimes call a "halo effect." This is when people, when faced with an enemy bent on subverting and taking over their state, see and express mostly the positive. Ukrainians have also reflected extraordinary confidence that they, together with their institutions, would prevail in this fight. Little is known from prior research, though, about how long halo effects last, how they evolve as a conflict endures, and ultimately when and how (or if) something like "normal politics" can be expected to reemerge before the formal resolution of a long war.

We address this general question through a unique survey series (War and Democracy Longitudinal Study, or WDLS) that allows us both to trace opinion trends from a pre-RFSI baseline through late 2024 and to unpack the shifts in individual views that comprise the aggregate trends.

Our primary, overarching finding is that, over the course of three-plus years of full-scale war, the shock-driven wartime unity of opinion on many questions has been gradually transforming into what may be called "normal democratic

[1] Mikhail Alexseev is a professor of political science at San Diego State University and has been conducting survey research in Ukraine in collaboration with the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology since 2015.
[2] Henry E. Hale is Professor of political science and international affairs and codirector of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia).

politics." This trend has two dimensions. On the one hand, Ukrainians' strong, extraordinary commitment to democracy as a system of government remains, including their pro-EU and pro-NATO orientations, along with a strong sense of civic national identity, faith in the military, and belief in an ultimate victory. Moreover, as Ukrainians have persisted through the major war and its incalculable devastation, public legitimation of democracy increasingly appears to have transcended the halo effect and turned into a fundamental sociopolitical reality in Ukraine. On the other hand, in other respects, including presidential and parliamentary approval, certain prewar patterns appear to be reemerging, reflecting political disagreements and related differences in preferred tactics, even as nearly everyone continues to agree on the priority of defeating Russia. Our findings may have important implications beyond Ukraine as to how struggling democracies can be expected to evolve throughout a period of prolonged, full-scale military mobilization.

War and Democracy Longitudinal Study

Our analysis builds on the data from the original opinion survey series in Ukraine, conducted in collaboration with scholars from the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (UNASIS), most notably, its current deputy director, Serhii Dembitskyi.[3] The series comprises six survey waves with a total of 3,551 respondents polled in at least one wave between November 2021 and November 2024. Our pooled dataset comprises three panels tracking as many of the same respondents as possible over time, with the first panel starting three months before RSFI in November 2021 (N=1,800), the second in June 2023 (N=869), and the third in June 2024 (N=882). Table 1 shows sample sizes of repeat respondents in each wave by panel. The columns for panels 2 and 3 show combined sample sizes for all panels by wave.

[3] Research has been funded by the Program on New Approaches to Research on Security in Eurasia (PONARS), the National Science Foundation Rapid Response Research program (SES 2309901), San Diego State University, and Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences. For more details, see here. We thank the UNASIS director, Dr. Yevhen Golovakha, for setting up and guiding our multiyear collaboration going back to 2015.

	PANEL 1	New	PANEL 2	New	PANEL 3
WAVE 1 (Nov 2021)	N=1,800				
WAVE 2 (Jun-Jul 2022)	N=482				
WAVE 3 (Jun-Aug 2023)	N=413	N=869	N=1,282		
WAVE 4 (Dec 2023-Jan2024)	N=371		N=865		
WAVE 5 (May-Jun 2024)	N=253		N=561	N=882	N=1,443
WAVE 6 (Nov 2024)	N=201		N=445		N=765

Table 1. WDLS Ukraine surveys, 2021–2024.

Despite wartime challenges, the differences across waves and samples do not amount to any dramatic skewing of the panel samples on the major demographics typically used to judge representativeness. The panel samples across survey waves on key sociodemographic characteristics varied within about +/-4 percent range on region, sex, age, income, rural/urban setting, and language use. The exceptions were (ii) a decrease in the share of respondents interviewed in Ukraine's eastern regions (Luhansk, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Dnipro) from 26 percent in Wave 1 to about 17 percent in Wave 2 (but rising to 24 percent in Wave 6) and a steady increase in the proportion of respondents with higher education (from 38 percent in Wave 1 to 48 percent in Wave 6 for Panel 1 and 53.5 percent for Panels 1-3, but with increases between waves of no more than three percentage points).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that our samples do not cover the occupied territories or Ukrainians who moved abroad since February 2022. Some individuals might have declined to be interviewed because they feared the pollsters could be enemy spies or military recruiters.

Our perspective is that it is of great importance what people choose to state in public, even if this differs from privately held views, and our claims about Ukrainian attitudes should be understood in this light.

Freedom Is Fundamental

The surge of support for democracy among Ukrainians following RFSI was more than a momentary instance of wartime rallying-'round-the-flag or a tenuous halo effect. Instead, it represented a longer-lasting social trend. We see this in all three panels on all three measures of political freedom, with around 80 percent of respondents since 2022 upholding the importance of democracy, the importance of free speech, and democracy as the best system of government (see Figure 1).

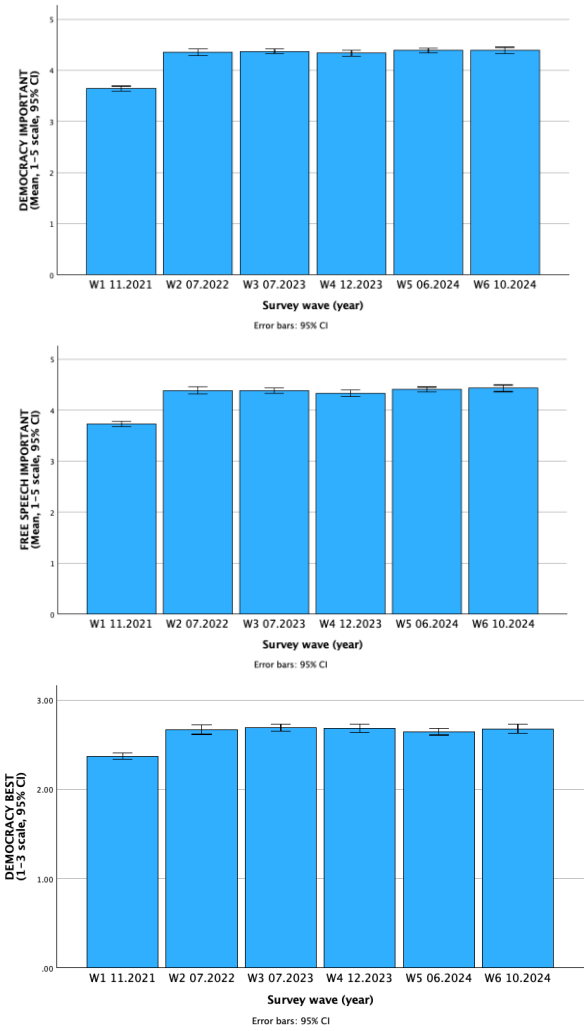


Figure 1. Strong support for political freedom in Ukraine since Russian invasion

To dig deeper into response patterns, we conducted two rounds of focus groups (September 2023 and March 2024). In each round, we had one focus group with residents of Kyiv and Kyiv Region each, one in Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk, one in Mykolaiv and Odesa, and one in Kharkiv and Donetsk Region (eight in each group).

Our focus group participants consistently, in every region, associated democracy with core civil liberties—from the ability of citizens to freely elect political representatives to freedom of expression. The discussions also revealed a strong aspiration for Ukraine to emulate the political system of Western European countries, the United States, and Canada, while rejecting Russia as a distinct antipode. There were some poignant digressions in the conversations, with participants feeling that, even though Ukrainians are laying down their lives in

support for values that are foundational to Europe and the U.S., they are not receiving enough military support to push back against Russia.

Other survey data indicates that democratic resilience in Ukraine is anchored in the aspiration to be a free, independent nation. In a UNASIS poll in June 2024, 83 percent of 4,000 respondents ranked the importance of Ukraine's independence at 10 on a 10-point scale. This is congruous with the long-term consolidation of a sense of shared civic identity in Ukraine since it gained independence in 1991 (see here and here). Our data shows that the number of people who first and foremost identified themselves as Ukrainian citizens (as opposed to residents of a region, members of an ethnic group, or former Soviet citizens, among other options) jumped 20 percentage points from 63 percent in November 2021 and held steady at around 80 percent in every survey wave through November 2024. Similarly, we saw a large increase in the number of respondents opting to use the Ukrainian language for the survey after RFSI (from 61 percent in Wave 1 to around 85-90 percent subsequently).

Ukrainians' democratic resilience also reflects their prevailing geopolitical identity as the Russian threat has galvanized their sense of belonging to a democratic West (see Stepanenko and Pylynskyi here). Support for Ukraine's membership in the European Union and NATO rose more than 30 percentage points in response to RFSI to around 70-80 percent and has remained at that level since, with support for NATO membership registering a major uptick in late 2024 (see Table 2).

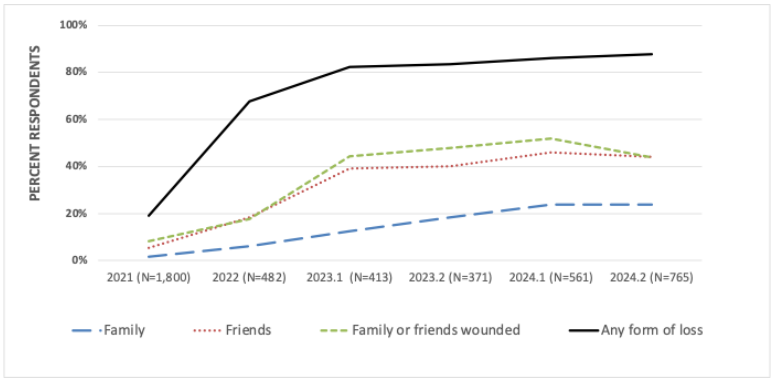
	PANEL 01		PANEL 02			PANELS 01-03
q25 HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT UKRAINE JOINING THE EUROPEAN UNION?	**Wave 1 (Nov 2021) (N=1,800)**	**Wave 2 (Jun-Jul 2022) (N=482)**	**Wave 3 (Jun-Aug 2023) (N=1,273)**	**Wave 4 (Dec 2023_Jan 2024) (N=865)**	**Wave 5 (May-Jun 2024) (N=586)**	**Wave 6 (Oct-Nov 2024) N=762**
Mostly negatively	21.4	3.6	4.1	5.3	6.6	7.0
Hard to say	30.1	14.1	14.0	16.3	16.9	15.0
Mostly positively	48.5	82.4	81.9	78.4	76.5	78.1
	PANEL 01		PANEL 02			PANELS 01-03
q26 HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT UKRAINE JOINING NATO?	**Wave 1 (Nov 2021) (N=1,800)**	**Wave 2 (Jun-Jul 2022) (N=482)**	**Wave 3 (Jun-Aug 2023) (N=1,273)**	**Wave 4 (Dec 2023_Jan 2024) (N=865)**	**Wave 5 (May-Jun 2024) (N=586)**	**Wave 6 (Oct-Nov 2024) N=762**
Mostly negatively	27.6	7.6	5.5	7.1	9.8	7.9
Hard to say	30.9	22.4	18.2	18.9	20.3	13.7
Mostly positively	41.5	70.0	76.3	73.9	69.9	78.4

Table 2. Preference for joining EU and NATO strong in Ukraine

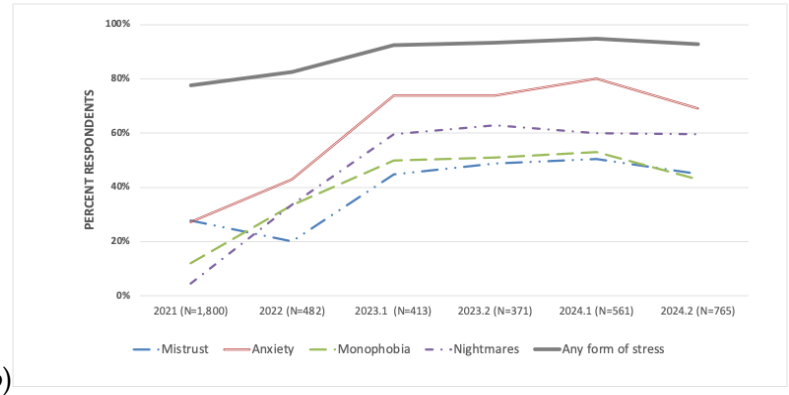
Weathering Headwinds of Trauma and Doubt

To estimate how Ukrainians' commitment to political freedom may hold up in the face of a long, brutal war, it is important to examine not only *because of what*, but also *in spite of what* this commitment has endured.

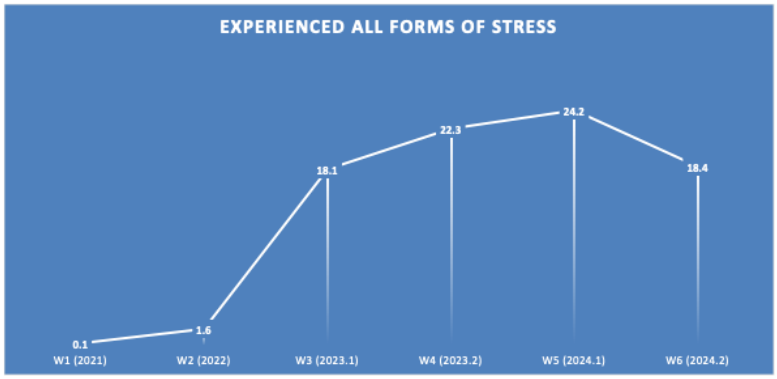
First, we observe support for democracy overcoming the heartbreaking physical and psychological impacts of Russia's military interventions (with the 2021 data reflecting the effects of the Donbas war prior to RFSI). By mid-2023, about 80 percent of Ukrainians experienced at least one form of war-related loss (being wounded themselves, having family or friends killed or wounded, becoming displaced, or losing property, a business, or jobs; see Figure 2a). By 2024, practically everyone in Ukraine had reported at least one of the four post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms we have been tracking, and nearly a quarter all four symptoms (see Figure 2b). At the same time, a significant decline in the latter over the course of 2024 (see Figure 2c) may point to post-traumatic adaption.



(2a)



(2b)



(2c)

Figure 2. War loss and trauma indicators in Ukraine, 2021–2024

Second, Ukrainians' democratic resilience is remarkable given the prevailing sense that international assistance—mainly from friendly democracies—while significant, has been far from sufficient to stop Russia's invasion. In our polls, the number of Ukrainians assessing military aid as adequate to that task dropped from the modest high of 33 percent in mid-2023 to 19 percent by end-2024. With every wave, Ukrainians felt the world cared less about their fight, with diplomatic support seen as sufficient by 55 percent of respondents in Wave 2, 42 percent in Wave 3, 37 percent in waves 4 and 5, and only 26 percent in Wave 6. As for outside economic support, fewer than half of Ukrainians, with the exception of mid-2023, saw it as enough to stop Russia.

Third, Ukrainians' commitment to freedom has so far withstood their worsening assessment of the prospects of the war for Ukraine. Expectations as to how long the war will last have grown considerably, with the baseline expectation by 2024 being that the war will last for multiple more years. Faith in Ukraine's military victory—even though it, at 80 percent, remained remarkably high in late 2024, considering the scale of loss and trauma—has steadily softened. The number of skeptics of Ukraine's eventual victory in our polls rose from 2 percent in Wave 3 to nearly 19 percent by Wave 6. A more significant shift took place within the category of people expecting victory, where they moved from "fully" believing in Ukraine's victory to "tending to" believe in it. Whereas only 17 percent fell into the latter group in 2022, the figure was 43 percent in November 2024. The number of people fully believing in victory, meanwhile, dropped from 80 percent to 39 percent. Those feeling Ukraine would recapture all its sovereign territory dropped from 31 percent to 16 percent over the second half of 2024, while those expecting Russia to keep steadily gaining Ukrainian territory increased from 19 percent to 37 percent.

Return to Normal Public Politics: Institutions and Leadership

Ukraine has seen no upsurge in support for strong-handed wartime leadership, as some might have feared (see Table 3). The biggest overall trend appears to be what might be called "the return of public politics" to Ukraine after the rally-'round-the-flag effect initially overwhelmed it in the face of RFSI. After 2023, we begin to see "political disagreement as usual" coming back in Ukraine—although not in all spheres. In particular, we see normalization with respect to trust in the Rada and the media, as well as, to a lesser extent, in the president (see Table 3).

	PANEL 01		PANEL 02			PANELS 01-03
q20 How much do you trust the media (television, radio, newspapers)?	Wave 1 (Nov 2021) (N=1,800)	Wave 2 (Jun-Jul 2022) (N=482)	Wave 3 (Jun-Aug 2023) (N=1,273)	Wave 4 (Dec 2023_Jan 2024) (N=865)	Wave 5 (May-Jun 2024) (N=586)	Wave 6 (Oct-Nov 2024) N=762
Don't trust at all	18.2	4.9	8.1	10.4	14.0	17.8
Mostly don't trust	30.7	11.8	18.1	23.7	29.4	27.4
Hard to say	36.2	32.6	39.6	35.6	33.0	30.5
Mostly trust	13.8	40.5	28.0	26.8	20.8	20.9
Trust completely	1.1	10.2	6.2	3.4	2.9	3.3

	PANEL 01		PANEL 02			PANELS 01-03
q23 How much do you trust the parliament (Verhovna Rada)?	Wave 1 (Nov 2021) (N=1,800)	Wave 2 (Jun-Jul 2022) (N=482)	Wave 3 (Jun-Aug 2023) (N=1,273)	Wave 4 (Dec 2023_Jan 2024) (N=865)	Wave 5 (May-Jun 2024) (N=586)	Wave 6 (Oct-Nov 2024) N=762
Don't trust at all	37.2	16.9	25.5	38.8	41.6	43.1
Mostly don't trust	32.3	20.8	26.8	25.1	25.5	25.4
Hard to say	23.6	26.0	29.5	26.1	24.5	22.6
Mostly trust	6.4	27.7	15.4	9.0	7.3	8.2
Trust completely	0.6	8.7	2.8	1.1	1.1	0.8

	PANEL 01		PANEL 02			PANELS 01-03
q22 How much do you trust the President?	Wave 1 (Nov 2021) (N=1,800)	Wave 2 (Jun-Jul 2022) (N=482)	Wave 3 (Jun-Aug 2023) (N=1,273)	Wave 4 (Dec 2023_Jan 2024) (N=865)	Wave 5 (May-Jun 2024) (N=586)	Wave 6 (Oct-Nov 2024) N=762
Don't trust at all	32.5	3.1	3.9	8.4	14.6	15.6
Mostly don't trust	26.3	3.3	4.8	9.7	12.3	14
Hard to say	23.5	7.6	15.7	19.8	22.9	22.4
Mostly trust	15.4	32.4	33.4	34.5	32.0	33.4
Trust completely	2.3	53.5	42.2	27.5	18.2	14.6

Table 3. Trust in institutions, November 2021–November 2024

While President Volodymyr Zelensky's late-2024 approval ratings were still very high in Ukraine historically speaking, and while more recent polling shows his support rose considerably in winter and spring 2025 as he attempted to manage the efforts of President Donald Trump and his administration to resolve the conflict, the 2021–2024 arc in support for Zelensky reflects not only waning rallying effects typically found in the initial stages of a war but also the fact that he has assumed ever greater personal authority over the war effort, which, as our surveys confirm, has not gone as the population widely expected. As Onuch and Hale have shown, many of Zelensky's pre-RFSI critics set aside their criticisms to unite behind his wartime leadership, yet they did not let go of their otherwise deep dissatisfaction with his style or policies. Our study indicates that these disagreements, an essential component of a functioning democracy (to which Ukrainians staunchly aspire, as we show in Figure 1), are simply coming back into public view now as people feel more confident about expressing them. We also observe that this willingness to openly express political views has not significantly diminished in the last year. When asked whether "criticism of President Zelensky may weaken Ukraine's effort to win the war," only about 17 percent of

respondents fully agreed in Wave 3, 16 percent in Wave 4, 14 percent in Wave 5, and 13 percent in Wave 6.[4]

In our focus groups, debates about how strongly democratic values have been maintained in wartime underscored how important they are to Ukrainians, with none of the participants abstaining from these discussions. The conversations, however, also revealed that democratic resilience in Ukraine is derived partly from painful underlying tensions. On the one hand, we listened to prolific complaints about the conduct of government institutions and officials, particularly the parliament, military recruiters, and the United News telethon (which combines news broadcasts from Ukraine's mainstream television networks). On the other hand, we noted a strong understanding that, if Ukraine fails to protect its sovereignty and political independence from Russia, all talk about democracy will become meaningless.

Consistent with this understanding that Ukraine must first defend itself from Russia before it can improve its democracy, faith in the army has remained very high, with around 90 percent of respondents continuing to trust it completely or partly across panels and waves.

Conclusion

Intelligence services in the U.S. and elsewhere rightfully take credit for predicting Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the U.S. government wrongly assessed that Russia would overwhelm Ukraine in a matter of days or weeks. This assessment had far-reaching consequences, including the rationale for, the scale, and the pace of military assistance to Kyiv and the application of sanctions on Russia. The principal factor in the incorrect assessment was a lack of understanding of Ukrainian society, of its long-evolving sense of national identity, commitment to freedom and independence, and resilience in the face of authoritarian aggression.

If the fundamental goal of the Trump administration is indeed to end the war in Ukraine, rather than just to reopen Russia for business, understanding the social forces driving Ukraine's war effort is as important as ever. Our data reveals a profound capacity for societal resilience in Ukraine beyond the initial rallying following RFSI. This resilience comes at a high cost, and one should not take it for granted as the war keeps grinding on. On the one hand, it is conceivable that some of the negative trends that emerged after mid-2023 may continue. On the other

[4] A comparison of the results from Panel 1 (Table 2) and a new sample from May–June 2024 (Control 2) reveals some fluidity between expression of full versus partial trust in institutions. While some differences on specific response options are substantial, the combined results for full and partial trust are rather consistent across those surveys.

hand, it is equally conceivable that Ukrainians will keep regrouping and readjusting to "new normals" even if conditions worsen significantly. One point to consider and analyze in greater depth is that our question on the meaning of victory has essentially a conditional clause, asking what is acceptable after all Russian attacks stop. But we do not have a measure of how likely respondents may see these attacks stopping even with a concluded ceasefire or peace deal. Focus groups suggest most Ukrainians will not trust Russia to stop attacking until they wipe out Ukraine or install a pro-Russian puppet government. This means we are more likely to see periodic resets of the will to fight, albeit with greater acknowledgements of the costs and risks, and in a more somber atmosphere.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Collaborative Crisis Governance and Societal Resilience in a Decentralized State: Learning from Ukrainian Local Authorities During the Full-Scale War

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 943
August 2025

Oleksandra Keudel,[1] *Kyiv School of Economics*
Andrii Darkovich,[2] *Kyiv School of Economics*
Valentyn Hatsko,[3] *Kyiv School of Economics*

Ukraine's political and social institutions continue to function in what is now the 11th year of Russia's hybrid war against the country and the 3rd third year after the full-scale invasion, accompanied by horrific human losses, psychological trauma, and daily exposure to missile strikes, drone attacks, and blackouts. Local self-governments (LSGs) have contributed to this societal resilience, providing public services and tackling war-related crises, such as energy shortages, water supply disruptions, and massive internal displacement.

Collaborative crisis governance at the local level has supported the resilience of Ukrainian society since 2022, improving adaptation and preparedness—the two components of resilience. Many war-related challenges have been addressed through partnerships between local governments and nongovernmental actors. This has enabled local knowledge to spread and resources to be mobilized for crisis response. Similarly, the involvement of stakeholders in *hromadas* (Ukrainian local self-governed communities),[4] the lowest administrative units, is potentially

[1] Oleksandra Keudel is an associate professor at the Kyiv School of Economics. She studies democratic transformation and societal resilience in hybrid regimes, specializing in Ukraine's subnational politics.
[2] Andrii Darkovich is a researcher and local governance expert at the Center for Sociological Research, Decentralization, and Regional Development at the Kyiv School of Economics Institute. He is pursuing a PhD in political science at the Kyiv School of Economics.
[3] Valentyn Hatsko is a data analyst at the Kyiv School of Economics and a PhD candidate in sociology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.
[4] In this study, stakeholders include residents, internally displaced persons, businesspeople, NGOs, war veterans, civil society organizations, and experts who are involved in collaborative crisis response and preparedness alongside LSGs.

associated with greater preparedness, namely thanks to nongovernmental stakeholders, such as local civil society and business, who facilitate resource mobilization and develop collaborative plans for crisis response.

Ukraine's Decentralization Reform Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion

Decentralization in Ukraine fundamentally transformed local governance, with LSGs established as semiautonomous entities with greater authority and responsibility. Launched in 2014, the decentralization reform aimed to implement the self-government and subsidiarity principles in line with European standards. It empowered *hromadas* to make decisions on budget allocation, local development, and public service delivery, fostering more responsive and participatory governance. Specifically, the share of personal income tax remaining with LSGs was 25 percent prior to the reform in 2014, increasing to 60 percent with the initial phase of decentralization in 2015 and then to 64 percent in 2022, meaning a greater access to resources at the local level and thus greater ability for local authorities to respond directly to citizens' needs. The newfound autonomy encouraged collaborative practices among local governments, civil society, and the private sector. The reforms improved public trust in local authorities. By enabling a bottom-up approach to decision-making, decentralization made LSGs the key actors in regional development and democratic governance.

However, the introduction of martial law due to Russia's full-scale invasion has led to changes in LSG areas of responsibilities. Some powers were recentralized, including emergency coordination, defense-related logistics, and civilian defense. The personal income tax paid by military personnel was withdrawn from local budgets and allocated to the national one. Regional state administrations were swiftly transformed into regional military administrations, which were granted expanded authority, especially over decisions related to security, resource allocation, and wartime coordination. Local self-governments were mandated to cooperate more closely with these newly empowered bodies. Moreover, 13 percent of the total number of *hromadas*, mainly in regions close to the front line, have military administrations at the territorial *hromada* level. Yet despite martial law and war shocks, LSGs have remained crucial in maintaining public services, supporting displaced populations, and mobilizing local resources.

Methods

Our study of crisis governance by Ukrainian LSGs draws on a survey of local public officials, as well as interviews, focus groups, and a validation workshop with public officials and civil society organizations. The survey, conducted from January 1 to March 12, 2024, was distributed through the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities, the NGOs People in Need and the National Platform for Resilience and Cohesion, and the mailing list from

a 2022 study by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. The dataset comprises 181 responses, representing 14 percent of municipalities under Ukrainian control (see Figure 1).[5] Of the 241 LSG respondents in the 2022 pilot survey on the needs and challenges of Ukrainian municipalities, 37 respondents (20 percent of the current sample) also participated in the 2024 survey.

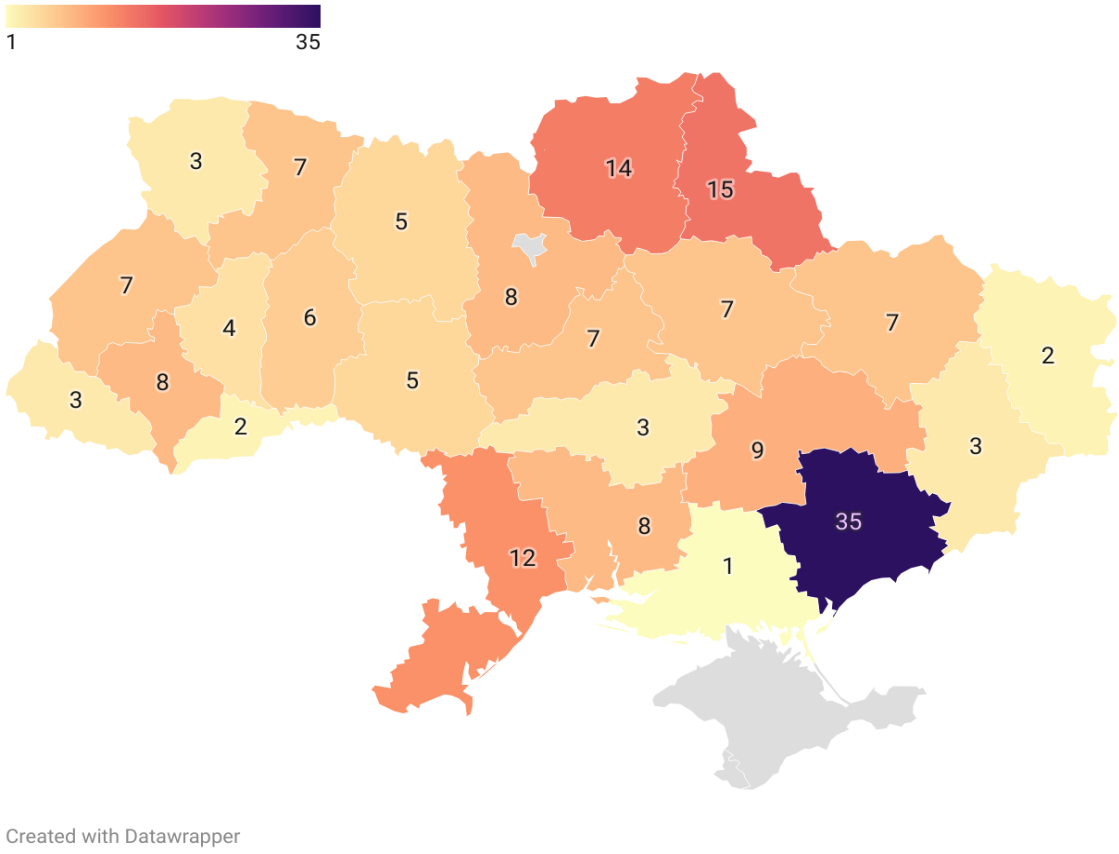


Figure 1. LSGs surveyed by region
Source: Authors

Collaborative Crisis Response: Community Members as Partners

Ukrainian LSGs have demonstrated the ability to coproduce solutions to local war-related crises and thus enhance state legitimacy under the martial law regime.

[5] The sample slightly overrepresents Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions. Most responses (89 percent) come from municipalities with 50,000 or fewer residents, while the rest are evenly distributed between medium-sized and large cities. Geographically, 67 percent of responding municipalities are outside of combat areas, 14 percent are temporarily occupied, and 19 percent are in active combat zones.

Legitimacy Pursuit Through Public Engagement

Contemporary crisis governance worldwide is marked by "regressive securitization," whereby democratic processes are sidelined to achieve perceived efficiency gains. Yet in today's Ukraine, grassroots engagement helps to support legitimacy even though elections have been suspended in line with the Constitution. Indeed, compared to 2022, even more Ukrainian LSGs involved stakeholders directly in problem-solving and took account of diverse opinions through information and/or engagement initiatives (see Figure 2). Whereas an erosion of democratic legitimacy might have been expected, Ukrainian LSGs have used local democratic practices to respond to crises proactively. This represents an alternative pillar of legitimacy and accountability, contributing to democratic resilience in Ukraine beyond electoral accountability.

For example, Makariv (Kyiv Region), a village that was massively damaged in the early days of the full-scale war, with 2,305 buildings destroyed or damaged (nearly 30 percent of all structures), involved the whole community—including vocal members of the opposition to the ruling party in the city council, as well as their affiliated constituencies—in deliberations on postwar reconstruction. After about a year of difficult dialogue in organized urban planning workshops, an informal "community development council" was established.

Another telling example is dealing with internally displaced persons (IDPs) through dedicated councils. These advisory platforms, consisting of LSG and community representatives, have been established in over 750 governing entities (mostly LSGs but also at the district and regional levels). They often involve IDPs and NGOs representing their interests, allowing information on the needs and possibilities for support to flow between LSGs and the affected individuals. Although participants are not always satisfied with the level of representation, IDP councils represent a mechanism for protected consultation, which is critical for a democracy.

Coproduction of Solutions to War-Related Problems

Most surveyed LSGs (71 percent), including in temporarily occupied territory (64 percent) and those in territory where fighting is taking place (69 percent), report having conducted initiatives to inform and/or engage citizens or businesses in their *hromadas* in the past year.

This was done for practical reasons: to build up community resources, meet the needs of vulnerable social groups, and coordinate supply/demand for aid, such as for the Ukrainian army and IDPs. We see notable shifts in LSG priorities, with the biggest decreases versus 2022 coming in mitigating emotional pressure and fear (down 21 percentage points) and coordinating volunteers (down 20

percentage points), while, as mentioned, bringing in diverse opinions saw the biggest increase (up 13 percentage points). This reflects a continued focus on practical and immediate assistance. Nevertheless, community cohesion remains a priority despite slight declines in stakeholder engagement.

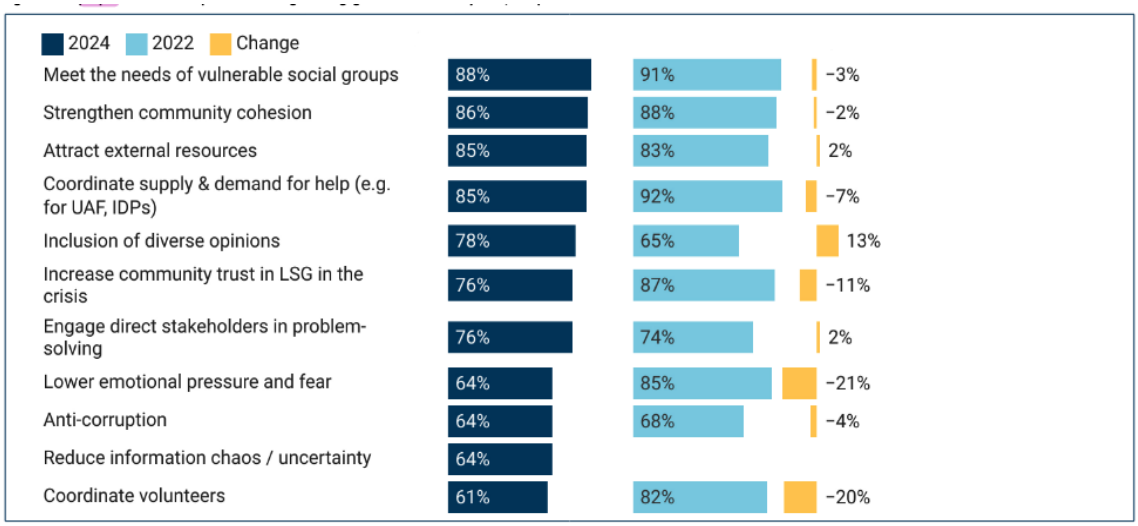


Figure 2. The purpose of wartime public information and engagement initiatives by LSGs, compared to 2022[6]
Source: Authors

The primary critical problem where LSGs reported public engagement was the integration of IDPs, with 34 percent of the total sample reporting it. In addition, LSGs report stakeholder involvement in organizing civilian security and defense (21 percent) and meeting residents' immediate needs, such as food and personal items (17 percent).

Ukrainian LSGs engaged nongovernmental stakeholders across various dimensions of civil participation (see Figure 3) when responding to one of the abovementioned critical issues. There were almost no LSG respondents who did not inform any stakeholder groups in connection with a critical issue (e.g., IDP issues). Furthermore, only about a fifth of all respondents did not engage the public on the informing, consultation, dialogue, and partnership dimensions. These high numbers indicate the collaborative nature of crisis response (see Figure 3).

[6] N 2024 = 129, N 2022 = 160 (for LSGs that have initiatives to inform and/or engage citizens or businesses); the question was: "For what purpose did the LSG in your community introduce initiatives to inform and/or engage citizens or businesses in the last 12 months?" Respondents were to indicate primary and secondary purposes, as well as those that were irrelevant. The figures shown reflect only primary responses.

Between 2022 and 2024, IDPs accounted for the most significant growth in engagement with LSGs, which mostly provided information proactively and engaged in regular discussions. LSGs relied on initiatives from IDPs or NGOs that support them, the latter serving as information facilitators for LSGs to adjust their IDP programs to meet needs. This increased consultation with IDPs indicates an appreciation of more nuanced and grassroots knowledge for problem-solving, even if participants criticize the responsiveness of LSGs to their proposals.

There are also examples of partnerships between relocated business and LSGs, such as in the small city of Kopychyntsi (Ternopil Region), which accommodated a furniture factory by providing space for production free of charge and finding housing for displaced employees, and Kosiv (Ivano-Frankivsk Region), another small *hromada*, where the LSG linked a relocated textile firm with local education providers to supply skilled labor.

Nongovernmental organizations have emerged as key players in collaborative crisis response, proactively approaching LSGs. Ukraine has a well-developed legislative framework for public consultation, aligned with global best practices, and a highly active civil society, which generally enables local NGOs to participate in discussions with LSGs. Nonetheless, LSG decisions do not always reflect NGO input. Yet, examples of NGO involvement include a participatory approach to the construction and design of bomb shelters in Chernihiv Region (NGO Dobrochyn) and the facilitation of inclusive community centers across 10 different *hromadas* (NGO Cedos).

Businesspeople are another stakeholder group that has had an influence since 2022. On the one hand, they do not necessarily seek to engage in policy consultations; on the other hand, when they do provide feedback, it is crucial for LSGs because businesspeople own material resources that can be used for the co-production of crisis response and contribute to local tax revenues. For instance, local taxi drivers have offered free transportation for individuals with reduced mobility, and a solar cooperative has supplied electricity to an LSG during power outages. A shining example is the institutional cooperation between the Lviv IT Cluster, the Ukrainian Catholic University, and the city of Lviv to support the UNBROKEN foundation, which funds a rehabilitation center in Lviv. Business, university, and city representatives jointly steer the initiative and fundraising while ensuring transparency and accountability. Thus, this is a model case of coproduction of services between local government and nongovernmental stakeholders.

Figure 3. Extent of stakeholder engagement in response to critical war-related local problems[7]
Source: Authors

Finally, 10–15 percent of LSGs indicate they inform or consult former soldiers about issues beyond veteran policy. For example, Makariv specifically contacted the local veteran society during rebuilding discussions. This reflects how LSGs are sensitive to the composition of their communities and understand the significance of veteran inclusion for social cohesion.

Public Engagement Supports Crisis Preparedness

Our regression analysis, which accounts for relevant control variables, suggests that **stakeholder involvement in Ukrainian *hromadas* is associated with greater preparedness**.

[7] N = 127 (LSGs outside of combat areas, LSGs in combat areas, and liberated LSGs that engaged the public and/or business on critical issues over the last 12 months); the question was: "Regarding the problem you identified in the previous question, which stakeholders were involved, and how did they participate in solving the problem?"

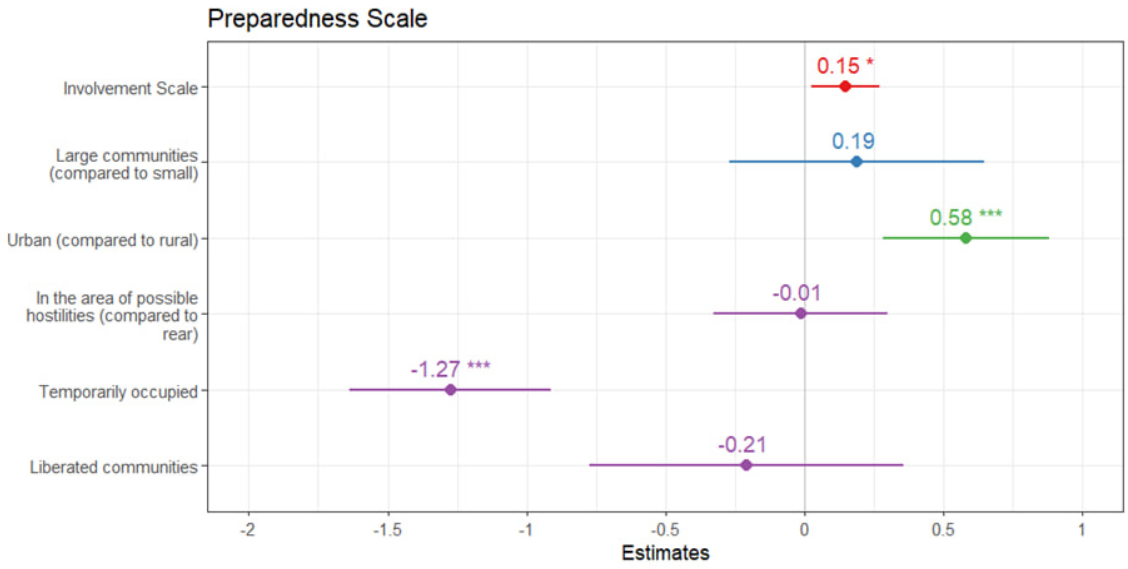


Figure 4. Standardized regression estimates of nongovernmental stakeholder impact on crisis preparedness[8]
Source: Authors

Specifically, we find that the more stakeholders an LSG engages in crisis response, the better it performs in our measure of preparedness, which includes the following components: action planning for emergencies, addressing the scarcity of critical resources (i.e., food, water, and medicine), and fixing damage to vital infrastructure. The mechanism underlying this relationship is likely that nongovernmental stakeholders facilitate the accumulation of resources and contribute to the elaboration of crisis response plans.

In addition, our findings show the limits of public engagement in crisis response planning: Only about a third of the LSG respondents engage NGOs and entrepreneurs. However, our results underscore that this can improve preparedness. Thus, it should be encouraged, for example, as part of international development cooperation assistance. Of note, Estonia has funded a unique project to build resilience through collaborative governance practices in Ukraine.

[8] The Involvement Index has a positive and statistically significant effect on preparedness ($\beta = 0.149$, $p = 0.016$). For example, a 10-point increase in involvement (on a 0–35 scale) is associated with a 0.22-point rise in preparedness (on a 0–1 scale), meaning highly engaged *hromadas* can be said to be over 20 percent more prepared than those with minimal stakeholder engagement. The model explains 35.6 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.356$, $n = 181$). Control variables include *hromada* size, *hromada* type, and security conditions.

We find that stakeholder engagement is not only a democratic practice but also a crucial instrument for crisis governance that supports societal resilience.

Community Spaces Foster Collaborative Crisis Governance

Our survey analysis indicates a small yet **significant correlation between stakeholder involvement in crisis response** and the availability of various physical and discursive spaces in local communities (see Figure 5). The more spaces available, the more stakeholders that LSGs engage in war-related problem-solving.

This finding complements our earlier results, pointing to a positive relationship between the availability of physical hubs and virtual networks in a *hromada* and its preparedness for the deprivations of war. Examples of such spaces include—to rank them from the most to least common—humanitarian aid hubs, IDP councils, youth centers, IDP support centers, volunteer hubs, community spaces for public organizations and initiatives, adult education centers, and business support centers.

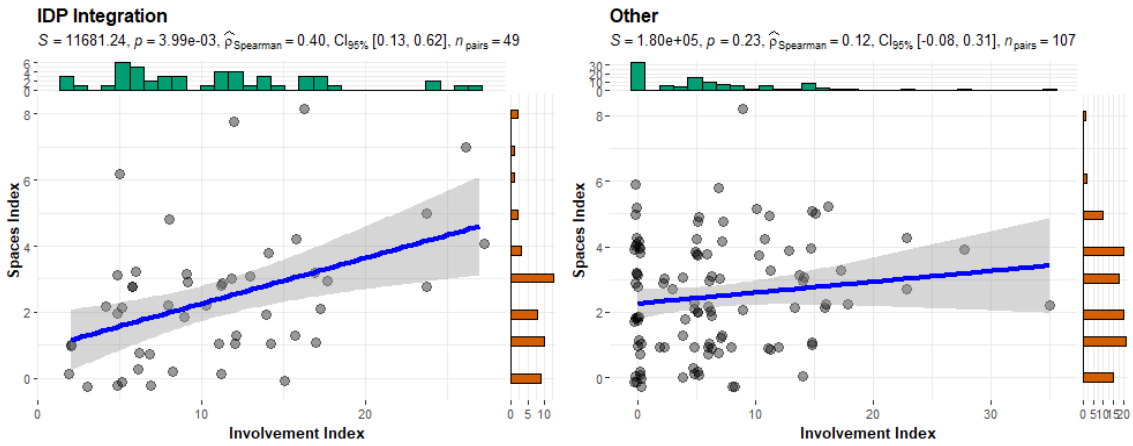


Figure 5. Availability of community spaces and stakeholder engagement in war-related problem-solving[9]
Source: Authors

[9] The figure shows a scatter plot of the Spaces Index against the Involvement Index with category-wise trend lines (IDP integration—Spearman's rho = 0.40 [p = <0.01]; other—Spearman's rho = 0.23 [p = <0.05]); N = 127 (LSGs outside of combat areas, LSGs in combat areas, and liberated LSGs that engaged the public and/or business on critical issues over the last 12 months); the Involvement Index reflects the diversity of involved stakeholders in the multiplicity of participatory dimensions, while the Spaces Index demonstrates the number of community spaces reported by LSG respondents.

Conclusions

The crisis response practices of Ukrainian LSGs underscore the **ability of decentralized governance systems**, with empowered local authorities, to **support societal resilience**. Embedded in their communities, LSGs find ways to enhance legitimacy during wartime, when traditional democratic accountability is limited. They understand their local contexts very well, including the urgency of needs and the capacity of their communities to contribute to solutions.

The Ukrainian experience highlights how **collaborative crisis governance—** engaging **nonstate stakeholders in crisis response and preparedness**, both as **"consumers" and as "coproducers" of resilience**—is possible in practice. At the same time, sustaining collaborative relations between local authorities and their communities is a challenge. Specifically, outmigration, combined with limits to people's psychological resilience due to war stress, makes arranging active and inclusive participation more difficult. Security is another serious concern: In-person participation is virtually impossible in front-line municipalities due to constant shelling, but it is challenging farther from the front line as well, since Russia may deliberately target public gatherings.

Three key lessons can be drawn from the experience of Ukrainian LSGs in fostering collaborative crisis governance:

1. **Local governments should be seen as partners for national authorities in solving war-related crises.** The former can offer local, context-specific solutions, easing the burden on the state. This requires intergovernmental feedback loops and coordination platforms.

2. **Stakeholder engagement should be strategic.** This includes: (1) investing in joint emergency preparedness exercises between LSGs, local community leaders, NGOs, and businesses to practice coordination before crises occur; and (2) decentralized approaches to resource stockpiling, where local stakeholders are actively involved in identifying, managing, and distributing emergency supplies.

3. **Community and LSG capacity for participating in collaborative crisis governance can be enhanced** by: (1) investing in physical community spaces that meet security and accessibility criteria, such as equipped bomb shelters and infrastructure for people with reduced mobility; (2) supporting the work of professional facilitators (individuals and organizations, both from within or outside the community) who can structure community dialogue over time and on multiple levels simultaneously; and (3) engaging new groups as communicators (e.g.,

youth groups and NGOs) because local authorities will likely be stretched to their capacity as they function and respond to crises during the war.

Appendix

The Preparedness Scale is a composite measure assessing LSG crisis readiness. It includes 26 items covering resource stockpiles, crisis communication, backup infrastructure, response planning, and data security. The scale's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α = .84), ensuring internal consistency. To facilitate interpretation, the index was normalized from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate greater preparedness.

The Involvement Scale measures stakeholder engagement in local crisis management based on the Council of Europe's participation dimensions. It includes 35 items (α = .87), capturing informing, proactive, and reactive consultation, regular exchange and feedback to stakeholder input (dialogue) across the following stakeholder groups: residents, businesspeople, NGOs, IDPs, veterans, and experts. The scale is an additive index summing all stakeholder interactions, normalized to enhance comparability.

For further reading, see "Survey on the Needs and Priorities of Local Authorities of Ukraine" by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and Keudel, O., Hatsko, V., Darkovich, A., & Huss, O. (2024). Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities' Crisis Response in War (Research Report No. 33; p. 57). Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

How Zelensky Has Leveraged Oligarchs for the War Without Dismantling Ukraine's Patronal System

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 949
August 2025

Yuriy Matsiyevsky[1]
Ostroh Academy National University

The optimistic expectations for President Volodymyr Zelensky's de-oligarchization campaign remain largely unmet today. Neither his efforts nor the war have brought about the demise of oligarchy or the patronal system, where the president strives to be the chief patron. This chapter engages with a recent work on the prospects of anti-patronal transformation in Ukraine, arguing that Zelensky's objective has not been to dismantle the system but to coerce oligarchs into cooperation to achieve his goals.

Oligarchs have not turned into regular businesspeople but rather have adapted to the new legal and wartime constraints. While figures like Viktor Medvedchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky have lost assets and influence, others, such as Rinat Akhmetov and Viktor Pinchuk, have aligned with Zelensky and fared better. Meanwhile, Petro Poroshenko, a candy tycoon and former president, remains active in the political opposition, despite pressure from his political rivals. Ultimately, Zelensky's campaign has preserved rather than eradicated the patronal system, which will likely survive the war and beyond.

Although Zelensky's approach may resemble Vladimir Putin's crackdown on Russian oligarchs, it diverges in three key ways. First, while Zelensky likes to dominate the political arena, he does not seek to establish a single patronal network akin to Putin's authoritarian model. Second, Zelensky's strategy selectively rewards or punishes oligarchs based on their stance on the war with Russia, unlike Putin's systematic elimination of rivals for personal enrichment. Third, despite martial law and restricted political competition, Zelensky has not politically destroyed Poroshenko—an unthinkable scenario in Putin's Russia.

[1] Yuriy Matsiyevsky is professor of political science in the Department of National Security and Political Science at Ostroh Academy National University (Ukraine).

Ukraine's political system differs significantly from typical Eurasian authoritarian regimes: It is not dominated by a single patronal network subordinating oligarchs to the president but features competing patronal networks, thereby preventing autocratic consolidation.

On the one hand, the resilience of patronalism will complicate Ukraine's effort to become an effective democracy; on the other hand, the revival of oligarchic competition in the postwar period will be an important safeguard against authoritarianism. With the shifting U.S. position on Ukraine, the European Union remains the paramount pole of democratic influence, and the prospect of accession to the European Union should keep Ukraine on the path of anti-patronal reforms.

Oligarchy and Patronalism in Ukraine

According to Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, oligarchs wield formal economic power to influence politics informally, while polygarchs use formal political power to influence business informally. When the spheres of social action are not separated, politics and business become closely intertwined in countries like Ukraine, with interactions based on personalized hierarchical exchanges known as patronalism. Oligarchs and polygarchs are an integral part of such a system.

Like most post-Soviet states, Ukraine saw oligarchs emerge in the mid-1990s. They significantly influenced politics through private payments to politicians, a phenomenon known as state capture. The natural reaction of the state, usually represented by the chief executive, was a desire to rid itself of oligarchs' influence, often through business capture. However, Ukraine's divided executive power, elite competition, and active civic engagement led to what Henry Hale calls a competing-pyramid system. In this framework, no single oligarch or polygarch has absolute control over the state—a hallmark of hybrid regimes and patronal democracies, as described by Madlovics and Magyar.

It was under the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014) when oligarchic influence peaked in Ukraine, which came to be dominated by the "Donetsk clan"—a group of oligarchs and organized crime figures from the Donbas. They controlled the central government four times (in 1993–1994, in 2003–2004 and 2006–2007 during Yanukovych's premiership, and in 2010–2014 during Yanukovych's presidency), overshadowing regional rivals like the Dnipropetrovsk and Kyiv clans. The aggressive expansion of the Donetsk clan's influence was a leading cause of the mass political protests in 2013–2014 that ousted Yanukovych and his circle, who were stripped of their power and a large part of their assets. The Revolution of Dignity then amplified public demand for de-oligarchization in subsequent electoral cycles.

Even Poroshenko, the businessman turned president (2014–2019), supported de-oligarchization, while appointing oligarchs Kolomoisky and Serhiy Taruta as regional administrators. Despite the demand for reforms, patronalism persisted as entrenched informal networks resisted change.

Zelensky's De-oligarchization Campaign

With Zelensky's victory in the 2019 presidential election and his party's subsequent triumph in the parliamentary election, Ukraine entered a unique moment where a single political actor could legitimately consolidate control over the country's executive and legislative branches. In Hale's terminology, this situation suggested a shift from competing-pyramid system toward a single-pyramid system. Nonetheless, oligarchs, including Zelensky's patron Kolomoisky, retained significant influence in politics and the media under the new president.

To respond to the public demand for de-oligarchization, Zelensky initiated a campaign targeting oligarchs. This included the passage of two key laws in late 2021: the "anti-oligarchic" law and a tax law. The former tasked the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC), rather than any of the anti-corruption agencies, with compiling a registry of oligarchs based on four criteria: wealth exceeding $80 million; beneficial ownership of monopolies; political involvement; and media influence. Meeting any three of these criteria would result in inclusion in the registry and entail restricted participation in privatization tenders and party financing.

The law took effect in May 2022. In July of that year, then-NSDC Secretary Oleksiy Danilov announced that around 86 persons may be subject to the law. Following Venice Commission recommendations, however, the government postponed creating the registry until after martial law ends and reassigned responsibility for it to the Ministry of Justice. The commission also suggested Ukraine adopt a systematic rather than case-by-case approach to de-oligarchization, but the government has yet to act on this.

The tax law, which took effect in January 2022, increased the tax burden on oligarchs. Both laws were part of a broader 20-step plan to reduce oligarchic influence through measures such as strengthening the Antimonopoly Committee, regulating lobbying, reforming the judiciary, and enhancing energy security. Despite initial momentum, only eight steps have been completed, the others remaining stalled or irrelevant due to the ongoing war.

Zelensky adopted a strategy of coercion during wartime, presenting oligarchs with a stark choice: cooperate or face ruin. He demanded political loyalty and financial support for his initiatives in exchange for immunity from prosecution

and continued business privileges. This strategy reduced the influence of oligarch-affiliated parties in the parliament and diminished their sway over public opinion—something Zelensky is very sensitive to—as most TV stations now operate under the state-controlled United News telethon format. The war further legitimized asset seizures from disloyal oligarchs such as Medvedchuk, Kostyantyn Zhevago, Oleksandr Yaroslavsky, Vadym Novinsky, and Dmytro Firtash.

Unlike Putin's 2003 crackdown on Yukos and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Zelensky's actions are motivated by state survival rather than personal enrichment. While his campaign has significantly curtailed oligarchic influence in politics and the media during wartime, it remains targeted at individuals rather than the systemic foundations of oligarchy. This personalistic approach risks allowing oligarchy and by extension patronalism to persist and resurge during postwar reconstruction.

Oligarchs' Survival Strategies

On February 23, 2022, the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion, Zelensky convened a meeting with the owners of Ukraine's 50 largest businesses, urging them to remain in the country and unite against Russian aggression. Many heeded his call, including Akhmetov and Pinchuk. Akhmetov pledged to set aside past grievances and announced a UAH1 billion ($34 million) advance tax payment to bolster government finances.

Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man, has suffered major financial losses during the war—$9 billion in the first year alone. Despite this, he has closed his media holding and donated $300 million to military and humanitarian projects since 2022. His actions reflect lessons learned from his inconsistent and fundamentally anti-Ukrainian stance in spring 2014, a move that contributed to Ukraine's loss of control over the Donbas. If Akhmetov's support for Zelensky demonstrated the president's success in reining in oligarchs, it was also a winning bet for Ukraine's richest man.

According to Forbes Ukraine, Akhmetov reached an informal agreement with Zelensky early in the war: In exchange for supporting humanitarian efforts—such as evacuations, free electricity for medical and military personnel, and cofinancing the FreeDom TV channel—Akhmetov received favorable treatment in sectors like energy and metallurgy, where he still has operating assets. Forbes also notes that Akhmetov has a direct line of communication with Zelensky and the head of the Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak, although he has used it only a few times to pledge support for the president's initiatives.

Novinsky, Akhmetov's Metinvest partner, also agreed to the new rules proposed by Zelensky. However, unlike Akhmetov, Novinsky failed to keep his assets after

relocating to Europe following the outbreak of the war, even though he renounced his parliamentary mandate. In December 2022, the NSDC sanctioned him and nine Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate; UOC) clergy for aiding Russia. Originally from Russia, Novinsky became a Ukrainian citizen in 2012 and a UOC deacon in 2020, and consistently backed UOC subversive activities in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) seized his assets in April 2023 and May 2023, in sums of $83.5 million and $202.0 million (UAH3.5 billion and UAH10.5 billion), respectively. In January 2025, the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) issued Novinsky a notice of suspicion of high treason and incitement of religious hatred.

Meanwhile, Viktor Pinchuk, the son-in-law of former President Leonid Kuchma, has emerged as Zelensky's "favorite" oligarch thanks to his exceptional pliantness. Pinchuk attended the prewar meeting with the president and, after the start of the war, transferred control of his media holding's information policy to the Presidential Office. Like Akhmetov, Pinchuk kept his word and donated $50 million in the first six months of the war to military and humanitarian efforts. With two thirds of his fortune tied to overseas real estate, Pinchuk's wealth declined only 15 percent—from $2.6 billion to $2.2 billion—in the first year of the war.

Pinchuk compensated for lost access to Russian markets by expanding metallurgical exports to Europe and the United States, including railway wheel exports made by his industrial company Interpipe. Following Donald Trump's introduction of 25-percent tariffs on steel and aluminum imports in 2025—a move that also affects Akhmetov's Metinvest—Pinchuk wants to expand the flow of railway wheels to the EU market. In 2024, Interpipe's European sales surpassed the level of 2021. In addition, the company is dominant in the domestic market, which is evidenced by its regularly winning tenders to sell wheels to the state railway company and pipes to gas companies. Despite 2022 allegations of inflated prices in state tenders investigated by Ukraine's Antimonopoly Committee, Interpipe has managed to come out largely unscathed.

Akhmetov, Pinchuk, and most smaller oligarchs (e.g., Taruta, Serhiy Tigipko, and Borys Kaufman) accepted the new rules and were allowed to keep their assets, while Firtash, Medvedchuk, and Kolomoisky faced investigations, losing significant holdings and influence. Poroshenko stands apart as the only oligarch openly opposing Zelensky politically while maintaining his business in Ukraine.

Firtash made his money in gas transit, having gained control over a network of gas distribution companies in Ukraine. Detained in Austria in 2014 at the request of the United States, he remains there, contesting extradition on bribery charges related to an Indian titanium mining permit. His influence in Ukraine's gas market has declined since 2021, with the SBI filing a $35.5 million damage case and a court

transferring 26 of his gas distribution operators to the Asset Recovery and Management Agency in May 2022. In May 2023, the SBU and the Economic Security Bureau accused him of actions that cost the state $429.29 million. Despite the loss of most of his gas assets, Firtash's Group DF remains a global player in the nitrogen and titanium markets.

The detention of Firtash, as opposed to Khodorkovsky's imprisonment, highlights the differences in relations with oligarchs in patronal autocracy versus patronal democracy. In Khodorkovsky's case, the legal system was used as a weapon against the Kremlin's political enemies. In contrast, the legal challenge against Firtash came because of competing political factions and with the help of external actors (the United States). His arrest was part of shifting political alignments after the Euromaidan revolution and the decline of pro-Russia forces in Ukraine.

Zelensky's approach to oligarchs is most evident in the case of Kolomoisky, whose relationship with the president has taken a dramatic U-turn. Once a key backer, Kolomoisky used his media empire to support Zelensky in the 2019 election. But their relationship soured after Zelensky blocked Kolomoisky's efforts to regain PrivatBank, nationalized under Poroshenko. In contrast to his active pro-Ukraine stance in 2014, Kolomoisky was passive after the full-scale war began, further straining ties with Zelensky. He was then stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship in July 2022 before being arrested in September 2023 on fraud and money laundering charges. He is currently held in a temporary detention facility due to the ongoing investigation. In May 2024, he was named a suspect in a decades-old attempted murder case, the culmination of his descent from patron to pariah.

Zelensky's relationship with Poroshenko is also telling. Since 2019, Ukrainian authorities have filed 58 cases against Poroshenko, including treason charges for allegedly allowing Medvedchuk to import coal from occupied Donbas in 2015. In December 2021, charges and an arrest warrant were issued against Poroshenko in the Medvedchuk case, with Medvedchuk charged earlier that autumn. Poroshenko's companies were fined $10.3 million, and on Orthodox Christmas Eve 2022, a court froze his assets, a move the opposition called political persecution.

Poroshenko attended the meeting with Zelensky right before the war and agreed to resist the Russian aggression jointly. Yet the partnership quickly collapsed after Poroshenko's two TV channels were removed from the list of national free channels. Seeing this as a breach of their informal agreement, Poroshenko and his team launched a campaign criticizing the Zelensky administration. In response, the Presidential Office implemented restrictions on Poroshenko and his MPs from traveling abroad. Poroshenko, leveraging his EU connections, accused Ukrainian authorities of suppressing the opposition.

Despite their feud, Zelensky is unlikely to eliminate Poroshenko politically. As the leader of the largest opposition party, Poroshenko remains shielded from pressure by law enforcement, which stands in contrast to Russia, where no opposition figure is safe from arbitrary arrest. Their rivalry looks set to stay political. This is evidenced by Poroshenko's ban from parliamentary sessions and the latest round of sanctions against him, including capital withdrawal restrictions and an asset freeze; still, an outright arrest before the next presidential election is unlikely.

Poroshenko's case underscores that in a hybrid regime, an oligarch who leads the opposition retains significant autonomy, which can ensure his political survival.

Survival of the System

While the share of oligarchic capital in Ukraine's economy declined from 15 percent in 2010 to under 10 percent in 2022, Zelensky's de-oligarchization policy has not dismantled the system. Instead, his personalistic approach has turned oligarchs into contingent partners. After the war and elections, the system is likely to revert to polycentrism, with a revival of oligarchic competition and old practices.

New economic opportunities during and after the war—particularly in the defense industry, energy sector, and infrastructure reconstruction, all areas with minimal competition—will be attractive to aspiring oligarchs. These could become the foundation for new financial and industrial groups, whose leaders may claim "new oligarch" status.

A systematic approach is essential for lasting de-oligarchization. Echoing James Madison's notion, put forward in Federalist No. 10, that the competition of moneyed interests is the lifeblood of democracy, the focus for Ukraine moving forward should be fostering rule-based competition rather than simply removing oligarchs from the political arena. Strengthening the Antimonopoly Committee and all anti-corruption agencies is crucial to this effort.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration lacks a clear policy on oligarchs. It recently disbanded a task force created to confiscate Russian oligarchs' assets, potentially weakening efforts to curb their influence. Pressure could also be applied to Ukrainian oligarchs to push Ukraine toward a ceasefire, as Elon Musk suggested after the Oval Office dispute between Zelensky and Trump. While no sanctions on Ukrainian oligarchs have been introduced since normal communication resumed between Washington and Kyiv, this remains a possible tool.

Overall, preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy aligns with U.S. strategic interests. The United States and the European Union ought to continue supporting Ukraine until a just peace is secured while pressuring it to strengthen

the rule of law, complete judicial reform, and advance EU accession. Encouraging non-oligarchic business and investment in historically monopolized sectors—metallurgy, chemicals, and minerals—will reinforce this transformation.

Only through these combined efforts can the public demand for de-oligarchization be translated into a lasting anti-patronal shift in Ukraine.

Part III.
War Crimes

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Russian Crimes in Ukraine: Aggression, Atrocities, and the Road Ahead

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 944
August 2025

Kristina Hook, PhD,[1]
Kennesaw State University

"Ukraine is a crime scene" — International Criminal Court Prosecutor Karim Khan summarized one year into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, describing the scope and scale of the devastation. From violence like killing, rape, and torture to property damage and forced displacement, the list of Russian crimes in Ukraine is extensive and includes millions of victims.

These crimes can be divided into two main strands: (1) the crime of aggression, i.e., the "planning, initiation, or execution of an act of using armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of another State," and (2) atrocity crimes, i.e., those "considered to be the most serious crimes against humankind" that harm "the core dignity of human beings" (war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide). In this chapter, I discuss the critical importance of addressing such Russian crimes for reasons that include (but are not limited to) their social impact in Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere.

Russian Criminal Actions in Ukraine: Aggression and Atrocity Crimes

Addressing the full breadth of Russian criminal violations in Ukraine is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a short summary of Russian criminal violations in the areas of aggression and atrocity crimes is presented below. Many of these categories of crimes occurred simultaneously, but the judicial accountability processes covering them will diverge. When considering the social impact of these crimes, the crimes themselves, the expressed intent of their perpetrator(s), and the adequacy (or lack thereof) of accountability mechanisms to provide acceptable—if not wholly adequate—forms of redress will all have lingering consequences.

The Crime of Aggression

[1] Kristina Hook, PhD is Assistant Professor of Conflict Management at Kennesaw State University's School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding, and Development.

The unprovoked nature of Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine has sent shockwaves across institutions, laws, and norms. Notwithstanding its well-discussed limitations and inequalities, the post-World War II system of international institutions and laws formalized a process by which interstate security and economic disputes could be resolved outside of kinetic warfare. The existence of fundamental principles like territorial integrity and state sovereignty, even when violated by nation-states, was itself not disputed. In this light, Russia's attempted annexation of (at least) five provinces within a neighboring state's sovereign, internationally recognized territory as part of a unilateral war of conquest has ripple effects for the international rules that uphold every existing diplomatic, economic, and security agreement.

These factors shape interpretations of Russia's war against Ukraine as a crime of aggression (also referred to as a crime against peace). In particular, the Rome Statute adopted the following definition: "The planning, preparation, initiation, or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of aggression which, by its character, gravity and scale, constitutes a manifest violation of the Charter of the United Nations." International aggression is best described as a leadership crime, and individual perpetrators tried for this crime must be political or military leaders. The Rome Statute also contains a comprehensive list of acts of aggression, which, although often-debated, include invasion, annexation by force, bombardment, military occupation, and military blockade of ports—all of which describe Russia's actions in Ukraine. United Nations General Assembly resolutions have reflected the language of the crime of aggression, including a March 2022 resolution, passed by an overwhelming 141-to-5 majority, condemning Russia's "aggression against Ukraine in violation of the Charter of the United Nations." In July 2023, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice inaugurated a new international center for prosecuting Russia for the crime of aggression against Ukraine—the first such effort since the Nuremberg Trials.

Atrocity Crimes

Throughout Russia's full-scale war, the intense cruelty shown toward Ukrainian civilians has resulted in numerous crimes under the broad category of atrocity crimes, defined by the United Nations as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Although the protected victims under each crime can differ, atrocity crimes collectively have been termed the "most serious crimes against humankind," harming the "core dignity of human beings, in particular the persons that should be most protected by States." Russian forces have carried out a systematic campaign of willfully targeting civilians, which has raised important questions regarding Russian motives in Ukraine.

While war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide are distinct crimes, they can occur in tandem. Definitions of *war crimes* are laid out both in international humanitarian law and in international criminal law treaties, as well as in international customary law (see Annex 1). Broadly, war crimes are serious violations that occur during a state of armed conflict, including violent acts, attacks, and reprisals against civilians and civilian infrastructure with no military objective; destruction of education and religious institutions; and attacks where civilian fatalities are expected or excessive in relation to direct, concrete military advantages. In contrast, *crimes against humanity* are possible during both peacetime and wartime and are defined under the Rome Statute in a specific list of prohibited acts (e.g., murder, deportation, torture, rape, etc.) "when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population." Unlike *genocide*, crimes against humanity have no such requirement to establish intent on the part of the perpetrator(s), with the prohibited acts including a final broad category ("other inhumane acts"). These factors have often led to more rapid determinations of crimes against humanity compared to genocide.

Although the term "genocide" is often loaded in political discourse, it is one of the most well-defined concepts in international law. The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter, Genocide Convention) was adopted in 1948, just three years after the UN itself was established. Now ratified or acceded to by 153 nations (including Russia), the Genocide Convention was the first human rights treaty adopted by the then-nascent UN General Assembly. The global breadth of its signatories, spanning every continent, remains a major achievement, and the Genocide Convention has been widely credited with pioneering the development of international criminal law and international human rights.

The Genocide Convention prohibits five distinctive genocidal crimes (Article III), with direct and public incitement to genocide and the commission of genocide being the two most frequently analyzed in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. First, the vitriol directed by Russian state actors is a well-documented trend, which existed prior to Russia's full-scale invasion. By May 2022, genocide experts described how Ukrainians were regularly constructed as constituting an existential threat, targeted with dehumanizing rhetoric, and accused of the acts that Russians themselves had committed (a social phenomenon common in genocides, known as "accusation in a mirror"). In the next year, follow-up inquiries examined evidence to determine whether Russian actors continued these prohibited acts and found no evidence that genocidal incitement had abated in regularity or severity of tone. Mapped through comparative frameworks like the five Ds of incitement—demonization, delegitimization, dehumanization, denial of past atrocities, and disinformation (knowingly promoting false narratives to malign)—genocidal incitement has been sustained and documented across

multiple levels of Russian state authority, from Vladimir Putin down through local military and occupation authorities, who exercise direct physical control over Ukrainian citizens. New dehumanizing tropes ("de-Satanization") were introduced through influential, state-endorsed platforms in autumn 2022, indicating that rather than stopping, these violations escalated. Expressed motivations to destroy Ukraine or Ukrainian-ness, or both, belie characterizations of the war as a straightforward border skirmish or land grab.

Multiple scholars have argued that such inciting language has been matched by genocidal actions, defined by the Genocide Convention (Article II) as: "killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." Crucially, the occurence of these acts does not itself meet the evidentiary standard of genocide; rather, they must also have been "committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group." Thus, establishing genocide involves the intersection of genocidal motives (*mens rea*) with genocidal conduct (*actus reus*). One of the most frequently suggested Genocide Convention violations has been the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children by Russian state actors. Other analytical reports have recorded violations of all five prohibited acts with destructive intent, underscoring the extreme level of Russian brutality toward Ukrainians.

The Road Ahead: Social Impacts of Accountability or Failure of Redress

Russia's numerous crimes in Ukraine have implications for research, policy, and law, several of which are described below. Perhaps most critically, Ukrainians, a protected national group under the Genocide Convention, are still not safe from Russia's continuing violent actions. Over three years of Russia's full-scale war, international audiences, multilateral organizations, and decision-makers have largely failed to grasp the scope of the civilian protection challenges. For example, Russia's mass targeting of Ukrainian infrastructure in autumn 2022 led the International Rescue Committee to estimate that 17.7 million Ukrainians would require emergency humanitarian aid—an extraordinarily large number, at risk of extreme violence by Russian perpetrators. Emergency humanitarian aid was increased dramatically to help Ukrainians to survive Moscow's attempt to damage and destroy electrical and civilian infrastructure, but a sustained plan for the proactive protection of Ukrainian civilians never materialized.

On January 2025, USAID—the official humanitarian and development vehicle of the U.S. government—abruptly paused operations globally and in Ukraine, one of the largest beneficiaries of U.S. funding, which further raised concerns regarding the protection of Ukrainians from ongoing Russian atrocity crimes. As of the time

of this writing, reports indicate that this freeze is impacting international investigations into more than 140,000 documented war crimes cases in Ukraine. Currently, direct diplomatic overtures to Russia by the Trump administration have led to some perceptions that external actors may attempt to dictate Ukraine's future over the heads of Ukrainian citizens and the state. As Ukraine's pursuit of justice faces administrative, logistical, bureaucratic, and political headwinds, discourse by some international leaders open fresh wounds for victimized Ukrainians and threaten the accountability mechanisms intended to support atrocity victims everywhere.

The Russia-Ukraine war has been called the "most documented war in history"—large-scale warfare is often livestreamed and geolocated in almost real time. Russia's genocide in Ukraine has, therefore, been occurring in this context of widespread documentation, with characteristics of all five prohibited acts laid out in the Genocide Convention, and key figures, including Vladimir Putin, routinely self-incriminating in public fora. Notwithstanding this overwhelming evidence, atrocity crime accountability relies ultimately on political will for designations and prosecutions. With the duty to prevent genocide unequivocally grounded in international law, whether the protection of Ukrainian civilians is secured, and whether their quest to bring the perpetrators to justice is achieved, is likely to play a key role in trauma healing—or the lack thereof.

On top of political will and open questions regarding the current U.S. administration's stance on the topic of pursuing accountability for atrocity crimes, other logistical and technological challenges remain. As granular evidence appears regularly across diverse social media platforms, prosecutorial efforts are likely to run into similar issues with evidence preservation that have come up in other conflicts. Additionally, open-source experts have noted that evidence scarcity is less of a concern than analyst capacity to analyze evidence, which must meet standards for various judicial accountability institutions. There is a tension between slow bureaucratic innovation within the legacy organizations tasked with responding to Russian atrocities and the need to codify processes and standards for the inclusion of open-source data. These realities will pose obstacles for holding perpetrators accountable and should be addressed by research-based policy guidance recommendations now.

For Ukrainians, the social impacts of Russia's crimes against civilians are innumerable. As of this writing, Moscow's war against Ukraine has stretched 11 years, starting with the military-backed annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 before culminating in three years of high-intensity warfare, on a scale which Europe had not seen since World War II. On the second anniversary of the full-scale invasion, Amnesty International stressed the need for justice and accountability measures that take into account the full duration of the war:

> There can be no justice for Ukrainians without full accountability for all crimes committed by Russia since its military intervention in 2014… Since the 2014 occupation of Ukraine's Crimea, Amnesty International has documented numerous atrocities, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and critical civilian infrastructure, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, unlawful deprivation of freedom, forcible transfer of civilians, and the abuse of prisoners of war.

Trauma healing literature underscores that individual and collective trauma creates new social demands, including justice, safety, answers, , empowerment, restitution, and vindication. As Ukrainian society comes to terms with two genocides carried out by Moscow in less than a century (the first being the Holodomor, Stalin's engineered famine that claimed close to 4 million lives in Ukraine in the early 1930s), channeling its need for accountability, safety, and recovery through institutions like the European Union, NATO, and international courts should remain a global priority to avoid extra-institutional scenarios, including prolonged intergroup conflicts. As windows close, or appear to close, for such social demands to be met through institutions, such scenarios become more likely.

As for Russian society, genocide research indicates that this crime happens when key architects like Putin are backed by a generally passive or cowed critical mass of society that is willing to frame violence as permissible or even necessary. The social processes inherent in "cascading radicalization" can enmesh millions in carrying out the violence; organizing its bureaucratic, engineering, or other administrative implementation; or bystanding. Dehumanization and psychological construction of victims routinely occurs, with cruel behavior socially rewarded. Perpetrator societies often cast blame on the victims for their suffering, as seen in Bosnia genocide denialism and in Russian narratives that Ukrainians bomb themselves.

As I have written elsewhere, evidence of moral reorientation of this nature has existed in Russian society from 2022. Violence against Ukrainians has been routinized, transformed for Russian society from "unfortunate but permissible" to an ethical good with Ukrainians framed as an existential threat. Remarks by Dmitri Rogozin, the former head of Russia's space agency, exemplify this social behavior—he has called them "an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, Russian language, and Russian civilians… so let's get this over with. Once and forever. For our grandchildren." These social transformations will haunt Russian society, as they generate unstable, unpredictable dynamics that even authoritarian leaders like Putin will no longer be able to control fully. Radicalization in Russia unleashed by the war will likely be prolonged and

entrenched by "defensive consolidation" and/or any perception that Russia "won" the war and received benefits from it in other socially defined ways.

Given the grim realities that accompany the homecoming of war criminals, Russian experts and actors should more clearly, coherently, and openly discuss the imminent social effects, especially in the context of what is likely to be a no-extradition policy by the Kremlin with regard to individuals indicted by international courts or other judicial mechanisms. If the Russian state is unable or unwilling to remove atrocity perpetrators from Russian society, many such individuals will stay in Russia to avoid international warrants. This should also shape European attitudes toward security on the continent. The post-Cold War "peace dividend" allowed European governments to spend less on security and defense, while shaping European attitudes toward major wars as something geographically far removed from Europe. A variety of harrowing statistics in Ukraine—for example, Europe is now home to the world's most-mined country—should influence European attitudes to prioritize Ukraine's victory and recovery as part of a broader deterrence posture.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Russian and Pro-Russian Biopolitical Propaganda in Occupied Mariupol: A Visual Analysis

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 945
August 2025

Andrey Makarychev,[1]
University of Tartu

Russian and pro-Russian propaganda is one of the most relevant topics in such disciplines as media and communication, security studies, and political sociology. The number of such academic publications is growing, yet there is (at least) one scholarly sphere where issues related to misinformation and disinformation remain only tangentially explored—namely, biopolitics. Based on the work of philosopher Michel Foucault, this concept highlights the use of human biology for political control. The following analysis intends to start to fill this gap, conceptualizing the propaganda/biopolitics nexus and applying it to the empirical material of pro-Russian vlogs filmed in occupied Ukraine, specifically in Mariupol—a city of about half a million people that was razed and occupied by Russia in 2022.

My methodology is grounded in visual analysis of several dozen videos, mostly by vloggers who call themselves as locals (residents of Mariupol), but whose posts are explicitly pro-Moscow, Russia-friendly, and Ukraine-skeptic. My database comprises about 20 hours of publicly available Russian-language visuals, each of a relatively long duration (averaging approximately 20 minutes), and contains both vloggers' narratives and shorter informal interviews with city residents.

Theoretical Framing

The biopolitical dimensions of media is a relatively new research area. Since "Biopower has become informational," the concept of biopolitical media was recently developed to understand how media controls and disciplines human bodies, particularly through discourses of victimhood and survival during crises. Bodily vulnerability is seen as a catalyst for disseminating political narratives via

[1] Andrey Makarychev is a professor of regional political studies at the University of Tartu. The author acknowledges and appreciates the support received from two academic projects: Relational Approaches to Strategic Narratives (Estonian Research Council, PRG1716) and The Long Arms of Authoritarian States: Suppressing Independent Voices Within and Beyond Their Borders (Horizon Europe).

media. Biopolitical media can play an immunizing role, insulating people from stressful memories, narratives, and imageries, thus reducing "human experience to mere biological existence" and shifting attention from war to "the figure of survivor." Biopolitical media "functions as the nervous system of society. National state media outlets serve as the spinal cord and the main nerves, while local media outlets… serve as the peripheral nerves. As the doctor, the propaganda system categorizes all public opinion using general and often floating criteria, such as the distinctions between positive and negative."

Previously, the biopolitical aspects of ISIS media propaganda have been examined, with the visuals exploiting vulnerabilities of human bodies considered to be a crucial component of the controlling and disciplining functions of power. In the context of war, many authors prefer, instead of biopolitics, the concept of necropolitics, which attributes the key role in strategies of power to death and physical harm. As seen from this perspective, visual techniques may justify and legitimize military occupation and control over the population in occupied territory: "Not only does colonial occupation use visual violence, but it cannot be sustained without it."

However, the case of Russian and pro-Russian propaganda in eastern Ukraine does not fully support this argument. It is more biopolitical than necropolitical, designed to promote a policy of normalization and "caretaking" as a "life-centric strategy." In this biopolitical propaganda, the many casualties of the Russian aggression may be viewed as "ungrievable lives" whose deaths are meant to be forgotten.

The concept of biopolitical propaganda raises the question of how human minds and bodies can be objects of manipulative techniques. My approach to this question is based on several interconnected concepts: bare life, *homo sacer*, regime of care, de-subjectification, immunization, victimhood, and normalization. Each acquires new interpretations when applied to the study of biopolitical propaganda in occupied Ukraine.

Bare Life and *Homines Sacri*

The concept of "bare life" was coined by Giorgio Agamben as an academic metaphor signifying human existence unprotected by institutional and legal norms. In the biopolitical literature, bare lives characterize groups that are reduced to the state of physical survival. These lives are biological (*zoe)* but not political (*bios*). This precarious status chimes with the adjacent metaphor of *homo sacer* – an outcast, a "killable body" oscillating between life and death, lacking a well-articulated identity. Under the conditions of occupation, bare lives, who, in their own words, have "lost everything," are easy objects of targeted manipulation.

The transformation of residents of Mariupol into "bare lives" was based largely on an effected information vacuum, which is "a peculiar type of torture, because you don't know whether someone is aware of what's going on." According to an eyewitness, there were people around who provocatively spread the rumor that Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, had been taken by Russia. As soon as Mariupol was switched off from the Internet in early March 2022, disorientation rose dramatically, with residents experiencing the psychologically depressing sense that they do not know what is going on or what to do in the situation.

By default, bare life is a product of sovereign power that functions as a mechanism of exclusion, marginalization, and ostracism, creating zones of indistinction between belonging and unbelonging, integration and expulsion. What the case of Mariupol adds is that the sovereign power that produces bare life here is external to Ukraine. Using its information resources, this foreign power has legitimized the unpunishable use of physical force against bare lives and secured acceptance of acts of violence that "do not count as a crime."

Russia-loyal narratives aim at disengaging people from the reality of the war and preventing its proper assessment; people are supposed to focus on the everyday, on the routine. Those whose lives are reduced to physical survival are unwilling to produce explicitly political narratives. They speak about the war rather as a natural disaster with no clear "perpetrator," meaning there is no space to blame Russia: "It got hot here. These buildings weren't lucky… Everything is destroyed"—this sort of neutral language also leaves the reality of war unquestioned.

Victimhood

In the biopolitical scholarship, victimhood is referred to as "a group identity in which traumatic memory is politicized to justify action, including violence, against those accused of being responsible for victimizing the group." As Ukrainian scholars have convincingly argued, traumatized victimhood is a media construct and a product of information technologies aimed at emotional control with strong biopolitical underpinnings. In pro-Russian narratives, the war is not omitted, but the responsibility for its depredations is pinned on the Ukrainian government: "We start lining up for water at 3 am… It's all because [Petro] Poroshenko and [Yulia] Tymoshenko, who wanted this war." In Russian and pro-Russian vlogs, residents of Mariupol are portrayed as having been abandoned and neglected by the Ukrainian government: "They didn't care about us and didn't protect us." This narrative creates a type of cynical victimhood that is not only tolerant toward the Russian invaders but also accepts their right to do harm to "liberated" Russophone areas: "I don't support the war, many people died, but it was unavoidable… Naturally, it's a war, and the Russians used air power."

Against this backdrop, the Kremlin's propaganda has described Russia's mission in Mariupol as a humanitarian one. In particular, Luhansk and Donetsk people's republic units are visualized bringing food and construction materials for rebuilding houses to Mariupol, thus establishing a "regime of care."

Regime of Care

Mariupol exemplifies a "regime of care," imposed by the Russian authorities. This includes free food disbursed to hungry people, while visualized charity from such organizations as the Kind People fund help the most vulnerable groups, like physically impaired persons, the elderly, children, and single mothers. Public gratitude for the assistance is an indispensable part of the new regime of care: "The Russians don't let our people down. Thank God, it is calm here nowadays."

Visualized caretaking includes compensation for material damage and state medical assistance, as well as what is portrayed as volunteering. Scenes of humanitarian aid being distributed have played an important biopolitical role, symbolically subjugating the local population to the authority of the caretakers and creating new loyalties and political hierarchies on this basis. Biopolitics here serves to erase the traumatic experience of the recent past and replace war memories with a local, "vernacular" agenda of people's lives improving.

Immunization

As Roberto Esposito explained, the biopolitics of immunity

> constitutes a way to construct such barriers in a defensive and offensive shape, against any threatening external element. This may apply both to the individuals and to the communities… as immunized against any foreign element that seems to threaten them from the outside… [As a result] it forces the life itself into a sort of cage where we end up losing not only our freedom, but also the very sense of our existence.

It is in this sense that Russian and pro-Russian propaganda plays an immunizing role by creating a controlled information space and reducing the circulation of alternative narratives that might question the validity of the Russia-sympathetic narrative.

This understanding of immunization drastically differs from the interpretation of "media as part of the immune system of the democratic body politic, whose survival depends on free and informed participation in the public sphere." The Russian and pro-Russian propaganda is meant to reduce people's sensitivity to emotions related to the war and to tranquilize "occupied bodies" by immersing them in the depoliticized and desecuritized sphere of the routine.

De-subjectification

In the Foucauldian version of biopolitics, the notion of subjectivity is correlative with "a technique of the self," a form of "self-knowledge," "self-examination," and self-reflection. In this respect, care is linked with the idea of responsibilization or responsibility attribution as key to self-governing and autonomous agency. However, the direct outcome of the "bareness of life" in occupied Ukraine is the opposite of de-subjectification of the population. The narratives constitutive for bare lives are produced on behalf of "simple, ordinary people" and entail a self-denial of political agency, like the ability to make political choices: "My mother is Ukrainian, my father is Russian. Who am I? I don't know." Another example: "I have two motherlands. I'm not against Ukraine, but neither am I against Russia. I'm against the war, and I'm for peace. I want these two countries to be friends."

"This is our destiny," a vlogger says about burned cars and houses in one of the visuals. Another similarly remarks: "Yes, I've adjusted to the situation, and I don't see anything wrong in this accommodation [to the situation]."

De-subjectification is built largely on depoliticization and the concomitant preference to remain silent: "We didn't leave, and it wasn't for political reasons. People are crazy about politics." The locals are visualized in numerous vlogs as recipients of free gifts from "good people." They are given bread and thank their saviors from the United Russia party and the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry. The following utterance of a local teenager is indicative of the new normal in occupied Mariupol: "My neighbors said there would be a concert and humanitarian aid packages. We immediately ran to the place… There was a Chechen guy who shared his chocolate with me."

Normalization

In the propagated narratives, the war is not denied; rather it is psychologically displaced and replaced by a new biopolitical mythology of a normalized and even "happy" life that is supposedly blossoming in the destroyed city. The war is seen largely as an event that does not need a rational explanation and is detached from the logic of everyday life, decoupled from moral judgements, and dissociated from economic or financial calculations. This shift from past suffering to the mundane routine de-actualizes memories about recent deaths through self-immersion into localism ("This is my home"). This is how pro-Russian narratives normalize mass violence and justify atrocities: "All the buildings are destroyed, sheds burned, cars and bicycles stolen, but the first strawberry [of the season] is in the garden."

The core of Russian biopolitical propaganda is the portrayal of Mariupol as alive, with life going back to normal. Local loyalists and collaborators visualize and narrate the supposed return to normalcy through references to people's everyday

life: "Flowers everywhere, the water supply system functioning, people relaxed, music [playing] in the car, children going to school, volunteers around. Nice weather, clear skies, grapes growing. Of course, this is postwar times, but all normal people believe in the future. Sure, many have lost husbands, and this is an enormous pain. But we have kids, and this motivates us to keep living." Similarly, a vlogger admires monuments to Soviet military heroes and the Soviet-style playground in her neighborhood. And another illustrative statement: "People are calm and gradually getting back to normal life."

A typical object of biopolitical visualization is new construction in the city with local residents displayed cleaning and removing remnants of destroyed buildings as enthusiastic music plays in the background. This is a symbol of riddance of the Ukrainian legacy and erasure of the "old" Mariupol. These visuals are complemented by faces of happy children and scenes of healthy urban lifestyles, which represents the biopolitical crux of Russian and pro-Russian propaganda.

Empire

The biopolitical-theorizing empire is seen as a "paradigmatic form of biopower… as a way to control human bodies and order life and death." A peculiar phenomenon in Russia's propaganda in occupied Ukraine is a sense of rediscovery of and fascination with empire and with the advantages and aesthetics of what might be called "imperial life." Illustrative in this respect are trips of vloggers from Mariupol to Moscow and across Russia featuring expressions of gratitude to the Russian authorities. Several videos show local children sent to a sanatorium near St Petersburg and their parents thanking the Russian government. The empire of the "Russian world" features in these vlogs not as a mechanism of colonization but as an emancipatory space of new opportunities for residents of the "newly acquired territories."

Conclusion

This paper endeavored to connect two fields of research—propaganda and biopolitics. My analysis has shown that the concept of biopolitical propaganda has two interconnected aspects: semiotic interpretation of the content of messages from a biopolitical standpoint; and the mechanism of biopolitical control and discipline.

The Russian and pro-Russian narratives circulating on behalf of the residents of occupied Mariupol is a new discursive genre that is available for research, with hundreds of self-made visuals posted online, including on YouTube. These amateurish videos provide a unique opportunity for understanding the state of

mind of local supporters of Russia who go public with their visualized stories that feature a combination of conspiracy theories and ignorance. The core characteristic of this narrative, which adds much to the nexus between biopolitics and security, is the grassroots legitimation of the state of exception in Mariupol and the concomitant exploitation of people's bare lives. It presupposes a direct shift from the necropolitics of war to the biopolitics of everyday life. This de-actualizes memories about recent deaths through self-immersion into what might be dubbed "biopolitical localism"—shopping in bazaars, procuring potable water, cooking on firewood, and rebuilding nearly-destroyed houses.

The analysis of visuals produced by residents of occupied Mariupol exposes a previously unnoticed facet of biopolitics—that of depoliticizing *dispositif*, which serves the purpose of distancing the population from engaging with the political/geopolitical reality on the ground and properly assessing it. People brought to the state of bare lives are susceptible to biopolitical control through the stimulation of positive feelings about what is portrayed as normalization of their existence. Biopolitics, therefore, represents an important policy tool to legitimize the war and secure the loyalty of the occupied population.

Part IV.
Military Power and Geopolitics

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Military and Strategic Features of the War in Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 946
August 2025

Sergey Minasyan[1]
Caucasus Institute

The Russia-Ukraine war is the largest armed confrontation on the European continent since World War II. Because of its enormous regional significance and global scale, as well as its numerous unexpected conceptual features and lessons, the war has had and will continue to have a great impact on the development of military theory and practice for future armed conflicts. At the same time, the changing nature of warfare and peculiarities of conflicts, in light of military theory and practice, have also had a direct impact on the general political goals and strategies of the warring sides in Ukraine today.

Conceptual Military Peculiarities: Analogies and Novel Experience

Analogies in politics and history are often simplistic; just as in political history, military history often unfolds in an upward spiral toward a higher technical level in a complex interplay of material and nonmaterial factors. Because it reflects state-of-the-art military science, the war in Ukraine has many features similar to past military conflicts, yet this seemed to come as a surprise to military specialists.

The first and probably the most important of these features is that, after a few weeks of maneuver warfare at the very start of the Russian invasion, the fighting underwent a sudden but stable transition into a predominantly positional war, in the manner of World War I or the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988.

Arguably, the reason was the increased power and accuracy of modern weapons, coupled with new capabilities for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as target acquisition. This means that, perhaps for the first time in the entire history of warfare, there is no "fog of war" for the warring sides in

[1] Sergey Minasyan is the deputy director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute and former ambassador of the Republic of Armenia to Romania. He holds a PhD in military history from the Institute of History of Armenia's National Academy of Sciences, as well as a Doctor of Sciences degree in political science and IR from the National Defense Research Institute of Armenia's Ministry of Defense.

Ukraine. This makes it difficult for one side to take the other by surprise, at least at the tactical, if not the strategic or operational level, even though surprise tactics are essential for offensives, especially against entrenched defensive lines.

Battle formations of attacking troops, even at the stage of their concentration and advance to the line of contact, are detected by various means of aerial reconnaissance and hit in real time by artillery, missile systems, and/or various drones (ranging from FPV and kamikaze drones to large drones equipped with their own miniature guided weapons). The importance of missile and artillery fire has increased markedly. It is significantly more accurate and destructive thanks to modern target acquisition and reconnaissance systems.

Manned assets operating in the air, as well as large drones equipped with their own airborne weapons, can launch long-range attacks with guided missiles and adjustable aerial bombs of various calibers. This allows aviation to operate effectively against enemy positions without entering (or only partially entering) the coverage area of its ground-based air defense.

In an environment of constant fire, one needs to decentralize and camouflage combat formations, whether attacking or defending. Ground forces need new methods of using and protecting, both actively and passively, armored vehicles. Field fortifications, long-term fortifications, camouflage, and protection of supply lines have become increasingly important.

Accordingly, the attacking side cannot ensure the full concentration of forces and means needed to break through prepared lines of defense. Called the "tactical crisis," this phenomenon has been widely known since World War I. In fact, it had manifested itself earlier during the 20th century, in military crises such as the Anglo-Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War. It consists of the superiority of defense over attack and a transition from maneuver to positional or trench warfare.

On the one hand, combat operations during positional warfare rely on "networking," with almost real-time monitoring and control of small, heavily equipped tactical units or even individual groups of fighters or combat vehicles. During an attack on equipped defensive lines, the need to decentralize combat formations under heavy fire led to the practice of forming small, dedicated "elite" assault units that are well armed and highly skilled in combat; this practice was modeled after the Kaiser's Sturmtruppen, which was later replicated in other armies that fought in the final stages of World War I.

Notably, in the eyes of military scholars, drones have almost entirely lost the huge, monopoly-like significance that they had during recent local conflicts, including the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the civil wars in Syria and Libya, and

even the first stages of the Russia-Ukraine war. Naturally, drones play a very important and even crucial role as a means of reconnaissance and are now used as strike weapons as well. However, they are primarily viewed, by default, as necessary elements of a larger system of dynamic multi-domain networked warfare. What is important, in other words, is the systemic approach, the flexibility, and combination of diverse elements that characterize military operations, not the use of drones per se.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Middle Eastern conflicts of recent years exhibited many of the early features of the generation of compound warfare that materialized in Ukraine starting in February 2022: the absence of the "fog of war" and appearance of a "transparent battlefield"; the importance of air-corrected target designation for suppressive fire to a significant depth of enemy positions; the infiltration of small assault groups through fortified defensive lines; the combination of high-tech and high-precision suppressive fire weapons with the massive use of traditional, "outdated" artillery systems; and the mass use of drones as independent reconnaissance systems and strike weapons.

Accordingly, fighting in Ukraine has been reduced to positional warfare, meaning a long war of attrition. The sides currently have similar conventional military capabilities on the battlefield but completely different capacities and resources to continue long-term hostilities and conduct a broad military-political confrontation.

In an attempt to break out of the deadlock of positional warfare, both sides carry out mass strikes on military and civilian targets deep in enemy territory, seeking to increase the other side's economic and political losses from the ongoing war of attrition. In some ways, this is similar to the so-called war of the cities during the Iran-Iraq War, as well as the World War I airplane, airship, and long-range artillery strikes against enemy capitals; both are examples of an effort to weaken the adversary's political will and undermine civilian morale at a time of static warfare.

Russia uses sea-, land- and air-based cruise and ballistic missiles, as well as long-range drones, to destroy Ukraine's economy, energy infrastructure, and transport network. Although the Ukrainian army also uses some advanced long-range missiles against military targets at the operational depth of the Russian army, it generally uses more basic military technology, such as drones that penetrate thousands of kilometers into Russian territory. The exception is Ukraine's unmanned boats, which have been used in mass against the Russian Black Sea Fleet and Russian air and land targets on the sea or around the coast. In this, Ukraine has turned a new page in naval warfare on a global scale.

Ukraine maximizes Moscow's political losses by hitting energy infrastructure and sensitive military targets, such as air bases and even Russia's early warning radar

system for tracking the launch of strategic nuclear missiles. This also includes Ukraine's attempts to strike the Crimean Bridge, which, given the existence of alternative, land routes to Crimea, is aimed rather at inflicting political and reputational damage on the Kremlin. In addition, the unexpected August 2024 offensive into Russia's Kursk Region, with the involvement of the most experienced and well-equipped Ukrainian troops, probably was driven mainly by political goals rather than military logic and strategic calculations.

With the Russia-Ukraine war having transformed into a war of attrition, it is logistics and military economics that take precedence and that may, in the long term, have more impact on the outcome than even military strategy or tactics. This largely explains why Vladimir Putin, in a move that was surprising for experts and politicians alike, picked financier and economist Andrei Belousov, a long-time aide in the Presidential Administration, to be Russia's minister of defense in May 2024.

In the general context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the concept of "strategic culture" acquires importance. While military technologies develop at a fast pace and conceptual approaches, theories, and practices adapt to new hardware, states, as social structures, tend to wage wars and respond to new security challenges in fairly traditional ways, which are linked to the predominant practices in each state. Observing how the Russian army prepared for and waged its large-scale war in Ukraine, especially the initial period, military historians may well find analogies with the Russian Empire in World War I and the Soviet Union in World War II, not to mention numerous European wars fought by the Russian state in previous centuries. One gets the same impression about the Ukrainian war effort, having studied Ukrainian historical military traditions with its culture of the flexible, decentralized military organization of the Cossacks, centuries-old-experience of resilience, irregular and guerrilla warfare, and civil resistance.

Goals and Strategies

The abovementioned conceptual military features form the general framework for the political goals and strategies of the warring sides. After three years of war, Ukraine and its allies still hope that the outcome of the long-term confrontation with Russia, with a race of increasingly high-tech weapons and economic sanctions, will be Russia's strategic defeat and the collapse of its ruling regime, akin to the 1917 revolution. In political science terms, this is a remake of the containment strategy implemented by the West during the Cold War.

At first glance, these hopes appear justified: in terms of economic, financial, and technological resources, the West has an advantage. One ought to, however, take into account Russia's military-economic mobilization and its significant reserves of military hardware. Plus, Russia's centralized authoritarian power has the

advantage of streamlined decision-making, whereas the United States and European Union are still in the midst of discussions about the advisability of militarizing their economies.

As a result, in the current phase of what has become a long-term war of attrition, Russia is still able to manufacture and field more military hardware and ammunition than Ukraine can receive from the U.S. and EU, especially against the backdrop of the Trump administration's threats to cut military aid to Ukraine. In addition to its own production, Russia buys arms from North Korea and Iran. Plus, there is the massive import of technologies and dual-use products from China. In the emerging polycentric world order, Russia's reliance on the resources and technological assistance of non-Western actors may prove a key factor in reducing the effectiveness of the new containment policy.

World War II revealed that, in a long war of attrition, the advantage is not so much on the side that manufactures more advanced weapons with better characteristics; rather, it lies with the side that manufactures more basic weapons faster and in larger quantities. In the Russia-Ukraine war, this has been borne out by the fact that the ordinary 155-millimeter artillery shell, millions of which are needed, has become the symbol of the arms race between the sides, instead of the high-tech, precision-guided Excalibur munition of the same caliber.

However, the current quantitative technical superiority is not Russia's main resource in the war of attrition in Ukraine. Even with the mass introduction of the most advanced technologies, the war consists chiefly of ground warfare, where trained and motivated infantry is of greater importance than other types of troops. In this, Russia has a major advantage: It can mobilize three to four times more men than Ukraine can. After several waves of mobilization, the need to mobilize more men has turned into a major political issue for Ukrainian leaders.

Meanwhile, Russia conducted just one partial mobilization in autumn 2022 and has since managed to compensate for its army's combat losses chiefly by recruiting volunteers and reservists through ongoing covert or "quasi" mobilization measures. The involvement of North Korean troops in the war could also affect the military calculus. In other words, Russia's leadership expects the Ukrainian army to run out of soldiers on the battlefield before Ukraine can achieve, with Western support, technical superiority over the Russian army.

However, according to some experts' estimates, despite Ukraine's huge military losses and migration outflow, it may prove capable of staffing its army for a significant duration. Moreover, both Ukraine and Russia are demonstrating unprecedented for the 21st century resilience in the military, political, and economic spheres, enduring the many losses.

Russia's strategy in this long war of attrition, in contrast to Ukraine and the West's, is military rather than political. Moscow is hoping not so much for a revolution or change of power in Kyiv but rather for the collapse of Ukraine's military due to huge losses, combined with heavy pressure from the Trump administration and/or a potential decline of U.S. military and intelligence support.

Some military and security experts refer to the strategy employed by the Russian army in Ukraine as "sustainable attrition." By analogy with the strategic approaches of the American Civil War and the positional phase of World War I, it could be expected to lead to what Clausewitz defined as "the culmination point," which would be the Ukrainian army collapsing, or the Ukrainian leadership losing the political will to continue the war.

Meanwhile, the Russian military has a blueprint for effecting a turning point in a positional war: the Brusilov offensive of 1916 on the Austro-Hungarian front line. This implies strikes and breakthroughs of fortified defensive positions in many directions at once. Russia has thus maintained its offensive momentum while forcing Ukraine to expend dwindling resources and reserves. The application of this strategy can be seen in Russia's opening of a new front in the north of Kharkiv Region in May 2024 to deflect some Ukrainian troops from the main front in the Donbas.

For its part, the Ukrainian army, in stubborn defensive battles, often defends strongpoints and settlements while being almost surrounded, using methods that resemble the strategy of "elastic" defense in depth, which was developed by the German army in the final stages of World War I and, with some modifications, used by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front during World War II as well.

Finally, the war in Ukraine has sparked a fundamental rethinking of the doctrine of strategic nuclear deterrence, which is still considered effective but to a lesser extent and in different forms than the major nuclear powers directly or indirectly involved in the war in Ukraine expected.

Conclusion

What we have in Ukraine after three years of large-scale combat operations, from the conceptual military point of view, is a tactical crisis, the prevalence of defensive and positional warfare over deep maneuvers, and a long war of attrition on a "transparent battlefield." Yet no one can guarantee that, in the foreseeable future, the war will not revert to maneuver warfare or different forms, with the introduction of new or updated weapons, new or updated conceptual methods of warfare, or—what is more likely—the complex combination of both.

The war in Ukraine has provided the Russian and Ukrainian armies with vast experience in state-of-the-art methods and concepts of warfare involving the combined use of high-tech and traditional weapons systems. Russia has demonstrated a sustainable ability to absorb huge losses of personnel and equipment with simultaneous attempts to undertake large-scale military reforms. Moreover, as was the case after World War II, the end or freezing of the war in Ukraine will likely leave Russia with the most experienced land forces and possibly also air defense forces in Northern Eurasia. This was mentioned by General Christopher Cavoli, the NATO supreme allied commander in Europe, who said: "At the end of the war in Ukraine, whatever it looks like, the Russian army will be stronger than it is today."

Even in the most realistic scenario today, whereby the conflict reaches a standstill as a *fait accompli*, the logic of military power indicates that the long-term confrontation between Russia and its adversaries in the post-Soviet space will almost inevitably continue on new technological and conceptual levels, in a distant analogy of the Great Game.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

What Russian Diplomatic Moves in the South Caucasus Mean for Ukraine and the War with Russia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 947
August 2025

Anar Valiyev[1],
ADA University

Nigar Gurbanli[2],
ADA University

The Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is one of the most complex in the post-Soviet space, where Russia has traditionally played the leading role, at least implicitly. Rooted in the late Soviet era, the dispute has led to two major wars (in the 1990s and in 2020), resulting in tens of thousands of casualties and ongoing regional tensions. Russia's policy toward Azerbaijan and Armenia changed several times during the First Karabakh War in 1988–1994. Even though it engaged in the peace process, Moscow had a fundamental interest in the lack of a resolution of the conflict. It served as a foreign policy tool for Moscow, enabling Russia to secure a political/military presence in Armenia and thus leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Karabakh conflict took a major turn in September 2023. Citing illegal Armenian military formations and the exploitation of local resources, Azerbaijan launched a military operation that it described as an "anti-terror operation" to retake separatist-controlled areas. It achieved complete control of the region, reducing the need for outside

[1] Anar Valiyev is an associate professor of urban studies and Jean Monnet Chair at ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan. He has 20 years of experience in urban development, public policy, and policy analysis with emphasis on smart cities and post-socialist development. He frequently works as a consultant for the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, among other agencies.

[2] Nigar Gurbanli is a research associate and undergraduate academic advisor at ADA University. Her area of expertise and research field is political science, international development, smart cities, e-governance, urban development, and public policy. She received her bachelor's degree in public affairs and master's degree in diplomacy and international affairs from ADA University.

peacekeeping troops. By this time, Russia, for its part, was less able and less motivated to maintain its peacekeepers in Karabakh. Its attention had been diverted to Ukraine, and the Kremlin was not interested in a confrontation with Turkey, which had been a staunch supporter of Azerbaijan during the latest war and continued to provide military support. Baku, meanwhile, was offering Moscow a strategic political and economic partnership.

The two states' already-strong political and economic ties, particularly in energy and trade, made Russia unwilling to alienate to Azerbaijan. With the Ukraine war ongoing, losing Azerbaijan as an ally would have exacerbated Moscow's strategic challenges. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine significantly strained its military resources, making it increasingly difficult to sustain commitments elsewhere, including in Karabakh. This research seeks to investigate how the Russia-Ukraine war has reshaped Russia's approach to Karabakh, influenced its broader regional strategy, and what implications these shifts might have for Ukraine.

Why Russian Peacekeepers Left

Russia began withdrawing its peacekeeping force from Karabakh in April 2024, with the process largely completed by May 2024. Nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers had been stationed there, in accordance with the ceasefire agreement signed by Yerevan and Baku in November 2020 that ended the Second Karabakh War (September 27–November 10, 2020), with a mandate to remain until 2025. They were supposed to monitor the Lachin Corridor and maintain peace. Their presence was significant in symbolizing Russia's role as a regional power broker and security guarantor. When Azerbaijan retook the region in September 2023, they played a limited and largely passive role, however. They eventually brokered a ceasefire on September 20, their involvement having failed to prevent the swift collapse of the self-proclaimed Armenian statelet.

Manpower Shortages in Ukraine Strain Russian Resources

The ongoing war in Ukraine has placed immense strain on Russia's armed forces, necessitating a redeployment of personnel. The need for reinforcements in Ukraine and the economic toll of sanctions likely outweighed the strategic importance of maintaining Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh. This underscores the systemic challenges for Russian military logistics and capacity amid commitments on multiple fronts.

Changing Geopolitical Winds in South Caucasus

Russia's withdrawal from Karabakh may also reflect a broader recalibration of its foreign policy priorities. The growing influence of Turkey and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, coupled with Moscow's need to preserve key alliances, likely

contributed to its decision to reduce its presence in Karabakh. The Kremlin likely calculated that, with Turkey having emerged as Azerbaijan's primary ally and military partner, Russia's leverage over Azerbaijan had been diminished. This geopolitical shift weakened Russia's longstanding influence in the region and foreshadowed less dependence on Russian peacekeeping for security in Karabakh. Russia's own strategic partnership with Turkey looks to have played a significant role in the Russian decision to withdraw its peacekeepers, as well. Putin touted that, as of 2021—even before the war—Turkish investment in Russia had reached $1.5 billion, and Russian investment in Turkey $6.5 billion. Turkish imports of natural gas from Russia, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant project, and the TurkStream natural gas pipeline have forged strong energy ties between Turkey and Russia. This interdependency meant Russia had little incentive to risk, over Karabakh, damaging its relationship with Turkey, which had taken significant time and effort to develop.

Azerbaijan as a Russian Strategic Partner

Unlike preceding post-Soviet conflicts in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, Russia opted against taking a side in the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Here, Azerbaijan was Russia's strategic partner, and Armenia Russia's strategic ally, Russia and Armenia having signed a treaty in 1997 in which they committed to mutual military support. In the wake of their own conflicts with Russia, Ukraine and Georgia turned to the West. They partnered with NATO to ensure security in the Black Sea region. However, their path to membership in NATO has faced significant opposition. Recently, in February 2025, new U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated that Ukraine's aspirations to return to its pre-2014 borders and join NATO are "unrealistic," suggesting that alternative security guarantees should be considered. Despite these setbacks, public support within Ukraine for NATO membership remains strong. A January 2025 survey indicated that 84% of Ukrainians favor joining NATO, viewing it as a higher priority than EU membership.

Faced with renewed conflict in Karabakh in September 2023, Russia hesitated to intervene militarily or confront Azerbaijan. In addition, leaving the Russian peacekeeping force in Karabakh risked the loss of Azerbaijan as a valuable partner in the South Caucasus, even though Azerbaijan understands and accepts Russia's role in the region. Russia's position in the so-called "shared neighborhood" would then have been further weakened. Before the Russia-Ukraine war, in 2021, Vladimir Putin emphasized that "The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Russia [was] developing very successfully." In Karabakh, Russia opted for a route that would ensure a balanced relationship with Azerbaijan and long-term economic and political stability.

Overall, Azerbaijan is a model of how a "multi-vector" foreign policy, desired by many post-Soviet countries, may succeed without harming Russian interests.

Implications of Russian Peacekeeping Force Withdrawal for Ukraine

Alliances to Help Bolster Ukrainian Position

The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh underscores the significance of regional dynamics and bilateral partnerships on Russia's strategic decisions. For instance, Azerbaijan's collaboration with Turkey played a crucial role in its military success in Karabakh. Ukraine can benefit in negotiations and beyond from strengthening alliances and seeking support from international partners to bolster its defense capabilities and diplomatic standing.

Both NATO and the European Union have consistently affirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. NATO, in particular, fully supports Ukraine's right to self-defense and right to choose its own security arrangements. It intensified cooperation with Ukraine after 2014 and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea; it then ramped up support to unprecedented levels following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The EU has also been instrumental in supporting Ukraine in the current war with Russia, implementing sanctions against Russia and providing financial and humanitarian assistance to bolster Ukraine's resilience.

Besides NATO and the EU, the so-called Crimea Platform, a diplomatic initiative launched by Ukraine in August 2021, significantly enhances Ukraine's negotiating position by providing a structured framework to coordinate international efforts aimed at reversing Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. It underscores Ukraine's commitment to a political solution to uphold international law and human rights and helps maintain global attention on the occupation.

Effecting Geopolitical Realignments

The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh demonstrates Moscow's prioritization of the Ukraine conflict at the expense of its influence in other regions. Ukraine can exploit this by highlighting Russia's declining influence in multilateral forums and encouraging greater international engagement in Black Sea security initiatives. This narrative can be presented in platforms such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In addition, Ukraine can capitalize on the erosion of trust between Azerbaijan and Russia by fostering closer diplomatic and security ties with the former. On December 25, 2024, an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane was damaged allegedly by Russian air defenses before crashing near Aktau, Kazakhstan,

resulting in the deaths of 38 people. This strained relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. Azerbaijan has accused Russia of shooting down the plane and criticized what it says is a cover-up, prompting a rare apology from Putin (he did not admit Russian responsibility, however). In January 2025, President Ilham Aliyev stated, "I can confidently say that the responsibility for the deaths of Azerbaijani citizens in this tragedy rests with representatives of the Russian Federation. We demand justice, accountability for those responsible, full transparency, and humane treatment." This incident has led to an uptick in anti-Russian sentiment in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government has even taken the step of ordering the closure of the Russian House cultural center in Baku and sending aid to Ukraine. By highlighting Russia's declining reliability as a regional partner, Ukraine can advocate a reevaluation of security alliances and encourage the formation of new coalitions that exclude Russian influence. This strategy should aim not only to isolate Russia diplomatically but also to strengthen Ukraine's position within the regional security architecture.

Ukraine Navigating Against Backdrop of U.S. Policy Shifts

Recent developments under the second Trump administration have complicated Ukraine's strategic outlook. Hegseth's abovementioned comment about Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations as "unrealistic" marks a departure from previous bipartisan support for NATO expansion in the U.S. This could embolden Russia to reassert its influence in Armenia and Karabakh, potentially restoring its military presence. A more assertive Russia in the South Caucasus could put pressure on Ankara to reassess its commitments to Azerbaijan.

In addition, there are signals from the White House that suggest less enthusiasm for multilateral defense structures. Azerbaijan, seeing reduced cohesion among Western powers, may respond by hedging more in its foreign policy—balancing between the West, Russia, and regional powers like Turkey.

For Ukraine, this evolving backdrop necessitates more agile diplomacy. It ought to double down on regional bilateral agreements, enhance its diplomatic standing through multilateral forums like the Crimea Platform, and work out alternative security guarantees to sustain deterrence against Russia. In this regard, strengthening trilateral initiatives such as the Lublin Triangle (Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine) and exploring a Black Sea security alliance (a coalition of regional and NATO-aligned countries) could serve as practical steps. Ukraine should also be keen to enhance defense ties with states like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, which have shown increasing interest in countering Russian and Chinese authoritarian influence.

Additionally, Kyiv should look to expand its outreach to nontraditional partners in the Global South to offset potential gaps in Western support and counter

Russia's global narrative. Strategic partnerships with Brazil, India, South Africa, or the ASEAN states would diversify Ukraine's diplomatic portfolio while positioning Kyiv as a proactive, globally engaged actor. Ukrainian participation in forums such as the G20, BRICS (as an observer or external partner), and climate and energy security summits may open new avenues for coalition-building.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh signifies a critical shift in Moscow's strategic calculations, informed by its ongoing war in Ukraine and changing geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus. This realignment underscores Azerbaijan's growing strategic importance to Russia and the influence of Turkey in shaping the region's security landscape. Moscow's decision to prioritize its relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey over maintaining its peacekeeping force in Karabakh is indicative of a broader reassessment of its foreign policy objectives.

The erosion of bipartisan U.S. support for NATO enlargement, coupled with diminished Western unity, presents new obstacles to Ukraine's integration into traditional security frameworks. Nonetheless, the strategy of building resilient regional alliances, securing bilateral agreements, and mobilizing diplomatic momentum through multilateral forums remains valid and, in some respects, more necessary than ever. For Ukraine, the Russian peacekeeping withdrawal from Karabakh offers important lessons in negotiation tactics, alliance-building, and geopolitical maneuvering. Azerbaijan's successful assertion of its sovereignty over Karabakh demonstrates how smaller states, backed by strategic partnerships, can leverage regional alliances to counter Russian influence.

The broader picture is a decline in Russia's ability to maintain influence in multiple theaters simultaneously. As Russia remains preoccupied with its war in Ukraine, Kyiv has a window of opportunity to reinforce its diplomatic and military standing. By capitalizing on Russia's overextension and fostering new strategic partnerships, Ukraine can further undermine Moscow's regional dominance while bolstering its long-term sovereignty and security.

Recent events have further exacerbated tensions between Russia and Azerbaijan, in particular, the Azerbaijan Airlines crash that led to increasing anti-Russia sentiment in Azerbaijan, the closure of the Russian House cultural center in Baku, and aid being sent to Ukraine.

Overall, Russia's withdrawal of its peacekeepers from Karabakh, on top of recent events that have strained Moscow-Baku relations, reflects a significant transformation in the regional power balance. Ukraine has an opportunity to use

Azerbaijan's experience and take advantage of the current situation to enhance its own strategic positioning against Russian influence.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Why Territory Is (Un)Important: The Territorial Question in a Russia-Ukraine Peace Deal

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 948
August 2025

Tetyana Malyarenko[1],
National University Odesa Law Academy

Stefan Wolff[2],
University of Birmingham

Disagreement over de jure belonging and de facto control of the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia has become a key stumbling block to concluding a ceasefire (and potentially a peace agreement) between Ukraine and Russia in the first 100 days of Donald Trump's second presidency.

Territory has been a critical dimension of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the creation of two Russia-supported de facto states in the Donbas. Nonetheless, territory is but one dimension of what is best characterized as a "blended" conflict in an antagonistically penetrated region, i.e., a multidimensional conflict involving multiple, overlapping disputes between different internal and external parties. The conflict over Ukrainian territory is embedded in, and instrumentalized for, Russia's geopolitical agenda of restoring a sphere of influence that includes Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the resulting geopolitical confrontation has intensified. While territory is crucial to the calculations of Russia, Ukraine, and various external actors in terms of what may constitute a feasible and viable settlement, the war is not just a dispute over territory, nor will agreement on territorial control alone bring it to a sustainable end.

Nonetheless, territory features prominently in the original and unchanged positions of Kyiv and Moscow. The former insists on restoring territorial integrity

[1] Tetyana Malyarenko is a professor of international relations at the National University Odesa Law Academy. Her research focuses on conflict and conflict management in Southeast Europe and the Eastern Partnership states.
[2] Stefan Wolff is a professor of international security at the University of Birmingham. He focuses on geopolitical competition between great powers in the Euro-Asian and Euro-Atlantic regions and on the international management of ethnic conflict and civil war.

within Ukraine's internationally recognized borders as of 1991, including Crimea, while the Kremlin (see, for example, the recent interview of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with the Brazilian daily *O Globo*) demands the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the four Ukrainian regions that Russia illegally annexed in 2022, even though it did not fully occupy them then or now.

In fact, Russia's territorial claims have gradually expanded since 2014. Until October 2022, Russia laid claim to the annexed Crimea only, while the status of other Ukrainian territories was open for discussion. For example, the joint statement released after a meeting of diplomats in Geneva on April 17, 2014, promised the "establishment of a broad national dialogue, with outreach to all of Ukraine's regions and political constituencies," and according to the Minsk II agreement from February 12, 2015, the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) were to be reintegrated into Ukraine. By contrast, the Kremlin now demands that Ukraine cede all territories that Moscow annexed: Crimea (occupied since 2014) and the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia (partially occupied by Russia but claimed in their entirety).

The Russian war, in its hybrid phase, was aimed at destabilizing the pro-Western government in Kyiv. Before the government change that occurred as a result of the Euromaidan revolution in 2013–2014, the Kremlin did not question, let alone actively undermine, the territorial integrity of Ukraine. However, it should not come as a surprise that the shuttle diplomacy conducted by the United States since early 2025, at least its publicly visible part, has focused on, and stalled around, the territorial issue. Russia is strategically using the status of the four partially occupied regions in eastern and southeastern Ukraine, along with Crimea, as leverage to achieve its wider geostrategic ambitions of weakening Ukraine and restructuring, in its favor, the European and transatlantic security order.

Against this backdrop, this policy memo assesses the geostrategic, economic, and symbolic value of the contested territories. We examine to what extent their status, as well as the benefits that the sides of the conflict may derive from their exploitation, is likely to remain an obstacle to any agreement between Kyiv and Moscow. We outline three scenarios for how this disagreement might be managed. The most likely scenario, in our view, is the continuation of hostilities and of Russia's illegal control of the Ukrainian territories (with the risk that the conflagration and the size of the territory under Russian occupation could grow).

The Geostrategic and Economic Value of the Occupied Territories

The territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia can be divided into two groups: 1) territories that have geostrategic and economic importance, and 2) those that have only economic importance.

The first group includes Crimea and the territories of the Ukrainian eastern Black Sea coast (and for Russia, the territories of the Azov Sea coast, which provide Russia with a land corridor to Crimea). The annexation of Crimea strengthened Russia's geostrategic position in the Black Sea by increasing the length of its coastline and the size of its economic zone, which has now been somewhat challenged by Ukrainian naval drone activity. Possible international recognition of Crimea could expand Russia's de jure and de facto control of the Black Sea all the way to Odesa, which could be used both to deter Ukraine and NATO's eastern maritime flank (Romania and Bulgaria) and for an attack on Ukraine in the event of renewed hostilities.

In economic terms, Crimea remains a heavily subsidized region as of 2025, with 75% of the regional budget representing a direct transfer from the Russian federal budget. This can be explained by: the weak economic development of the peninsula when it was part of Ukraine; international sanctions that allow neither for foreign investment nor for the full-fledged operation of Russian firms in Crimea; and the priorities for its development after the 2014 annexation, with investments in infrastructure and military potential, instead of nonmilitary production. United States recognition of Crimea as Russian territory, which is reported to be part of a discussed peace deal, even in the half-hearted, symbolic form of lifting sanctions (Ukraine and EU countries have stated that they will refrain from recognition), could cause a domino effect of recognition by non-Western states, chiefly China. (Note that, in 2013, before the change of government in Kyiv, Ukraine and China signed an agreement to build a new deepwater port in Crimea, which was supposed to be a Black Sea hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative.) This, in turn, would significantly increase the investment attractiveness of Crimea and provide a boost to the economic development of adjacent occupied regions, through which Russia has already built railway and road infrastructure to Crimea.

Compared with Crimea and the territories along the Sea of Azov, the old industrial regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, which have been heavily damaged by the war and have a high share of mining in their economies, are less attractive for investment and have lower geostrategic value. Even taking into account that the occupied territories (including Kherson and Zaporizhzhia) contain between 40 and 66 percent of the mineral resources, by value, that form the basis of the U.S.-Ukraine "minerals deal," the depth at which they lie makes extraction problematic and thus uncompetitive.

The greatest economic component of the four occupied regions is their labor force (the population, according to various estimates, ranges from 4.5 million to 5.5 million), but, paradoxically, these residents' status and living conditions have reportedly not been mentioned in the mooted peace agreements to date. A separate point is the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe, which, under the terms of discussed U.S. control, could supply electricity to both Ukraine-controlled territories and Russia-occupied territories.

In summary, except for the Crimean Peninsula, which has geostrategic value for Russia (in particular, its control by an unfriendly state poses a geostrategic threat), the occupied territories of Ukraine are of little economic significance, even compared with other regions of Russia and Ukraine. Just maintaining them, let alone rebuilding them, requires large-scale investments, which neither Russia nor Ukraine can afford.

The Symbolic Value of the Occupied Territories

For both Russia and Ukraine, all the occupied territories have a high symbolic value. Control of these territories, or the loss thereof, is an obvious criterion for victory or defeat in the war.

The Russian Perspective

For Russia, the peace negotiations in May 2025 mirror those in the run-up to the February 2015 Minsk II agreement. In 2015, having realized the impossibility of destabilizing the newly established pro-Western government in Kyiv through direct military intervention and Russia-backed rebels in the Donbas, the Kremlin accepted the second-best option: control over the DNR and LNR, in the expectation that changing the context of the war would allow for the best-case scenario, i.e., gaining control over all of Ukraine, to be realized.

In 2025, a peace deal on the terms proposed at the April Paris talks would certainly be a winning scenario for Russia, albeit again as a second-best option, especially if the peace agreement would secure Ukraine's status as outside of NATO and involve the formal recognition by the U.S. of Crimea as part of Russia. In addition to the economic and geostrategic gains, international recognition of Crimea as Russian territory plays an important symbolic role. While Russia would not have achieved its main goals in the war—weakening Ukraine and restructuring, in its favor, the European and transatlantic security order—peace on Trump's terms could be sold as a geopolitical victory to foreign and domestic audiences.

The Ukrainian Perspective

For Ukraine, the adoption of a peace agreement that cements, at least without full-fledged formal international recognition, the loss of territory would certainly be interpreted as Ukraine's defeat in the war both domestically and abroad. For the foreign audience, the claim that Kyiv lost the war and therefore, as the losing side, should accept the terms of a peace agreement was first voiced by Trump and his team, while the Biden administration had pursued a more flexible formula of "Russia does not win, Ukraine does not lose," which allowed for continued support for Ukraine to improve its position in future negotiations. Trump's remark that Ukraine "doesn't have the cards right now" (i.e., that it had already lost the war) has been accompanied by an information campaign to undermine the reputation of President Volodymyr Zelensky and at least partially shift the blame for the beginning and continuation of the war onto Ukraine.

Within Ukraine, a peace agreement featuring the loss of territory, which would imply recognition of defeat in the war, would critically threaten the stability of the Zelensky government, whose political program rests on the premise of a return to the 1991 borders as the main goal of Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion. In effect, the Ukrainian leadership has become hostage to its own information strategy, which has placed the "return of all territories" at the top of possible criteria for victory in the war. This result is the hardest to achieve and the easiest to measure. After three years of war, Ukrainians' expectations nonetheless remain high. According to surveys conducted by the Razumkov Center in March 2025, 74 percent of respondents believe Ukraine will be victorious in the war. Among these respondents, victory is most often said to mean the expulsion of Russian troops from the entire territory of Ukraine and restoration of the borders as of January 2014 (30 percent). Another 17 percent see victory as the defeat of the Russian army and an uprising in/collapse of Russia. Twenty-two percent would be satisfied with the status quo as of February 23, 2022; 11 percent with the expulsion of Russian troops from the entire territory of Ukraine besides occupied Crimea; and 10 percent with the cessation of the war, even if the Russian army remains in the territories it captured during the full-scale invasion (after February 24, 2022).

Thus, the tug-of-war waged by Russia and Ukraine in the information space, directed at foreign and domestic audiences, with a high, sacred priority placed on territory from the beginning, makes it impossible for them to give up territory, even if it does not carry any additional economic value. The demand for complete control of territory (even if it is clearly impossible to achieve) serves as a convenient pretext for continuing the war if that is seen as politically less risky than peace.

Three Scenarios

Assuming that the circumstances outlined above will not fundamentally change, we see three possible scenarios going forward. They are not mutually exclusive but should be seen as potentially overlapping in both time and substance.

The first scenario is a reconstitution of the Ukrainian democratic political space through elections, which could enable the next leader to sign a peace agreement with Russia (the Kremlin had insisted on this until it realized that Zelensky's current public support and the electoral system would allow him to be reelected). In this scenario, Zelensky or another leader, once elected, would have the public support either to make peace or to continue the war, thus sharing responsibility with society for that decision.

The second scenario involves making the loss of territory more palatable for Ukraine by compensating it with, for example, membership in the EU or NATO. Seemingly to this end, the new German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has stated that Ukraine will be able to become a member of the EU or NATO only after the war is over. In this scenario, the territorial dismemberment of Ukraine would be the price to pay for solid security guarantees against a repeat of Russia's land grab in 2014–2015 and after 2022. This compensation strategy could be applied as a result of a lasting ceasefire under the terms of which Ukraine would acknowledge, but not legally accept, Russian control of part of its internationally recognized territory, or as part of a peace agreement with Moscow.

The third scenario is the continuation of the status quo. It would entail military hostilities for at least one more summer campaign in the hope of changing the political and battlefield situation and of clarifying U.S. and European intentions, as well as the capabilities underpinning them, in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. Part of this scenario, and the other two, may be a temporary ceasefire, followed by a resumption of the war either immediately or after a period of constant violations, as was the case after the Minsk agreements. In other words, even the more optimistic scenarios above do not offer any long-term guarantees for peace.

Conclusion

In the negotiations to end the war against Ukraine, territory plays an important role. Russia is trying, just as it did during its hybrid war starting in 2014, to replace the government in Kyiv with a more pliant one, in line with the broader geopolitical agenda that the Kremlin has pursued for more than a decade now. Waging a full-scale war of territorial expansion is simply how the Kremlin has implemented this strategy since 2022. This is likely to continue for as long as Russia has the will and means to pursue a campaign to bring Ukraine into its sphere of influence.

For Ukraine, restoring territorial integrity (even at the expense of other goals, such as building its democracy, developing its economy, protecting its citizens' human rights, and addressing its demographic crisis) is equally important. The Ukrainian leadership, having reassessed the balance of power after Trump's return to the White House, has a narrow corridor for maneuver between admitting defeat, with all the consequences for the ruling elite and the nation as a whole, and continuing the war.

With neither side currently having a clear path to victory on the battlefield or to a favorable and sustainable agreement by way of the negotiating table, the continuation of the ongoing war of attrition, featuring only minimal territorial losses and gains, is the most likely scenario in the short term.

Conclusion

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Understanding Wartime Ukraine and the Prospects for Peace

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 950
August 2025

Henry E. Hale[1],
George Washington University

We all hope for peace between Ukraine and Russia. The question is: What kind of peace? The peace that Vladimir Putin and so many of his supporters in Russia advocate is one in which Ukraine (with the possible exception of the small western area of Halychyna) irrevocably joins Russia's political orbit, either as an ostensibly neutral and disarmed "vassal state" (Popova and Shevel 2024) or as a constituent part of a larger Russian-led polity. The peace demanded by Volodymyr Zelensky and the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians, in contrast, is one where Ukrainians themselves decide their own fate and can rest assured that Russia will not simply resume its deadly attacks at a later moment when it feels the time is right.

These visions are incompatible and deeply held on both sides. In authoritarian Russia, the relevant decisionmakers are few: Putin and a close circle of associates. While the Russian public's view is more malleable, Kremlin leaders have made crystal clear that they are determined to do whatever they think it takes to achieve their version of peace, calling the loss of hundreds of thousands of Russians' own lives a necessary sacrifice for what they say is historical justice and the security and greatness of Russia and the larger civilization it represents. As Putin put it at the June 2025 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, "I consider the Russian and Ukrainian people to be in fact a single people. In this sense, all of Ukraine is ours," making clear that if Ukraine resists, Russia will fight (Kolesnikov 2025). The Kremlin thus refused to join even an unprecedentedly Russia-friendly American administration's call for a 30-day cease-fire for the sake of peace negotiations in March 2025. Understanding the Ukrainian position, however, requires grasping a much wider range of actors and factors because of Ukraine's status as a complex democracy now under martial law. This volume helps us understand Ukraine's

[1] Henry E. Hale is Professor of political science and international affairs and codirector of the Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia).

actions by shedding light on the real political, social, and military forces that have sustained its perspective and that are strongly positioned to continue even should it lose American support. They help us understand how there are real opportunities for peace that would involve compromise on both sides, but that these will require actions by the United States or other international powers that none so far have been willing or able to take.

The Fundamental Obstacle to Peace

The fundamental problem for ongoing peace negotiations is that Russia's leaders are unlikely to agree to stop so long as they think they have the upper hand militarily, and Ukrainians will not stop fighting back without iron-clad guarantees against future Russian aggression. This is the problem that has yet to be solved. Why has it proven so intractable?

Sergey Minasyan's chapter explains why Moscow continues to see its position as strong. In what has become a war of attrition, Russia has important advantages in manpower, the ability to manufacture or buy more basic weapons faster, and a powerful military-oriented economy far greater than Ukraine's that has been carefully planned to withstand Western economic sanctions. Indeed, Russia has been making incremental territorial gains rather steadily for over a year despite Ukrainian advantages in modern drone warfare. While the Russian leadership surely recognizes its resources are not inexhaustible, it is betting that it can overwhelm and exhaust Ukraine, driven by a (mistaken) belief it still appears to hold that ordinary Ukrainians are not really very committed to their own independence and are simply being manipulated. And as Andrey Makarychev's chapter shows, the Kremlin has developed a highly repressive set of "biopolitical" tools--developed through practice on its own population--that it believes can successfully digest the new peoples it conquers into the Russian polity.

On the Ukrainian side, one major source of determination is precisely this Russian biopolitics. For one thing, Ukrainians have witnessed first-hand the carnage that Russia has wrought in Ukraine, and are determined to make this impossible in the future. Kristina Hook's chapter reminds us that Russia is committing not only the crime of international aggression, something one state does to another state in violation of international law, but also mass atrocities that degrade Ukrainians as people in ways that justify both their extermination as a distinct nation (not part of Putin's "single people" with Russia) and as individuals who, by resisting Putin's vision, are portrayed as "Nazis" or traitors.

This motivates Ukrainians to continue their resistance not only out of "never again" resolve and much less out of a desire for revenge, but crucially for a very practical additional reason: Even outright surrender would leave those Ukrainians who openly resisted Russia exposed to severe persecution in the future. And "those Ukrainians" are the vast majority of the population, as the chapters by Serhii Dembitskyi, Volodymyr Kulyk, and Mikhail Alexseev and Henry Hale show. People who volunteered to fight Russia or served in any of its current government institutions are already considered Nazis by Russia's regime and so could be singled out for repression. But looking at how Russia treats its own population indicates the dangers for ordinary Ukrainians in any Russia-influenced polity could be far greater: Russia has investigated and even jailed Russians themselves for posting pro-Ukraine sentiment in social media, so just think of what it might do after scraping through all of the social media postings made by Ukrainians themselves in support of their country's resistance to Moscow's invasion. Ukrainians also remember history well, when at times even speaking the Ukrainian language could be seen by Russian-dominated authorities as a sign of "dangerous" nationalist activity.

The dangers of post-war persecution are starkest for Ukrainians in the event that they actually wind up under direct Russian control, but they could also be vulnerable under a nominally independent state that commits to "neutrality" in return for ending the bloodshed. This is because such a state would be subject to military pressure from Russia to "rein in" what it calls "Nazi elements" lest Moscow find it to be in violation of the neutrality pledge and launch either a new military attack or a "hybrid warfare" attempt to install a pro-Russian government. In short, laying down arms, even if Russia's leadership agrees to do the same, is no guarantee for most ordinary Ukrainians that they will be left to live their lives in peace and security. Treaties here will not help: As Ukrainians well remember, by treaty Russia had fully recognized the inviolability of Ukraine's borders ever since the 1990s, yet this did not stop Russia from seizing Crimea in 2014 and conquering more territory in 2022.

This helps us understand how, as several of this volume's chapters show, Ukrainians' will to defend themselves through warfare remains strong despite the carnage and destruction wrought by Russia and despite Russia's incremental but steady advances since Ukraine's counteroffensive peaked in 2023. Dembitskyi's research shows that the willingness to fight on despite hardship is strongly grounded in a sense of civic national identity, including deep concern about Ukraine's future as a country. Kulyk finds that Russia's invasion has greatly strengthened aspects of Ukrainian identity specifically linked to resistance to Russia and a more positive view of the idea of "nationalism," previously resisted

in Ukraine. This has included, he shows, changing views of history, including a growing popular willingness to emphasize the fact that groups like Stepan Bandera's OUN fought Russia for Ukrainian independence over crimes committed by such groups that people were earlier quicker to condemn. Alexseev and Hale's chapter additionally shows that earlier findings from studies like Alexseev and Dembitskyi (2024) and Olga Onuch (2022) remain robust: Ukrainians see their fight against Russia in large part also as a fight for democracy, contrasting their own political system and their own political ideals with the authoritarianism articulated and practiced by Putin. All told, these considerations make it likely that Ukraine would continue to fight on, and muster considerable force in so doing, even were it to lose the backing of the United States.

The Importance of Nuance in Understanding Ukraine

At the same time, we must be careful not to oversimplify, portraying Ukraine as a pure liberal democracy and Ukrainians themselves as somehow superhuman in their resolve. Experts supportive of Ukraine risk doing its cause a disservice by, for fear that world opinion may not support anything short of perfection, glossing over key elements of how its political system actually works and downplaying the potential for wartime stressors to wear some of them down. In fact, such glossing and downplaying can backfire: Painting too pristine a picture, while indeed potentially inspiring for some, can also fail to ring true to many others, thereby opening avenues for Russia's narrative to take hold that Western support is based on false, idealized notions of Ukraine. Ukraine's cause does not and should not hinge on its being a utopia.

What is needed, therefore, is nuance about Ukrainian politics of exactly the kind this volume provides. For one thing, while Ukraine is a democracy, we must understand it for what it is and has been now for many years: a *patronal* democracy, as Yuriy Matsiyevsky's chapter describes it. While Ukraine's political institutions have gained in strength over the years, it still remains a polity where personal connections can be decisive and political outcomes depend upon the arrangement of powerful, extended political-economic networks, often headed by big-business "oligarchs."

The wartime imperative to centralize authority and concentrate national political attention on the war effort through martial law has exacerbated political cross-pressures felt by Ukraine's leadership as it manages these networks. While democracy has been and remains a core source of Ukrainians' motivation, as Alexseev and Hale write in their chapter, martial law has required that elections be postponed until peacetime. While the vast majority of Ukrainian citizens

believe this is necessary and think the greater threat to their democracy lies in trying to hold elections in the specific wartime conditions they face, this has opened the door for Russia and other critics to question the leadership's legitimacy. In examining Ukraine's rough-and-tumble personalized politics, Matsiyevsky's chapter documents how Zelensky has come down hard on some oligarchs and political opponents at the same time that political pluralism remains vibrant in Ukraine. Thus while the largest opposition party (led by former president and reputed oligarch Petro Poroshenko) has found itself facing dozens of legal cases launched against it by state bodies, it has not been banned or shut down, something Matsiyevsky correctly points out would be unthinkable in Russia. At the mass level, Alexseev and Hale document a "normal politics" reemerging in Ukraine after the first 2-3 years of war, with people less reticent to criticize Zelensky and some other Ukrainian institutions for some of their actions even as they continue to strongly support their efforts to prosecute the war and defeat Russia. Political division and robust competition is normal to any democracy, so should not be interpreted as signs of state crisis or collapse in the case of Ukraine either.

Complexity can also be found in other dimensions of Ukrainian politics and society. The chapter by Oleksandra Keudel, Andrii Darkovich, and Valentyn Hatsko finds that while wartime centralization has compromised some aspects of the local governing autonomy, local authorities have not only remained strong but provided crucial avenues for citizen engagement and state responsiveness to the public that to some degree compensate for avenues of democratic representation suspended under martial law. Oxana Shevel's chapter shows how Ukraine's government has struggled to thread the proverbial needle between preserving religious freedom (crucial to its self-image and public diplomacy of democracy) and the need to counter Russian attempts to exploit for the war one of Ukraine's most popular churches. This is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that has historically recognized the Moscow-based Patriarch, who in turn has traditionally been close to Russian political authorities, been willingly used by these authorities for political ends, and (most recently) blessed Putin's war effort against Ukraine. And on a personal level, Dembitskyi documents that Ukrainian people are indeed human, not completely immune to wartime stressors. Individuals facing hardship in the most intense measure do, he shows, weaken the sense in which they personally feel they can endure further hardship.

Importantly, what these chapters also show is that in all these areas where Ukraine is challenged, Ukrainians have found ways to keep Russia essentially in a stalemate after three years of war and to hold out hope that the tide may one day turn. While Zelensky has pressured big business to be loyal, Matsiyevsky shows

that his efforts have first and foremost prioritized getting oligarchs to support the national resistance to Russia, which they have largely done in powerful measure. Local government, as Keudel, Darkovich, and Hatsko document, has also provided potent support for the country's war effort, and Shevel shows that even the UOC claims to have broken with Moscow and backed the national resistance, though doubts remain for many amidst discoveries that at least some of its elements have worked for Russia's cause. And as Dembitskyi reports, despite suffering trauma on a massive scale, Ukrainian resolve has not bent. Strong beliefs, national identity, and national commitment continue to motivate a large majority to support continued resistance to Russia even as substantial shares feel at times that they no longer have what it takes to carry on with the fight. There are also some grounds for hope in the military sphere, Minasyan notes. Ukraine has some major advantages in technology and motivation, and wars often bring unexpected turns of fortune due to innovations in hardware or strategy. Indeed, Anar Valiyev and Nigar Gurbanli's chapter argues that shifting geopolitics and new alliance strategies could open up possibilities for Ukraine in the international arena, much as happened with Azerbaijan as it recently restored control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region militarily and sent Russian "peacekeepers" there packing home.

Conclusion

There are ways that the fundamental obstacle to peace might be overcome beyond the simple victory of one side over the other, but two things are necessary that seem difficult to achieve at this moment. First, Russia needs to be forced to the table. For the reasons given above, this would probably have to involve Ukraine's allies ramping up their support of Ukraine so strongly that Moscow is convinced it will not gain more (and might even lose ground) by continuing its fight. Second, Ukraine will still need real long-run security guarantees. This would mean some kind of credible assurance that Russia could not simply resume its attack later (a potential it could use to pressure Ukraine whenever it wanted) or otherwise reassert political control of Ukraine's domestic affairs. NATO membership is the most obvious such guarantee, though one could conceive of other potentially credible options that did not involve the US or would not require all NATO members to agree, such as military contingents supplied by major European powers outside the alliance framework.[2] If both things were supplied, one could envision a scenario whereby Ukraine de facto accepted Russian control over some of its territory in return for a peace in which the rest of Ukraine's security could be assured, something like the second scenario laid out by Tetyana Malyarenko and

[2] See also the June 2022 PONARS Eurasia Policy Exchange on Guaranteeing Ukraine's Long-Run Security.

Stefan Wolf's chapter in this volume. But the Ukrainian ally with the most power to achieve both of the necessary conditions, the United States, currently looks unwilling to do all of what it takes, and it is unclear now that the "willing" European powers by themselves could muster enough pressure on their own. Malyarenko and Wolf thus appear correct in their conclusion that the most likely scenario for the near future is continued war between Russia and Ukraine, but other possibilities remain to strive for.

References

Alexseev, Mikhail A., and Serhii Dembitskyi. 2024. "Geosocietal Support for Democracy: Survey Evidence from Ukraine." *Perspectives on Politics*, April, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000422.

Kolesnikov, Andrei. 2025. "Esli s Iugom Vyshel v Put'." *Kommersant*, June 20, 2025. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7831014.

Onuch, Olga. 2022. "Why Ukrainians Are Rallying Around Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 33 (4): 37–46.

Popova, Maria, and Oxana Shevel. 2024. *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States*. Cambridge: Polity.

PONARS Eurasia

New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia

Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY