

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 a full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, Ukraine fell on harder times. By May 2023, at horrendous losses in manpower Russia seized 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, its leaders eliminated. Putin's power position remained solid, culminating in yet another successful orchestration of the mass demonstration of consent through an uncompetitive pseudo-election this March. The Russian economy transitioned to the war footing, in particular, exceeding NATO's artillery shell production. Moreover, Russia has kept getting large military supplies from Iran and North Korea, while evading international economic sanctions.

While enabling Ukraine to mostly hold the line along the entire 1,000-mile front, international military assistance fell short when it came to Kyiv's efforts last summer to regain significant territory. Long delays and limitations on the quantity and range of desperately needed weapon systems, particularly air defenses, long-range artillery and missiles, and combat aircraft made much-hoped-for gains unrealistic. By mobilizing more soldiers and leveraging its continuing superiority in airpower and artillery, Russia regained initiative. To make the situation harder, the U.S. House of Representatives, in a procedural maneuver by a minority group of hard-right isolationists, blocked the renewal of America's military aid to Ukraine. With ensuing ammunition shortages, the Russian forces managed to seize Avdiivka, a symbol of Ukraine's resistance going back to Russia's 2014 intervention in the Donbas. And while resiliently slowing down Russia's further push, replenishing losses has become an increasingly painful challenge for Ukraine.

The War's Darkening Shadows

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It would be surprising if all these developments didn't affect 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 with 488 of them re-interviewed in December 2023 - January 2024²—shows Ukrainians enduring increasing strains amidst growing uncertainty about international support.

- The polls paint a stark picture of Ukrainian families' mounting sacrifices. Among the same 488 respondents, the number of close family members they reported participating in combat since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion increased from 37 to 43 percent. The number reporting other family members taking part in the war rose from 30 to 42 percent, and friends -- from 49 to 60 percent.³
- The number of respondents reporting family members killed in action rose from 13 to 19 percent and of those who lost friends to the war – from 36 to 43 percent. We also recorded reports of family or friends wounded in action rising from 34 to 46 percent; of family or friends being displaced by the war -- 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. Just to think of it, 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 testifies to the overwhelming psychological stress Ukrainians have been sustaining).

The deprivation, Russia's grinding advances along the frontlines, and suspension of U.S. military aid are also very likely reflected in Ukrainians' growing fears that vital international support is waning. Ukrainians remain deeply appreciative of whatever assistance they get—being keenly aware it would be momentarily harder for Ukraine to defend itself without it.

- The largest decline we observed was in the number of Ukrainians feeling that international military support is sufficient for Ukraine to win the war—from 31 to 17 percent; closely followed by the perceived sufficiency of economic assistance—from 53 to 40 percent.
- Symptomatically, significantly fewer Ukrainians remained optimistic that the war may end within about a year—with the number of respondents who said so 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 – more than three years (compared to 40 percent and 9 percent in mid-2023). This is a major shift with significant yet unclear implications, pending how Ukrainians project the

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 could be about 4-5 percent higher if all 869 respondents could be reinterviewed in December 2023 and January 2024.

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 expect under the circumstances.

First, faith in the ultimate military victory over Russia remains a dominant social value in Ukraine. In December 2023/January 2024, about 93 percent of people in our survey expressed this view—only around five-percentage points fewer than in June 2023. This is not to say that hardship, setbacks, and assistance decline have not had a toll. The number of respondents who told us they believed in Ukraine's victory completely, 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 (a 4- and 1.5-percentage point increases from June 2023, respectively). Notably, this slight uptick in pessimism is significantly smaller than the increase of the number 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) continue to see 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 would be OK with freezing the conflict along the current lines of control only rose from 1.9 to 5.7 percent. Interestingly, there was no change in the number of people saying they would be satisfied with trading peace for the Crimea (3.5 percent in both survey waves).

In an open question, we probed why Ukrainians consider regaining the occupied territories as so important as to endure the devastating hardship and suffering. Most of our respondents said this is because these territories rightfully belong to Ukraine and its people, and this right is enshrined in law. Prominent among additional reasons was outrage that otherwise Ukraine's war sacrifices would be in vain as well as fear that Russia would continue to expand if any of its territorial gains are accepted. Here are some representative examples:

- “This is Ukraine.” “This is our native land.” “These are the borders within which independent Ukraine emerged.” “These are our territories and the people who lost their homes and fled must be able to return to them.” “Because my home is there.”
- “These are our borders set in our Constitution, there must be territorial integrity.” “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.” “There must be rule of law.”
- “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.”

- “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 securing territorial integrity and independence has to do with defending fundamental, life-organizing values that are held dear and that an external invasion threatens. In Ukraine’s case, as our data indicates, these values are, to quote Alexis de Tocqueville, “pre-eminently democratic.” In essence, they are about “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—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 number of those saying that under certain conditions authoritarian rule could be preferable remained practically unchanged at around 10 percent. This shows that even under the pressures of war most Ukrainians are not inclined to accept the rule by “a strong hand.”
- The number of respondents saying freedom of expression was personally important to them remained the same between the two survey waves, at about 83 percent.
- Ukrainians also showed enduring capacity to keep their government accountable: as we expected given the extended and mounting hardship, public trust in institutions posted sizeable declines (although still staying above pre-invasion levels). Compared to June 2023, in December 2023/January 2024, the number of people in our surveys who said they trusted 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. Even then, these are still significantly higher levels of trust than before Russia’s full-scale invasion (at 8, 20, 17 and 17 percent, respectively). Also, an almost universal trust in the armed forces has persisted (at around 95-97 percent in both survey waves).
- 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 people in our surveys 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 at 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 was unlikely to have significantly impacted our findings. Specifically, we had an about 50-50 split with normal distribution on the

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 deeply heart-ripping 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 observe 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 fast in 2023, battlefield retreats, and the reduction of external military support. On the other 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 number of those in the upper-middle tier increasing from 36 to 41 percent. This is very much testimony to international economic assistance as well as to Ukraine’s government capacity to sustain living standards in the face of a large-scale destructive war, a no mean feat.

Second, Ukraine’s military with major Western assistance was able to build up air defenses and prevent the repetition of massive blackouts that rolled through Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia’s bombardments of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure in the winter of 2022-23. 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 the Crimea over 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 it 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); and 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 the Ukraine was capable of holding the line and averting catastrophic damages and the sinking of public spirit that Moscow wants.

Conclusions

One straightforward practical implication of these findings is that given Ukraine’s resilience with limited and uncertain international military support, even a modest but consistent, predictable, and increased provision of military aid probably has more chances to reverse Russia’s advances than one might think now based on frontline reports. It also gives credence to analysts who argue that Ukraine could well prevail in a protracted war against Russia provided its Western allies

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.

move faster to beef up their military-industrial complexes, including in partnership with Ukraine. Yet also, some negative tendencies indicate Ukraine cannot win on resilience alone and now is not the time to curtail assistance.

And there's one broader and possibly more important implication of our research. It speaks to a probably more fundamental reason why it is in the national interest of the United States and its European allies to support Ukraine than even specific security threats the aggressive, expansionist Russia poses. Our surveys tell us that Ukraine's public mood today rhymes with that of Patrick Henry's speech at the Second Virginia Convention (1775): "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" And so, in the end, our findings indicate that Ukraine's fight is about defending America's intrinsic core values. It is also about how much these values will be shared around the world, how many friends, allies, and partners this country will have to rely on and to do business with for better security and prosperity for generations of Americans to come.