

Ukraine's Counterintuitive Democratic Stoicism

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY-BUILDING IN A WAR-TORN STATE

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Numerous academic studies have shown that economic hardship, ethnoregional divides, corrupt governance, and war are bad for democracy, particularly in states where democracy has weak historical roots. By those yardsticks, one might expect public support for democracy in Ukraine to plummet four years after the Euromaidan revolution and the onset of the Donbas war. Yet this has not been the case. Why?

Drawing on mass public opinion surveys, structured interviews, and focus groups, with a particular focus on the Ukrainian government-controlled Donbas region, this analysis indicates that Russia's military intervention in Ukraine—igniting and sustaining a war that by now has resulted in over 10,500 people dead and counting—is a pivotal factor explaining democratic stoicism in Ukraine. This is because the Donbas war has unique principal characteristics that make its impact on domestic political preferences hard to assess based on prior comparative research. Much more than territory and spoils are at stake. This is a hybrid war more in the conceptual than the operational sense. What Ukraine fights is a blend of independence/national liberation wars, great power proxy wars, and also a war about the long-term political and economic prospects of its citizens and future generations—whether these would be better through integration with Europe or with Russia. In the latter sense, this is a geosocietal war: a geopolitical orientation toward Russia is synonymous with the rejection of democracy at home, while a geopolitical orientation toward the West is synonymous with support for democracy at home. And while the number of people leaning toward the West or Russia predictably differs across Ukraine's regions, this fundamental association of democracy with the West and nondemocracy with Russia—along with the role of age and education—suggests that regional divisions are not immutable and time is on the side of democracy in Ukraine, including in the government-controlled Donbas.

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Ukraine's Democratic Stoicism

From 2013 to 2015, Ukraine's GDP fell from about \$181 billion to \$91 billion, unemployment rose from about 8.5 to 11 percent, and the value of the Ukrainian hryvnia declined threefold against the dollar and the euro. About half of Ukrainians in the reputable annual surveys of the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (UNASIS) felt the change of government in 2014 amounted to a loss to them personally.² Government corruption remained among the top public concerns. The Crimea annexation and the Donbas war demonstrated Ukraine's military vulnerability to Russia and the limitations of the West's ability to help the country regain territorial integrity. In 2017, nearly half of respondents in the UNASIS nationally representative surveys reported knowing someone personally who had been involved in combat over Donbas, including about 5 percent of the total sample who reported having themselves been combatants or combat witnesses. About 40 percent of respondents reported having experienced disturbing nightmares about traumatic events related to the war.

And yet, support for democracy and integration with the West has remained strong.

- Over three quarters of respondents in the UNASIS July 2017 (N=1,800) poll said that democracy was important to them personally. Fewer than 15 percent said it was not important. This is approximately the same level of support as in 2012, 2014, and 2016 surveys and 5-10 percent higher than in surveys conducted from 2002 to 2009.
- Nearly three quarters of respondents in the 2017 survey said it was important to them to be able to express political views without fear of losing freedom, while only about 11 percent said it was not important. This is about the same as in surveys from 2012 through 2016, and 10-15 percent higher than in surveys from 2002 through 2009. Posed a negatively framed control question, fewer than one third of respondents agreed that freedom of speech would completely disorganize Ukraine's society.
- Similar trends on those questions were recorded in the National Democratic Institute (NDI) July 2018 [survey](#) (N=5,784), with even a larger number of respondents (83 percent) saying a "fully functioning democracy" was important or very important to them. Support was above 66 percent in all regions of Ukraine.

Similarly, willingness to join the Euro-Atlantic community remained robust.

² The author has access to the original UNASIS survey datasets (for 2016, 2017, and 2018). Subsequent data presented throughout the memo is based on those.

- Support for joining the EU in 2017 was more than twice as strong as opposition (54 vs. 24 percent). Support for the EU in 2017 rose 6 percent from 2016, back to the 2015 level (55 percent) and higher than in 2014 (51 percent). The reverse was the case regarding joining the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (22 vs. 54 percent).
- Support for joining NATO in mid-2017 remained stronger than opposition (41 vs. 36 percent). It was also higher than in 2016 (38 percent) and 2014 (35 percent), and just 2 percent below 2015.
- These trends were upheld in the NDI 2018 survey and in the UNASIS survey conducted in November 2018 (N=1,800). In the latter, support for joining NATO led opposition by the largest margin ever (42 percent to 28 percent).

War as a Toll on Democracy

Multiple regression analysis—when the impact of any one hypothetical cause of a phenomenon of interest is estimated while alternative causes are held constant—shows that in certain respects the Donbas war continues to undermine support for a democratic and European orientation among Ukrainians.

- In the 2016 UNASIS survey (N=1,800), respondents who directly experienced the war as combatants or witnesses were about 7-9 percent less likely to consider democracy and freedom of expression as important. This effect transcended regional divides. While most people directly affected by the war resided in the Donbas, residence in the Donbas *per se* was a weaker predictor of democracy support and not statistically significant with respect to support for freedom of expression once war exposure was taken into consideration.
- In the 2017 UNASIS survey, respondents who said they had disturbing dreams associated with the Donbas war were 10 percent less likely than others to support the democratic path for Ukraine and 8 percent less likely to say freedom of expression—and specifically the freedom to criticize the government—was important to them personally.

While consistent with prior research, these negative effects on democracy support have been counterbalanced by the positive effects of interpersonal relations and communication associated with the war.

War as a Source of Democratic Resilience

Surveys show that individuals who knew someone directly affected by the war and/or discussed the war with others were generally more likely to feel that democracy and freedom of expression were important to them.

- In the 2016 survey, respondents who discussed the war with other people were on average 7-12 percent more likely to feel democracy was important to them. Respondents who knew someone directly affected by the war were about 4 percent less likely to support authoritarian leadership.
- In 2017, respondents who knew someone directly affected by the war and respondents who discussed the war with others were 4-6 percent more likely to support democracy and freedom of expression.
- The odds of the same kind of respondents in 2017 supporting Ukraine joining the EU were 1.5 times higher than average, based on the logit tests.

Another contributor to democratic stoicism was the decline of anti-democracy views among respondents directly affected by the war. Unlike in 2016, those respondents in 2017 were no longer more likely than others to state that democracy and freedom of expression were unimportant to them.

The Crux of the Matter: Geosocietal Factors

Across Ukraine—whether a respondent lived in the West or in the Donbas or spoke predominantly Ukrainian or Russian or had high or low family income or was male or female—geopolitical orientation has come to be strongly and robustly associated with democracy support.

- In 2017, respondents who supported Ukraine joining the EU or/and NATO were about 12 percent more likely than others to view democracy in Ukraine as important. Those who wanted Ukraine to be part of the Russia-centered Eurasian Economic Union were 7 percent more likely than others to see democracy as unimportant. These are sizeable effects, considering the typical amount of noise in the survey data, and highly significant, with low standard errors resulting in less than 0.1 percent probability it was due to chance. The same geo-societal divide was found regarding support for free political expression.
- The perceived role of Russia in the Donbas predicated support for democracy and West-East orientation across the board, more consistently and strongly than other indicators. Notably, respondents who believed that the Ukrainian armed forces principally fought with the regular Russian troops or Russia-backed separatists

were 8 percent more likely than others to feel democracy is important for Ukraine, 12 percent more likely to support Ukraine joining the EU, and 15 percent more likely to support Ukraine joining NATO. These effects obtained while controlling for region.

The ongoing Donbas war – in which about 70 percent of Ukrainians in 2017 justifiably saw Russia as the principal aggressor – appears to clarify and raise the stakes for the choice between the democratic West and nondemocratic Russia. In fact, the perception of Russia as the aggressor has been the single major underlying factor in both support for democracy and for joining the EU/NATO vs. the Eurasian Union in the UNASIS 2017 poll. In other words, support for democracy comes through as coterminous with defense of territorial integrity and national dignity, explaining stoicism in the midst of adversity.

The Matter of Regions

Unsurprisingly, analysis shows that democracy support is more likely in Ukraine's West, while the strongest skepticism about democracy is in Ukraine's East, including the government-controlled Donbas. It is very clear that democracy is a Western phenomenon.

Yet, the results strongly suggest that regional views are regional only up to a point. This comes through in a case study³ of Donbas under Kyiv's control, where additional respondents were polled in 2017.

- Geosocietal variables mattered in the same way as in other regions. Notably, respondents within Donbas who viewed Russia as the principal aggressor were systematically more likely to see democratic institutions and free expression as important. They were also more likely to support Ukraine joining the EU and NATO. Support for freedom of expression was more common among respondents who had indirect exposure to war through people they knew personally.
- Importantly, individuals who directly experienced the war as combatants or witnesses were systematically more likely than others to support Ukraine's EU membership (but not necessarily NATO membership).

The analysis further suggests that public preferences within a region are hardly set in stone. The only two other significant predictors of democracy support within the Donbas are telling.

- Younger and better educated respondents were more supportive of democracy as a path for Ukraine and saw freedom of speech as important.

³ My addendum to that year's UNASIS survey (making for a subsample of 565 respondents).

- Younger respondents were also more likely than average to support Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO.

Focus groups that I conducted with UNASIS scholars in the Donbas – two in the town of Druzhkivka and two in the city of Mariupol in May 2017 – also revealed that living in proximity to the war zone was not translating systematically into support for authoritarian governance.

- While discussing what kind of “strong rule” might be good for Ukraine, only 5 participants out of 32 said they understood it as “a strong leader” (i.e., an autocrat). Only one participant defined it as “the rule by professionals” (i.e., technocrats – often a guise for authoritarianism). The largest number of participants – 11 or over a third – said such rule should be first and foremost legitimate, lawful, and accountable. Nine respondents said they had a hard time defining it.
- When handed cards with statements on political and socioeconomic preferences and asked to pick those they agreed with, only 5 of the 32 respondents picked “Democracy makes no sense, because the authorities we elect ignore the interests of the people.” Sixteen respondents picked the card saying “A country's success is the sum of successes of its citizens, their freedom and independence.” Fourteen respondents picked “freedom of speech” and 12 picked “expanding the power of local communities (decentralization of power and tax authority).” (For reference, the uncontroversial and unambiguously desirable “material well-being” was also picked by 12 respondents). And while 13 respondents picked “several strong leaders can do more for the country than laws and debates” the prevalent interpretation in subsequent discussions emphasized the word “several” and the idea of a strong team based on consensus and respecting different positions.
- Perhaps most impressive was the willingness of participants to harshly criticize their government in front of strangers (the moderators and this author) and in a way that revealed strong understanding of democratic fundamentals such as civil liberties, checks and balances, and accountability.

Conclusion

Persistent support for democratic values and institutions and Western orientation is testimony to a unique combination of geopolitical and societal conditions that have shaped responses to the Donbas war. It is still a hard act to pull through. In policy terms, it points to the importance of a coordinated multipronged strategy, if Ukraine is to develop and improve its democratic governance. It has to defy the venerable Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu, who concluded that it is impossible to build a state and fight a war at the same time. Ukraine needs utmost external support – military and diplomatic – to hold the line and contain Russian expansionism to minimize shocks to the system. It also needs

to sustain all basic democracy components beyond ensuring free and fair elections – particularly those that deal with checks and balances. And a significantly stronger effort needs to be invested in public education promoting understanding of the strength and weaknesses of democratic governance. This is, in fact, something that one of the Druzhkivka focus group participants passionately asked for – and there, in that plea, one would find major opportunities for partnerships including Ukrainian government agencies and civil society, domestic and international. This can also be a productive issue area for enhancing practical integration of Ukraine with the EU.

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