

WAR AND MEANING OF DEMOCRACY: SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP EVIDENCE FROM UKRAINE

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We shall lay down our souls and bodies for our freedom
Ukraine's national anthem

Can Ukraine survive the ongoing Russian aggression not only as a nation, but as a democracy? How may democracy support among individuals vary as the war unfolds and losses and suffering mount over the years, and why? These questions are pertinent to both Ukraine's future and our fundamental understanding of the origins and evolution of political systems. Ukraine's democratic resilience—evidenced by a surge of public support for democracy as a political system and of trust in democratic institutions since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 (Alexseev and Dembitskyi 2022, 2023; Onuch 2022)—showed that public support for democracy may increase under wartime conditions that previous studies found related to diminishing democracy support—namely, insecurity; personal loss and trauma; economic hardship and social polarization; incentives for rule-breaking; and diminution of intergroup tolerance (Rasler and Thompson 2004; Davis and Silver 2004; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Dyrstad 2013; Marshall and Cole 2014; Walter 2015; Tir and Singh 2015).

And yet, students of war effects on democracy may still ask whether the 2022 survey findings in Ukraine reflect the special case of short-term social mobilization under a massive attack—akin to rallying-‘round-the-flag—and whether those findings reflected rising optimism, as the Russian attempt to capture Kyiv was repelled, the Russian forces were being pushed out of Ukraine's north and southwest, Russia's Black Sea Fleet flagship was sunk, and the U.S. and its allies stepped up military and economic assistance and imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia. By 2023 and onward, however, the frontlines stabilized, Ukraine was on the defensive again fighting grinding battles in the East, and Russia's forces and the economy regrouped, leveraging its massive superiority in population, economic resources, and military capabilities, also bolstered through deals with China, Iran, and North Korea.

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Our survey research in Ukraine, detailed further, indicates that public support for democracy as a political system---widely considered a social foundation of democracy survival (Weber 1965; Lipset 1959; Easton 1975; Diamond 1999)---has remained high and robust amidst an exhausting war of attrition, including Russia’s new advances in the first half of 2024 that took advantage of a half-a-year delay in U.S. military assistance. The question now is not if democracy legitimation can endure years of war, but *why* it endures.

PROTRACTED WAR AND DEMOCRACY: EXTENDING THE GEOSOCIETAL LOGIC

We know from the literature that wars play a significant role in shaping states, national identities, and domestic politics (Tilly 1992; Greenfeld 1993; Gourevitch 1978). We also know that some sociopolitical attitudes such as trust are likely to get stronger in a society that comes under external attack and already has an established sense of national identity (Bauer, et al. 2016). Extending these insights and specifically testing them in Ukraine with mass survey data, Alexseev and Dembitskyi (2024) showed that support for democracy is to a significant degree “geosocietal”—a combination of civic national pride and external threat from authoritarian actors, either perceived or coming as a military attack. Importantly, the geosocietal logic not only explained the surge of democracy support among the same individuals interviewed about three months before and after Russia’s February 2022 full-scale invasion, but also strongly and robustly predicted democracy support at the time of the much lower-scale Donbas War in 2017 and 2018. In other words, we have evidence indicating that geosocietal logic matters in different contexts, that it is not necessarily limited to initial wartime rallying and that it therefore could provide an explanation for democratic resilience in protracted interstate wars.

What we don’t know is whether and how this logic may apply as a war proceeds for years. Three issues are foundational to consider through the geosocietal prism.

First, we ask to what extent democracy is associated with political freedoms and with geopolitical group identity, in particular, to what extent it is associated with desired membership in international alliances or organizations where those freedoms are seen as dominant and are a major membership criterium. It is important to examine, in our case, whether Ukrainians consider “striving for their freedom” as striving “also for a European future” – something that has been noted as a strong post-Soviet tendency (Stepanenko and Pylynskyi 2015,12).

Second, we need to estimate to what extent the external aggressor state’s polity is viewed as the antipode or the enemy of democracy. One possibility here is that softer views on Russia may be related to weaker democracy support.

Third, we focus on a counterintuitive question that may be central to geosocietal logic in protracted wars: Is it possible that experiencing personal war losses and war-related trauma could boost one’s support for democracy? Much of the conventional wisdom on this issue posits the opposite (Janoff-Bulman 1992, Chemtob, et al. 1997, Rosenblatt, et al. 1989; Dyrstad 2013; Canetti-Nisim, et al. 2009). The crucial point, however, is that these studies do not examine the effects of specifically external/interstate military aggression (and, more broadly, the effects of geopolitical in/out-group identities). This is where the geosocietal logic comes in: if personal losses are directly attributable to external aggression in an interstate war and the aggressor’s

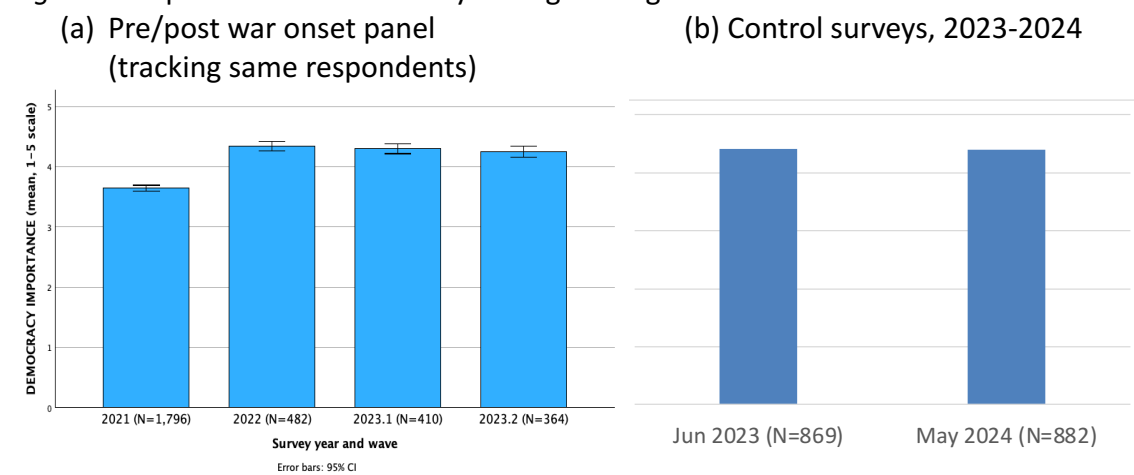
victory would mean the end of democracy at home, then they become a valid context-appropriate proxy for perceived external (geopolitical) threat. Experiencing such losses could then bolster the sense of shared sacrifice for the nation and its people and the values they hold dear, including political freedoms and democracy as a political system.

We examine each of those issues empirically with original data from Ukraine. First, we have a panel (longitudinal) tracking poll broadly representative of Ukraine’s population in territories under Kyiv’s control, first interviewed in the Ukraine National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (UNASIS) annual monitoring survey in November 2021 (N=1,800) and then reinterviewed in June-July 2022 (N=482), June-July 2023 (N=412), and December 2023 – January 2024 (N=371).² Second, we analyze two additional UNASIS surveys with new respondents to control for putative effects of panel attrition, each using identically worded questions as the ones used in our longitudinal survey (N=869 in June 2023, and N=882 in May 2024). Third, we draw on four focus groups, conducted in mid-September 2023 (with eight participants each) and representing Ukraine’s main macro-regions: Center (Kyiv and Kyiv province); West (Lviv and Ivano-Frankiv’sk); East (Kharkiv and Donetsk); and South (Odesa and Mykolaiv).

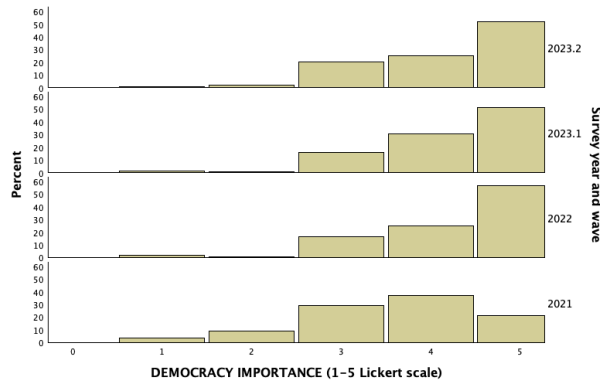
MAPPING OUT DEMOCRACY MEANING: SOCIETAL AND GEOPOLITICAL

Our survey data shows that Ukrainians continue to see democracy as personally important to them and that the surge in these views in response to Russia’s full scale February 2022 invasion (from the average of 3.7 to 4.3 on the 5-point Likert scale) has translated into a solid, enduring support. This is illustrated both by tracking polls of the same respondents and additional control polls (Figure 1). The histograms at the bottom of Figure 1a show that most Ukrainians have persistently expressed “complete support” for democracy, indicating a strong commitment to these views.

Figure 1. Importance of Democracy Strong Among Ukrainians



² Not all respondents participated in every survey wave. The number of repeat respondents in our tests—using repeated measures from two or three waves—varied from 261 to 482, giving us sufficient statistical power to identify significant relationships of interest. Descriptions of survey methodology and reports, including nonresponse data, is available from the authors upon request.



To assess how Ukrainians define democracy, we invited participants of all our focus groups to tell us what they mean by democracy and what they see as the main characteristics of democracy. We used verified Google Translate transcripts in English and analyzed them with *Voyant Tools*, a well-established free web-based text-analytic platform designed and developed by scholars (<https://voyant-tools.org/docs/#!/guide/about>). We generated word clouds on top-100 most frequently used words and ran the analysis of link frequencies within five words.

The graphics show that to Ukrainians democracy predominantly stands for the freedom and power of the people (Figure 2). This is the most explicit result in all word clouds and text links graphs. Based on the word counts, the most prominent secondary associations are “expression” (embracing freedom of speech and the right to freely elect leaders—the latter also reflected in the prominence of “choice”), “law” (referring to equality under the rule of law); as well as a cluster of related terms (“society,” “collective”) contextually referring to deliberative majority rule; and “different” (reflecting the importance of tolerance to different views).

The links analysis also shows the importance of the war theme in democracy discussions. This theme included criticism of Ukraine’s government, which also indirectly showed appreciation of what participants held dear about democracy.

In the Kyiv and Kyiv Oblast group, participants debated whether the situation with democracy in Ukraine worsened during the war. One participant expressed concern that the president was amassing too much power, and that the army was mobilizing people to the front against their will. Two others disagreed. One opined that democracy improved because the government reduced the influence of the oligarchs.

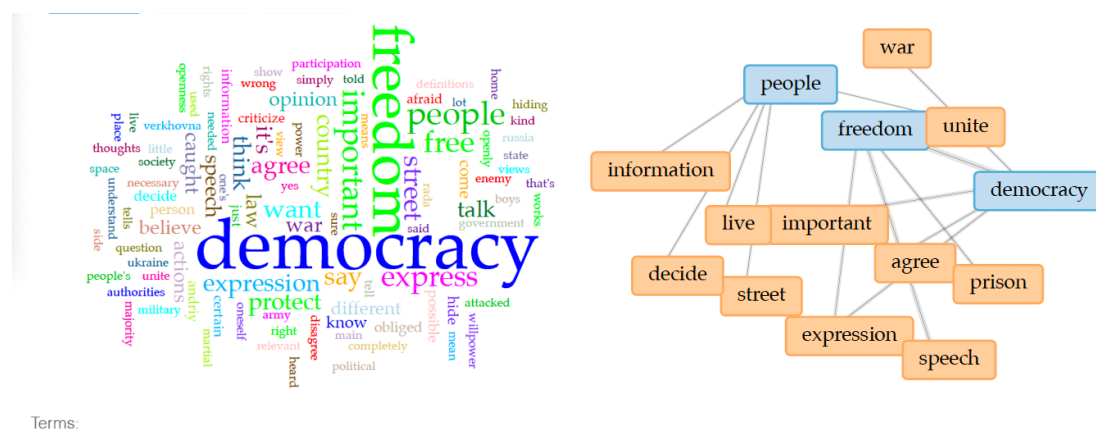
In both groups participants discussed the importance of striking the right balance between freedoms and national security, seeing the two as interrelated. One participant from Kyiv argued with passion that ability to defend sovereignty is quintessential for democracy in Ukraine: “If they deliver draft papers to you and you hide, ask who will defend your country? Who? Will that Englishman come, or will that American come and defend your country? We all want to have a democratic, free, free Ukraine. But how could it be free if there’s no one to defend it?”

Some discussion indicated that Ukraine’s civil society is an important foundation of democracy. In the Kyiv group, one participant pointed out that Ukrainians could and should bring their grievances to the authorities. In the Kherson/Donetsk group, a participant said: “To be

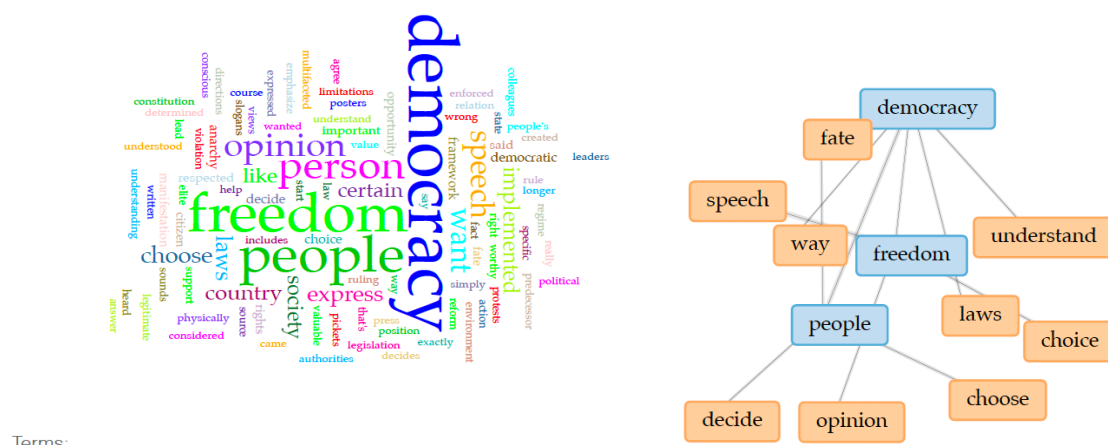
100% democratic during war? I don't know if that's even possible. At the moment, I believe that I have heard a lot about it in the news. People are currently creating democracy themselves on a daily basis. This can be seen in some cities, where people are trying to ensure that the money allocated for roads goes to equip our country with our military.”

Figure 2. In Focus Groups Ukrainians See Individual Freedoms as Key to Democracy
(Voyant Tools: Top 100-word clouds and links frequency within five words)

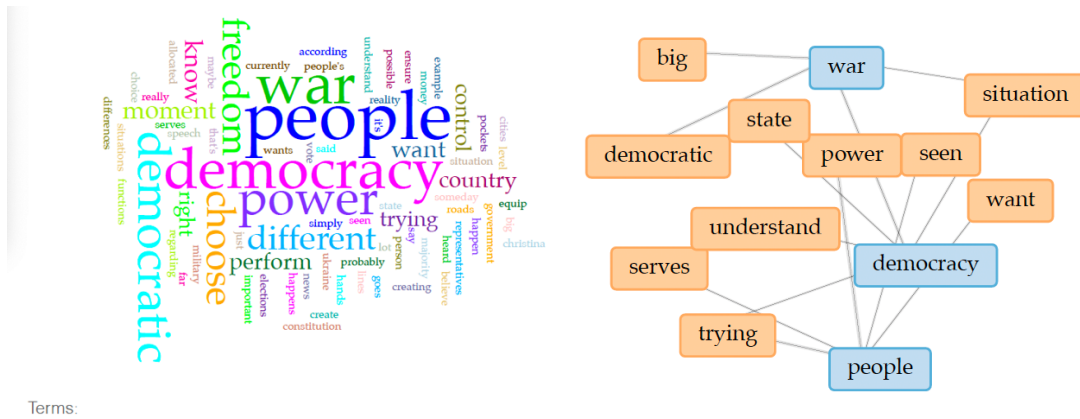
(a) Kyiv & Kyiv Oblast (Corpus = 1,747 words)



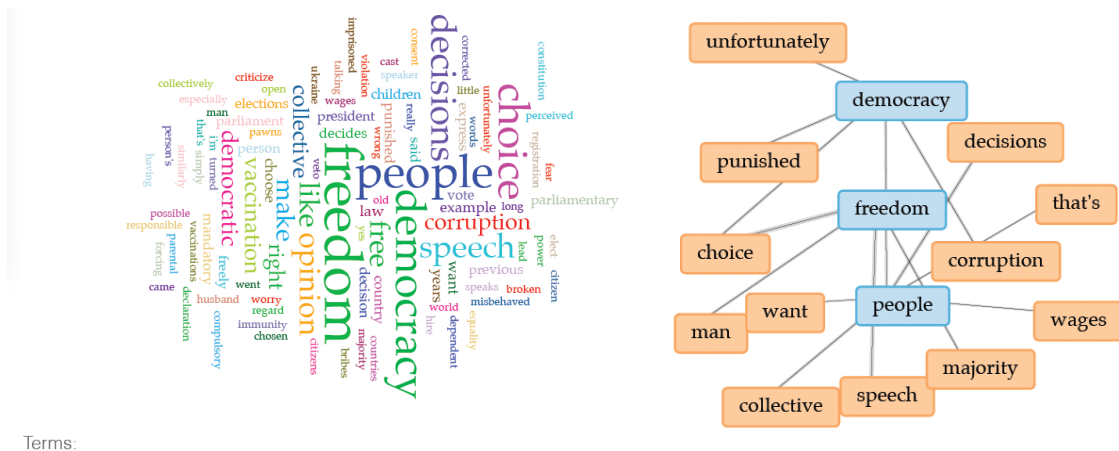
(b) Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk (Corpus=475 words)



(c) Kherson and Donetsk Oblast (Corpus=290 words)



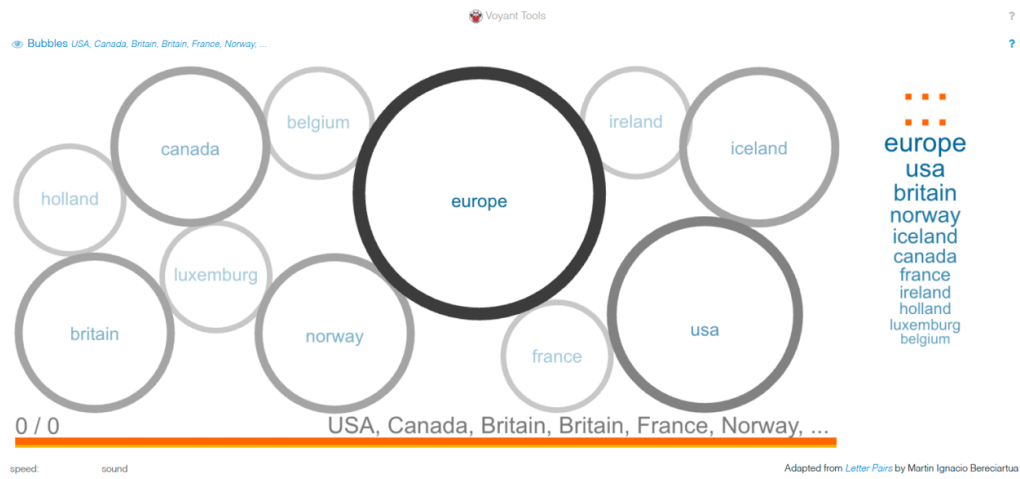
(d) Mykolaiv and Kharkiv (Corpus=453 words)



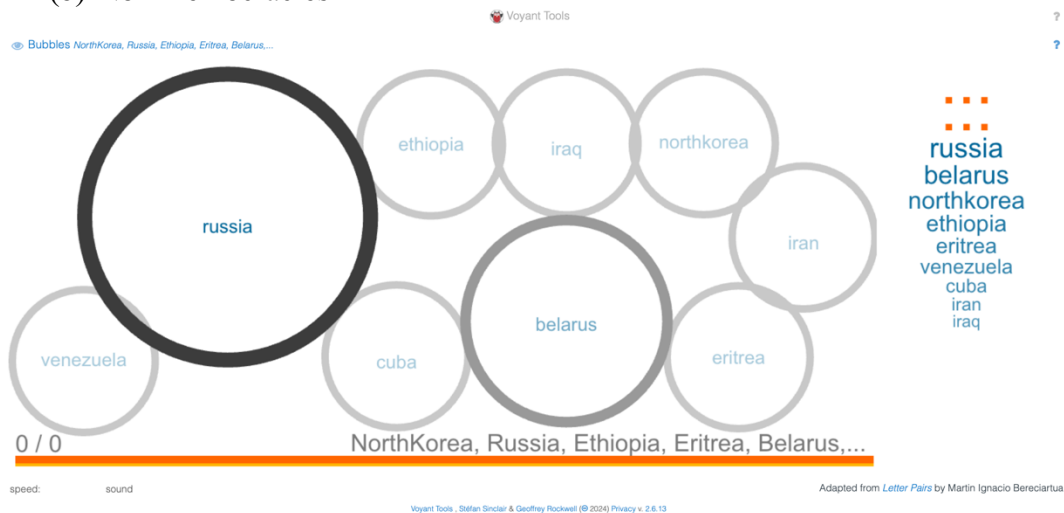
Turning to geopolitical divides on democracy, we asked participants to give us best examples of countries they considered to be democracies and non-democracies. We made a list of countries that were named by different respondents (if the same respondent mentioned a certain country more than once it was counted as one country). No country was brought up as an example of both democracy and non-democracy. The geopolitical divide is unambiguous: the Euro-Atlantic core of democracies vs. the Eurasian core of non-democracies (Figure 3). In the discussions, the former was a clear referent for assessing the state and the prospects of Ukraine's political system, and the latter was brought about as a counterpoint (i.e., as examples of what Ukraine should not become). In sum, Figure 3 shows the dominant sense that Euro-Atlantic geopolitical in-group identity is the most desirable one for Ukraine. In our surveys, the overwhelming support for Ukraine joining the EU and NATO also testifies to this. At the same time, the external aggressor state is strongly viewed as the antipode of democracy.

Figure 3. Focus Groups Distinguish Clearly Between Democracies and Non-Democracies

(a) Democracies



(b) Non-Democracies



DEMOCRACY SUPPORT OVER LONG WAR: SHIFTING TO GEOPOLITICAL IDENTITY

We now turn to the question of whether war losses and traumas may undermine or bolster democracy support and what other pertinent factors matter over the course of a protracted war. We conducted two sets of statistical tests with our survey data: longitudinal (repeated measures over four survey waves of the same respondents in 2021-2024) and cross-sectional (one-time measures with additional surveys in 2023 and 2024). Our surveys assess the state of public opinion in territories governed by Kyiv, but exclude territories under Russian occupation, as well as contested settlements along the line of high-intensity fighting or among Ukrainians who fled the country. They also reflect changes in population movements across Ukraine resulting from Russia's invasion and interventions since 2014.

Longitudinal Analysis: Design and Methods

To analyze our tracking poll of the same respondents in four waves (2021, 2022, 2023 and 2023/2024) we use regression with a linear mixed-effects model (LMM) in SPSS for repeated measurements. The model estimates change-over-time effects at the individual level by controlling for respondent (subject) as a factor in the model. In a way this is a form of multilevel regression analysis with data clustered by subject over time. Residuals are no longer estimated only as the distance between a data point and the average for all respondents (as in OLS models used with cross-sectional data for a single set of observations on each subject), but also as the distance between a data point and the mean for *that respondent* over time. Using this model, we estimate democracy support controlling for both between- and within-subject effects.³ This is important, because, among other things, doing so allows us to assess whether any substantive factor (e.g., income) or the passage of time as the war unfolds matter more – and by extension, to identify which causal factors may gain or lose significance over time among the same individuals.

Our dependent variable is the degree of importance to individual respondents of democracy for the development of Ukraine (on the 5-point Likert scale, descriptive statistics in Figure 1). In the model, we used respondents' id as subjects and *War* as a repeated measure represented by the survey year (wave), and spanning different war phases: the Russian invasion and Ukraine's initial response and pushback (Feb-Jul 2022); recapturing territory and defending against regrouped Russian forces while building up for a counteroffensive with increasing international military assistance (Jul 2022 - Jun 2023); and a prolonged grinding war following small gains by Ukraine but with Russia regaining initiative and U.S. military aid package stalled in Congress (Jun 2023 – Dec 2023/Jan 2024).

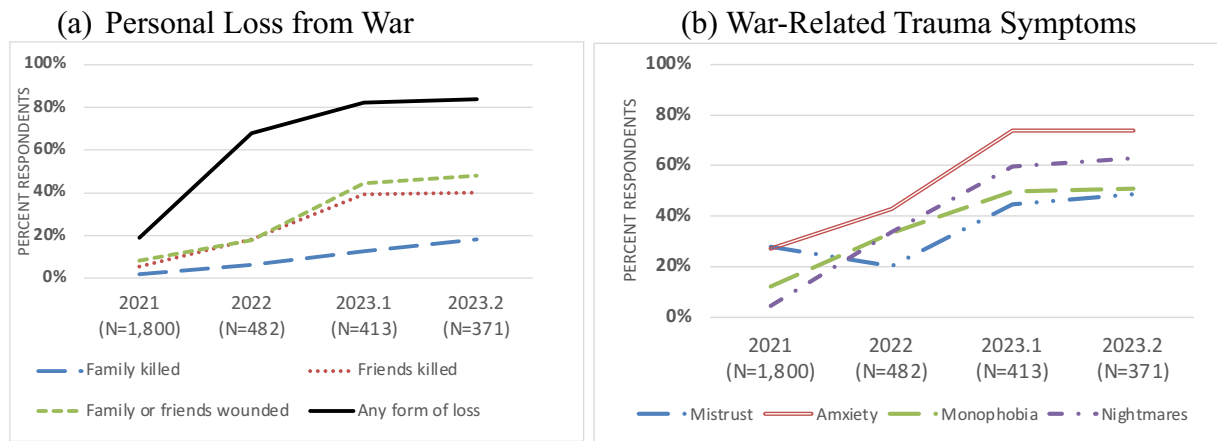
To estimate the putative effects of changes over each war phase, we ran the tests for each of the three time-spans above with two repeated measures (for Waves 1-2, 2-3, and 3-4) plus a test with three repeated measures (Waves 1 through 3) to estimate the durability of initial rallying in response to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion.

Our data paints a heartbreaking picture of Ukrainians' suffering from Russia's military interventions since 2014, rising sharply after its February 2022 full-scale invasion (Figure 4).

Between November 2021 and June 2023, we observe a rise from 20 to 80 percent of the number of Ukrainians who reported family members and friends injured/wounded or killed, or who lost their jobs, homes, or other property or who got displaced after fleeing the war zone rose or escaping Russia's bombardments and airstrikes across Ukraine (Figure 4a). Notably, from mid-2022 to mid-2023 the number of survey respondents reporting death or injury of their family members and close friends rose sharply. Those year-on-year increases are statistically significant for all loss categories between survey waves, meaning they are less than five percent likely to have occurred by chance. We see a stunning rise after 2021 of the number of Ukrainians reporting typical manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder such as anxiety, monophobia (fear of being alone), and war-related nightmares (Figure 4b).

³ For all variables we estimated fixed effects and included random intercepts for subjects estimated with default covariance type (variance components).

Figure 4. Wartime Personal Loss and Trauma in Ukraine (Panel Survey, 2021-2023/2024)



To assess the effects of personal war loss, we used a binary variable identifying respondents who experienced at least one form of such loss since 2014 listed in Figure 4a. The survey question asked specifically about the losses incurred due to war, so we computed a measure combining them. For trauma, we used a binary variable for respondents who reported experiencing “war-related nightmares” (the only response option specifically referring to the war effects in the survey questions).

The panel design also allows us to unobtrusively estimate the effects of geopolitical in/outgroup perceptions on democracy support at wartime—a binary variable identifying respondents who reported in November 2021 that one of their two main news sources was based in Russia. (In June/July 2022 we repeated that question, but almost no respondents any longer named Russia, very likely, in part, due to the social desirability considerations). However, with our longitudinal model we were able to estimate the effects of the prior-to-the-war consumption of news from Russia on democracy support at different phases of the war. Our hypothesis here is that the use of Russian news sources could either have long-term perceptual effects, or that it could be a proxy of a combination of sociodemographic factors underlying a generally softer views of Russia. One way or another (or both), it is plausible that respondents who reported Russian news use in 2021 would perceive Russia and its autocratic polity as a lesser threat than others throughout the war.

We also tested for geopolitical in-group identity preferences using support for Ukraine’s membership in the EU and NATO (on a three-point Likert scale) – both being prominent international coalitions of democracies and both essential to Ukraine’s capacity to counter Russian aggression).

Last but not least, we control for Ukraine’s civic national identity (respondents who say their primary identity is as citizens of Ukraine rather than residents of a town/village/city/region or a member of an ethnic group), language use in the survey, microregion (West, Center, South), age, income and education levels, and gender.

Comparison of means on key sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, education, region) of respondents showed no significant differences across survey waves going back to

November 2021, despite sample attrition, with a partial exception of region. The biggest change from 2021 to 2023 was the decrease of the percentage of respondents living at polling time in the Donbas (6.7 to 1.2 percent) and in the South (16.3 to 10.9 percent). No respondents lived in the Luhansk Oblast in 2022 and 2023 and in Kherson Oblast in 2023 (3 in 2022). Based on the distributional properties of the data, the effects of these shifts have been within about 5 percent. Partially offsetting these shifts was our ability to hold the proportions of respondents in Ukraine's East based on their 2021 residence relatively constant (23 v. 20.4 percent). We use macro-region location in 2021 for control in our tests. In our larger (N=869) sample newly recruited in 2023 we had a slightly larger share of respondents residing in the Donbas (1.8 percent) and more respondents (N=11) in Kherson.

Longitudinal Findings

Three results stand out and they are consistent with but also extend on the geosocietal logic of democracy support. First, we see how powerful the boost in democracy support was in response to Russia's full-scale invasion, with *War* remaining a significant predictor of democracy importance more than a year hence (Table 1, Wave 1-2 and Wave 1-3). And the fact that the continuation of the large-scale destructive war does not translate in a significant decline of democracy nearly two years after Wave 2 indicates that what we observed in 2021-2022 was more than a rally, but a fundamental shift in social attitudes.

Second, we see strong support for the counterintuitive hypothesis in that respondents reporting war losses were more, not less likely to see democracy as important for Ukraine. This finding weighs in favor of considering loss as a measure of external threat to the state and the nation. Another indication of this phenomenon is that the significance of loss persists after the significance of war year disappears, in other words, loss becomes the most salient proxy for war continuation once the war onset (as a triggering event) recedes into the past. Consider also a strong association of the source of that threat, Russia, with autocratic, repressive polity in our focus groups—meaning the salience of war violence coming from loss would also boost the salience of external threat to democracy.

Table 1. Panel Surveys Shows Significance of External Threat in Democracy Support

	Wave 1 -> Wave 2			Wave 1 -> Wave 3			Wave 2 -> Wave 3			Wave 3 -> Wave 4		
	Nov2021 - Jun-Jul 2022			Nov2021 - Jun2023			Jun2022 - Jun2023			Jun2022 - Dec2023/Jan2024		
	(N=482)			N=409			N=341			N=264		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	0.457	0.069	***	0.127	0.037	***	-0.09	0.051		-0.074	0.057	
AGE (Older)	0.005	0.002	*	0.063	0.049		0.069	0.054		0.074	0.075	
Income	0.073	0.03	*	0.036	0.027		0.05	0.031		0.028	0.038	
Education	0.077	0.029	**	0.04	0.03		0.039	0.033		0.045	0.043	
Trauma (nightmares)	0.104	0.082		-0.021	0.06		-0.063	0.061		-0.068	0.076	
Language Ukrainian	0.109	0.084		0.244	0.083	**	0.225	0.105		0.251	0.121	*
Male	-0.108	0.067		-0.037	0.068		-0.003	0.075		-0.018	0.098	
War Loss	0.113	0.07		0.238	0.063	***	0.143	0.072	*	0.27	0.101	**
Civic Identity	-0.003	0.009		0.207	0.064	***	0.12	0.078		0.197	0.127	
Russian Media2021	-0.458	0.145	**	-0.617	0.125	***	-0.541	0.138	***	-0.682	0.187	***
WEST2021	0.235	0.132		0.086	0.115		0.213	0.131		0.073	0.182	
CENTER2021	0.139	0.118		0.072	0.109		0.22	0.125		0.062	0.175	
EAST2021	0.116	0.122		0.009	0.118		0.126	0.138		-0.087	0.192	

Note: Confidence levels: *** = 99.9%; ** = 99%; and * = 95%; blank = statistically insignificant.

Third, and much consistent with the geosocietal logic, we find that reliance on Russian news sources prior to the full-invasion—plausibly associated with the softer views of Russia

(i.e., perceptions of Russia as a lesser threat)—translated into a significantly weaker democracy support in all survey waves.

Fourth, for our latest set of repeated measures (Waves 3-4) we checked how preference for joining NATO and the EU affected support for democracy (Table 2). For convenience we repeat the Wave 3-4 results without NATO and EU in this table. The findings show a strong positive effect. The desired membership in the geopolitical West, where democracy is a prerequisite, clearly matters.

Table 2. Democracy Support Strongly Related to Desire for EU and NATO Membership

Jun 2023 - Dec 2023/Jan 20	DEMOCRACY IMPORTANCE								
	Model 1			Model 2 (NATO)			Model 3 (EU)		
	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.	Estimate	Std. Error	Sig.
WAR	-0.074	0.057		-0.044	0.058		-0.044	0.058	
AGE (Older, LN)	0.074	0.075		0.075	0.072		0.075	0.072	
Income	0.028	0.038		0.018	0.037		0.018	0.037	
Education	0.045	0.043		0.031	0.041		0.031	0.041	
Trauma (nightmares)	-0.068	0.076		-0.057	0.075		-0.057	0.075	
Language Ukrainian	0.251	0.121	*	0.191	0.119	*	0.191	0.119	
Male	-0.018	0.098		0.008	0.094		0.008	0.094	
War Loss	0.27	0.101	**	0.261	0.1	**	0.261	0.1	**
Civic Identity	0.197	0.127		0.189	0.122		0.189	0.122	
Russian Media2021	-0.682	0.187	***	-0.496	0.183	**	-0.496	0.183	**
NATO				0.297	0.068	***			
EU							0.297	0.068	***
WEST2021	0.073	0.182		0.031	0.175		0.031	0.175	
CENTER2021	0.062	0.175		0.052	0.168		0.052	0.168	
EAST2021	-0.087	0.192		-0.059	0.184		-0.059	0.184	

Note: Confidence levels: *** = 99.9%; **=99%; and *=95%; blank = statistically insignificant.

Additionally, we see a drop into insignificance of sociodemographic cleavages (age, gender, education) after Wave 2. This is understandable considering the overarching importance of national security cutting across social cleavages in a country under relentless military attacks, with years of Russia’s bombings of over 100 Ukrainian settlements daily on a scale of Texas—arguably making the Russia-Ukraine war the most physically destructive military conflict on any given day anywhere in the world since February 24, 2022 to the time of our writing. This is likely a further indication of geopolitical (external threat) factors retaining or even gaining significance as predictors of democratic resilience in Ukraine as the war keeps raging.

One important non-finding is that war-related traumatic experiences (if respondents said they occurred regularly) are not related to support for democracy. It means that personal psychological experiences were less salient than physical loss related to war. One possible interpretation is that the latter can be more directly and immediately linked to specific acts of external aggression, whereas the former, while rooted in the impressions caused by war events, are linked to them in more complex ways, including the fact they may result not necessarily from personal experiences but from mediated communications, including notably the media.

Cross-Sectional Analysis

We find additional evidence in support of the enduring significance of geopolitical factors in public legitimization of democracy in Ukraine with two control surveys. The main difference is that we didn't have the measure of Russian news consumption from 2021, since those were new samples and the question was not included, as being potentially provocative and insulting to respondents, and unlikely to illicit honest responses.

The first survey, conducted at the time of Wave 3 panel study in June 2023, confirms the panel survey findings regarding the significance of personal loss and desired geopolitical in-group identity (orientation toward NATO and EU) (Table 3). The findings on age are open to several interpretations, including suggestions that older people may be more resilient to stress and/or that they may have closer understanding of what it means to live in an oppressive authoritarian state (Soviet Union). The association of faith in victory with democracy support is shown here to very possibly associated also with geopolitical orientations (given widespread recognition that without NATO and EU memberships it would be hard, if impossible, to consider any war outcome as victory for Ukraine; this would explain why *Victory* is no longer significant once we include either NATO or EU in the model).

Table 3. Correlates of Democracy Support in June 2023 Control Survey

<i>Jun 2023 (N=869)</i>	DEMOCRACY IMPORTANCE		
	Model 1	Model 2 (NATO)	Model 3 (EU)
AGE (Older)	*** .009 (.002)	*** .008 (.002)	*** .008 (.002)
Male		*.114 (.057)	
Income			
Language Ukrainian			
Trauma			
War Loss	*** .238 (.068)	** .198 (.066)	*** .214 (.067)
Victory	*.141 (.058)		
War Duration (longer)			
Civic Identity			
NATO		***.399 (.053)	
EU			***.354 (.059)
WEST2021			
CENTER2021			
EAST2021			

The significance of gender in Model 2 also speaks primarily to geopolitical identity considerations. This effect is not there because Ukrainian males in general are less supportive of democracy than females, but because among Ukrainians who support NATO membership males rate democracy importance higher. While small substantively (about 0.2 points on a 1-5 scale), this difference is statistically significant.

The second control survey conducted May 11-13, 2024 (N=882) lends further credence to the geosocietal logic and to our supposition that as the war continues and social context evolves, some indicators of external threat might become less salient, while alternative indicators may become more so (and thus would have a stronger association with democracy support). NATO and EU remain the most significant predictors of democracy support and the results are the same for *Victory* as in June 2023. However, *War Loss* is no longer significant—which is consistent with the flattening of the curve on total loss in Figure 4a at a very high, 80-percent level (Table 4). In other words, the salience of war loss (but not war losses themselves) has diminished. Tragically, this could mean that in the third year of the full-scale war, Ukrainians have suffered

so much cumulative losses that they have increasingly been treating acts of war violence as manageable “perturbations” (Sniderman, et al. 2019) or have become desensitized to repeated stimuli (Nussio 2020).

However, the results indicate that while the salience of war losses may have declined, the salience of external threat has not. They further indicate that fear of Russia’s capability to keep attacking Ukraine over a longer term has gained salience as a proxy for external authoritarian threat. This would also reflect geopolitical context and battlefield changes between the last panel survey in December 2023/January 2024 and the latest control survey of May 2024. Russia took advantage of the U.S. government’s six-months’ delay in authorizing military aid to Ukraine. The Russian forces pushed deeper into Ukraine’s east. They launched a new seventy-mile-wide offensive in Ukraine’s north. Within about a month before our survey, Russia captured about 180 square miles of Ukraine’s territory, fired over 3,200 glide-bombs weighing from a quarter-ton to one-and-a-half tons; and intensified bombardments of Ukraine’s second largest city, Kharkiv. Russian strikes wiped out power plants, residencies, and a hardware megastore there. Meanwhile all over Ukraine, over 100 settlements kept coming under Russian fire daily.

Notably, just like with war loss, the conventional wisdom in the literature suggests that fears of a longer war would likely decrease democracy support. However, same as for *War Loss*, we find that respondents who saw the war lasting longer to be more supportive of democracy. And we also find this readiness to endure to be a strong independent factor—it remains significant when we control for NATO and EU membership support.

Table 4. Correlates of Democracy Support in May 2024 Control Survey

May 2024 (N=882)	DEMOCRACY IMPORTANCE		
	Model 1	Model 2 (NATO)	Model 3 (EU)
AGE (Older)	** .006 (.0002)	** .005 (.002)	** .005 (.002)
Male			
Income	*** .098 (.029)	** .084 (.029)	** .083 (.028)
Language Ukrainian			
Trauma			
War Loss			
Victory	* .088 (0.043)		
War Duration (longer)	* .079 (.033)	* .070 (.033)	* .068 (.033)
Civic Identity			
NATO		*** .184 (.054)	
EU			*** .332 (.057)
WEST2021			
CENTER2021			
EAST2021			

One interesting finding with the 2024 data is the re-emergence of income as significant predictor of support for democracy, indicating that modernization theory (Lipset 1959) is important to consider. One interpretation of this result is that life goes on, people adjust and adapt to wartime conditions and after a while income again becomes a more important factor. However, we do find that it also relates to geopolitical orientations—in Models 2 and 3 the significance level of income effects is somewhat lower. This means that a substantial number of respondents feel that their incomes are related to Ukraine’s geopolitical future.

An important caveat regarding the cross-sectional results is that they reflect snapshots of public opinion at given points in time. Variables in these models should not be interpreted as

indicators of why democracy support may change. One illustration is the significance of age. It reflects the fact that support for democracy among respondents under 30 was about .4 (10 percent) lower on a 1-5 scale than among respondents over 45. But because this relationship remained stable, we don't see age as a significant predictor in our LMM models that account for change in individual respondents' views over time.

CONCLUSIONS

- (i) Democracy to most Ukrainians is most strongly associated with the freedom of the individual; Ukrainians clearly define the geopolitical divide between democracies and autocracies; and they see democracy as very important for becoming a part of international coalitions and institutions led by the world's most advanced democracies.
- (ii) As the war continues, external threat – linked to Russia's ongoing full-scale military aggression – not only retains significance, but becomes more salient, further validating the geosocietal logic of democracy support.
- (iii) One lesson for the study of democracy support in countries sustaining resistance over long wars is that it is a good strategy to test for multiple indicators of external threat, because their salience may shift in response to changes in the war fortunes and geopolitical conditions.
- (iv) A major implication of these results is that military support for Ukraine is vital not only to help Ukraine defend its territory but also to ensure that Ukraine emerges from the war as a democracy and will strengthen international coalitions of democratic states. In fact, one lesson is very clear: out of multiple policies of democracy support, the best one for Ukraine is the provision of military aid and sanctioning Russia on a scale that could stop and push back Russia's invasion, restore Ukraine's territorial integrity, and guarantee its capabilities to defend its sovereignty.

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