

Anchored in Freedom: Ukrainians' Will to Fight Back in Harder Times

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After regaining nearly half of the territories Russia occupied in its full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, Ukraine fell on harder times. By May 2023, having incurred horrendous personnel losses, Russia had seized the Ukrainian strongholds of Bakhmut and Soledar in the Donbas. The Wagner Group's mutiny against the Kremlin's top brass in protest of these losses was swiftly suppressed and its leaders eliminated. Putin's position in power remained solid, a fact confirmed by yet another successful orchestration of a mass demonstration of consent: March 2024's uncompetitive pseudo-election. Over the past two years, the Russian economy has transitioned to a war footing, notably exceeding NATO's artillery shell production. Moreover, Russia has continued to receive large shipments of military supplies from Iran and North Korea while evading international economic sanctions. Meanwhile, international military assistance has fallen short of helping Kyiv to achieve decisive gains.

While these challenging developments have affected public opinion in Ukraine, Ukrainians remain resolute in their will to fight back and in their support for the core Western civic values. The second round of our tracking poll, conducted in December 2023 – January 2024 among 488 of the respondents previously interviewed in June 2023, shows that almost nine in ten Ukrainians have lost a family member, friend, or their own health or property to the war, and just 18 percent of respondents envision an end to the war in the next year. Yet 93 percent still believed that Ukraine would eventually prevail and support for democracy and freedom of expression remain consensus positions. In sum, we find that Ukraine is fighting to defend the same core values on which America was

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founded, and even modestly increased military aid – if consistent and predictable – could make a meaningful impact.

The War's Darkening Shadows

It would be surprising if all the military developments of last year had not affected Ukraine's public mood. Indeed, our tracking poll – broadly representative of Ukraine's adult population in territories under Kyiv's control, with 869 respondents interviewed in June 2023 and 488 of them re-interviewed in December 2023–January 2024² – shows Ukrainians enduring increasing strains amid growing uncertainty about international support.

- The polls paint a stark picture of Ukrainian families' mounting sacrifices. Among the 488 respondents to the December 2023–January 2024 poll, the share that reported having close family members who had participated in combat since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion increased from 37 to 43 percent. The share reporting other family members taking part in the war rose from 30 to 42 percent, while 60 percent had friends involved in combat (up from 49 percent).³
- The share of respondents reporting family members killed in action rose from 13 to 19 percent and the share of those who indicated having lost friends to the war increased from 36 to 43 percent. We also recorded reports of family or friends wounded in action rising from 34 to 46 percent and reports of family or friends being displaced by the war increasing from 45 to 51 percent. All told, the number of respondents reporting some form of war loss – including people they know, as well as their own health or property – rose from about 80 to 87 percent. To put it another way, only slightly more than one in ten Ukrainians has not been directly affected by the war in a significant, devastating way.
- The Russian invasion continues to traumatize Ukrainians. The number of respondents reporting persistent feelings of tension or anxiety rose from 75 to 82 percent, while the number of people saying they had not experienced any trauma symptoms dropped from 7 to 5 percent (while this is within the sampling error margin, the data at the very least testify to the overwhelming psychological stress Ukrainians have been sustaining).

Deprivation, Russia's grinding advances along the frontlines, and the delay of U.S. military aid are also very likely reflected in Ukrainians' growing fears that vital international support at the time was waning. Ukrainians remain deeply appreciative of

² Directed by the Institute of Sociology of Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences and conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology based on Computer Assisted Telephone Interview sampling.

³ The full initial sample of June 2023 indicates that those numbers might have been about 4-5 percent higher if all 869 respondents could have been reinterviewed in December 2023–January 2024.

whatever assistance they get, being keenly aware it would be substantially harder for Ukraine to defend itself without it.

- The largest decline we observed at the start of this year was in the number of Ukrainians feeling that international military support was sufficient for Ukraine to win the war (from 31 to 17 percent), closely followed by the decline in perceptions of the sufficiency of economic assistance (from 53 to 40 percent).
- Symptomatically, significantly fewer Ukrainians remained optimistic that the war might end within about a year, with the number of respondents who expressed this opinion dropping from 38 to 18 percent.
- Most respondents at the turn of 2024 saw Ukraine facing a much longer war, with about 50 percent estimating it would last between one and three years and another 20 percent that it would grind on for more than three years (compared to 40 percent and 9 percent, respectively, in mid-2023). This is a major shift with significant yet unclear implications that will depend on how Ukrainians project the extension of overwhelming loss and trauma that we reported above and how they think it may affect them.

Staying the Course

Our surveys indicate, however, that as dark as the war shadows may have been, they have not diminished Ukrainians' will to fight back and to uphold the core Western civic values as much as one might have expected under the circumstances.

First, faith in Ukraine's eventual military victory over Russia remains a dominant social value. In December 2023–January 2024, about 93 percent of our sample expressed this view – only around five percentage points fewer than in June 2023. This is not to say that hardship, setbacks, and the decline in assistance have not had a toll: the share of respondents who told us they had full faith in Ukraine's victory dropped from about 78 to 58 percent. However, three-quarters of this difference was due to people saying they still mostly believed in victory; that compares to just about 4.5 percent of respondents who said they mostly didn't believe, and 2 percent who said they completely didn't believe in Ukraine's victory (4- and 1.5-percentage-point increases from June 2023, respectively). Notably, this slight uptick in pessimism is significantly smaller than the increase in the share of respondents expecting the war to last longer – indicative of an enduring determination among Ukrainians to win regardless of hardship.

Second, the overwhelming majority of our respondents (78 percent) continued to define victory as regaining all territories within Ukraine's 1991 international borders. While this is a drop from 86 percent in June 2023, the number of respondents who saw freezing the conflict along the current lines of control as sufficient for victory only rose from 1.9 to 5.7 percent.

In an open question, we probed why Ukrainians consider regaining the occupied territories to be important enough to make it worth enduring devastating hardship and suffering. Most of our respondents said this is because these territories rightfully belong to Ukraine and its people, a right enshrined in law:

“This is Ukraine.” “This is our native land.” “My home is there.” “These are the borders within which independent Ukraine emerged.” “These are our borders set in our Constitution.” “These are internationally recognized borders to safeguard a nation.” “There were certain agreements that were broken by the United States and Russia, the security assurances that Ukraine received when it gave up its nuclear weapons.” “These are our territories and the people who lost their homes and fled must be able to return to them.” “There must be rule of law.”

Participants also expressed outrage that if Ukraine made territorial concessions, its war sacrifices would be in vain:

“We have been fighting for a long time already and many of our guys perished.” “We are paying a high price, too many people have died for us to give [these territories] away.” “Because my son died defending whole Ukraine.”

We also noted participants’ fear that Russia would continue to expand if any of its territorial gains were accepted:

“Russia won’t stop unless it loses.” “Leaving our territories to the enemy will provoke him to expand aggression.” “We already gave up territory in 2014 and look what it led to.”

Anchors in the Storm

Our surveys tell us that for all the variations over time due to war effects and international context, securing territorial integrity and independence for most Ukrainians has to do with defending fundamental, life-organizing values that they hold dear and that Russia’s invasion threatens. In Ukraine’s case, as our data indicate, these values are, to quote Alexis de Tocqueville, “pre-eminently democratic.” In essence, they are about the same “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” enshrined in the United States’ Declaration of Independence.

- Despite losses and suffering, Ukrainians maintain an overwhelming preference for democracy as a form of government – a preference expressed by 79 percent of our respondents in December 2023–January 2024 (with a four-percentage-point drop from June 2023 being within the margin of the sampling error). The share of those

saying that authoritarian rule could be preferable under certain conditions remained practically unchanged at around 10 percent. This shows that even under the pressures of war, most Ukrainians are not inclined to accept rule by “a strong hand.”

- The share of respondents saying freedom of expression was important to them personally remained the same between the two survey waves, at about 83 percent.
- Ukrainians also showed an enduring capacity to keep their government accountable. As we expected, given the extended and mounting hardship, public trust in institutions witnessed sizable declines (although remaining above pre-invasion levels). Compared to June 2023, in December 2023–January 2024, the share of respondents who expressed trust in Ukraine’s parliament (*Rada*) dropped from 19 to 12 percent; the president from 78 to 63 percent; the police from 43 to 36 percent; and the media from 40 to 32 percent. Nevertheless, these are significantly higher levels of trust than before Russia’s full-scale invasion (when they stood at 8, 20, 17 and 17 percent, respectively). An almost universal trust in the armed forces (at around 95-97 percent in both survey waves) has also persisted.
- Support for Ukraine joining international coalitions that require new members to adhere to democratic norms has remained strong. In December 2023–January 2024, 83 percent of survey respondents had a positive view of joining the European Union and 80 percent of joining NATO. This is largely the same as in June 2023 (87 and 81 percent, respectively).

Understanding that during wartime people may be reluctant to voice their true opinions out of fear of saying something that might be construed as socially undesirable, we included control questions. The responses indicate that social desirability bias is unlikely to have significantly impacted our findings. Specifically, we had an approximately 50-50 split with normal distribution on agreement/disagreement with the statements “Some people worry that they might not look patriotic enough” and “Criticism of Zelensky may weaken Ukraine’s efforts to win the war.”⁴

Silver Linings

Our surveys show the heartrending effects on Ukrainians of Russia’s persistent, gut-wrenching brutality in its bid to subjugate Ukraine. Yet they also show Ukraine’s enduring, deeply rooted, inspiring resilience. On the one hand, the key changes we observed in Ukraine’s public mood over the last year are broadly consistent with the continuing suffering, war losses, destruction from Russia’s daily bombardments of about a hundred Ukrainian settlements, the inability to regain significant territory rapidly in 2023, battlefield retreats, and the reduction of external military support. On the other

⁴ The first question was asked in June 2023, the second in both waves. Since the distribution of responses remained constant across waves, it is unlikely that social desirability drove significant shifts in responses to our main questions of interest.

hand, the continuity of Ukraine's democratic resilience and the fact that some negative trends could have been much worse is also consistent with Ukraine's major achievements over the same time frame. The latter are worth a closer look.

First, Ukraine's economy has stayed afloat – in our surveys, 87 percent of respondents in both waves were in the middle-income bracket on a seven-point scale, with the share of those in the upper-middle tier increasing from 36 to 41 percent between the two waves. This testifies to international economic assistance, as well as to the Ukrainian government's capacity to sustain living standards in the face of a large-scale destructive war – no mean feat.

Second, Ukraine's military was able – with major Western assistance – to build up air defenses and prevent the repetition of the massive blackouts that rolled through Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's bombardments of Ukraine's energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022-23. (Russia's renewed attacks causing major damage to Ukraine's power generating capacity happened after our second survey). In part, help came from Ukraine-made sea drones that inflicted significant losses on Russia's Black Sea Fleet and forced it to move its main naval base from Sevastopol in Crimea about three hundred miles east to Novorossiysk. Ukraine's anti-ship operations not only reduced Russia's missile attack capability on Ukraine from the South, but also enabled the operation of the Black Sea grain export corridor in defiance of the Kremlin's refusal to guarantee its security.

Testifying to these improvements in the overall security situation, our surveys showed somewhat fewer Ukrainians having to evacuate family members (45 percent in December 2023–January 2024 compared to 49 percent in June 2023); losing property due to war (20 percent compared to 22 percent); or experiencing recurrent war-related nightmares (58 percent compared to 63 percent). While modest in absolute terms and bordering on or being within the margin of sampling error, these results at least indicate that Ukraine has been capable of holding the line, averting catastrophic damages and the sinking of public spirit that Moscow wants.

Conclusion

One straightforward practical implication of these findings is that given Ukraine's resilience with limited and uncertain international military support, consistent, predictable, and modestly increased provision of military aid would probably have greater potential to reverse Russia's advances than frontline reports might currently lead one to think. It also gives credence to analysts who argue that Ukraine could well prevail in a protracted war against Russia provided its Western allies move faster to beef up their military-industrial complexes, including in partnership with Ukraine. Ukraine cannot win on resilience alone and now is not the time to curtail assistance.

There is a final broader – and possibly more important – implication of our research. It speaks to a reason probably more fundamental than even the specific security threats an aggressive, expansionist Russia poses why it is in the national interest of the United States and its European allies to support Ukraine. Our surveys tell us that Ukraine’s public mood today rhymes with America’s foundational values of freedom and independence. It is also about how much these values will be shared around the world – how many friends, allies, and partners the United States will be able to rely on and to do business with in support of greater security and prosperity for generations of Americans to come.

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