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DEMOCRACY

Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>
e-mail: Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>
Twitter: https://twitter.com/UA_Analytica

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PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN UKRAINE AMID WAR WITH RUSSIA

Petro Burkovskiy

Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation

Despite the low level of trust in the political leadership and state institutions, Ukrainians have demonstrated strong civic consciousness and consolidation, which have played a crucial role in repelling the full-scale Russian invasion. Although the Ukrainian public remains susceptible to populism, the scale of volunteer activities, national unity, dedication to freedom and understanding of the dire consequences of unrestricted government are protecting Ukraine's democracy from authoritarian attempts.

The State of Public Opinion and Social Resilience in the Wake of the Russian Aggression

In February 2022, on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society experienced a serious deficit of trust towards key state institutions, political leaders and democratic procedures. According to the Razumkov Centre's nationwide polls¹, at the end of 2021, 67% of Ukrainians distrusted the president, 60% of respondents did not trust the National Bank, 72% of respondents did not trust the cabinet of ministers, 74% of the population did not trust the judicial system, and 76% of Ukrainians did not trust the national government as such. Moreover, in December 2021², 45% of Ukrainians named President Zelenskyy as the "disappointment

of the year", while giving answers to an open-ended question.

Unsurprisingly, the Russian authorities hoped that they would be able to use this incredible gap between the Ukrainian government and their people to conduct their "shock and awe" invasion of Ukraine, without facing significant popular resistance. Moreover, a huge public distrust towards the key state institutions could have been considered as a prerequisite for political apathy in the Ukrainian people, and therefore the eventual acceptance of the new occupation administration at the national and local levels.

However, at the beginning of February 2022, many Ukrainian citizens acknowledged

1 Citizens' assessment of the situation in the country. Trust in social institutions, politicians, officials and public figures. Attitude to holding national elections in Ukraine before the end of the war, Razumkov Centre, 15.10.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/sociology/press-releases/citizens-assessment-of-the-situation-in-the-country-trust-in-social-institutions-politicians-officials-and-public-figures-attitude-to-holding-national-elections-in-ukraine-before-the-end-of-the-war-september-2023>

2 Serious and Merry Opinions about the Year 2021, release of the nationwide study, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 29.12.2021, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/serious-and-merry-opinions-about-the-year-2021>

the Russian threat. According to a DIF nationwide opinion poll³, almost 48% of Ukrainians would either fight or assist the army if Russia invaded. In addition, 43% rejected any kind of concession to Putin. The majority of the population was not ready to back any compromises with Russia, in order to thwart its aggression – in the West (55%), the South (40%), and the Centre (45%) of Ukraine. In the eastern regions, a compromise with Russia was unacceptable for 29%, while 40% were undecided. In the government-controlled areas of Donbas, the majority of respondents (52%) believed that the Ukrainian government should give up a bid for NATO membership to stop the Russian aggression.

Thus, we may say that on the eve of the invasion there was a critical mass of law-abiding citizens who valued the sovereignty and independence of the Ukrainian state despite its low level of effectiveness and corrupted government at the national and local levels. It was a clear indication of the civic maturity of the Ukrainian people, and their deep understanding of their personal responsibility for the situation in the country.

The national volunteer movement which started in the first days of the Russian invasion proved the efficacy of pre-invasion sociological observations. Self-organisation and taking the initiative in defending cities and towns from invading forces, volunteer facilitation of the evacuation of civilians and broad assistance to supplies of the Armed Force of Ukraine became decisive factors not

only in the early defeats of the Russia army, but also in the rapid increase in social self-confidence of the people.

Suddenly, many Ukrainians realised that they could do great things through their own individual competence and without external guidance or control from the state. According to a DIF poll in December 2022⁴, 61% of Ukrainians admitted that they were participating personally in volunteer activities or that they had donated goods/services/money to volunteers who were helping the army or internally displaced people (IDPs). Even more critically, after 18 months of the war, the Ukrainians have not shown signs of exhaustion. According to an opinion poll in August 2023⁵, almost 68% of Ukrainians reported that since the full-scale war had begun, they had volunteered to help the army/temporarily displaced persons or people affected by the war.

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Thus, we can say that Ukrainians have demonstrated a high level of civil mobilisation, willingness to fight and sacrifice for the sake of the country. They have successfully passed

3 No to Russia's Aggression: The Public Opinion of Ukrainians in February 2022, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 22.02.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/no-to-russias-aggression-the-public-opinion-of-ukrainians-in-february-2022>

4 Opir agresoru, volonterstvo, obstrily infrastruktury: yak povnomasshtabna viyna vplynula na zhyttya ukraintsiv, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 24.02.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/article/opir-agresoru-volonterstvo-obstrily-infrastruktury-yak-povnomasshtabna-viyna-vplynula-na-zhyttya-ukraintsiv>

5 Citizens' Involvement in Volunteering after a Year and a Half of War, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 22.09.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/citizens-involvement-in-volunteering-after-a-year-and-a-half-of-war>

a severe test set by the war and proved to be an exemplary modern civilised and consolidated nation.

Key Factors Explaining Why Ukrainians Defend Democracy Amid Warfare

This is an important observation, since the war has brought dramatic changes to the lives of the people.



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First of all, the national government established a martial law regime at the beginning of the war which put additional limits and constraints on the constitutional rights of the people, such as the prohibition of rallies, suspension of elections and referenda, centralised control of major national and regional media, a curfew and restrictions on movement inside and outside of the country. The state system was reorganised and the president obtained new war-time powers for the cabinet of ministers, limiting the role of the parliament.

It is not unusual for countries in war to see an increase in popular support for authoritarian practices, and their acceptance of the concentration of power in the hands of strong political leaders. In addition, a sharp deterioration in the economic situation, an increase in unemployment and other negative consequences of the war may cause the population to look for «strong hands» on the tiller. It must be said that Ukraine is no exception, and different social studies and opinion polls have shown that authoritarian tendencies are also present in Ukrainian society.

For instance, for decades, the majority of the Ukrainian people have considered that strong leaders are much more capable of achieving important goals than legislation⁶. In August 2022, 58% of Ukrainians agreed with the statement that “several strong leaders could accomplish more for the country than all laws and debates”.

Moreover, as stated above, before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society was desperately frustrated and disillusioned about the ability of the democratically elected leaders and political parties to bring about positive changes. Many people still consider the malfunctioning democratic institutions, and procedures like parliamentary activities and elections as obstacles to effective government. In May 2023, according to the Razumkov centre’s opinion poll⁷, 62% of respondents endorsed a possible political regime with a strong leader who does not depend on parliament or elections.

6 Oleksandr Reznik, Osoblyvosti avtorytarnykh oriyentatsii ukraiintsiv pid chas viyny, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 3.08.2023, available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/osoblivosti-avtoritarnikh-orientatsiy-ukraintsiv-pid-chas-viyni>

7 Suspilno-politychni oriyentatsii hromadian Ukrainy (traven 2023), Razumkov Centre, 21.06.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/suspilnopolitychni-orientatsii-gromadian-ukrainy-traven-2023r>

At the same time, Ukrainians demonstrated a growing sense of the value of freedom and the rule of law. In May 2023⁸, when asked to choose between personal freedom and social welfare, 51% of the respondents replied that they were ready to endure economic and welfare difficulties to keep their civil freedoms and personal liberties untouched. That was the highest figure for all years of observation since 2010.



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Furthermore, sociological monitoring has revealed that the war has made Ukrainians ardent supporters of democracy⁹. Between 2010 and 2021, the share of respondents who considered democracy to be the most desirable type of state system ranged from 48-56%, and those who preferred an authoritarian regime ranged from 18-24%. After the outbreak of the war, in October 2022, support for democracy increased to 68%, while endorsement of authoritarianism fell to 11.5%. In May 2023, the share of supporters of a democratic

regime increased to 73%, while the share of supporters of authoritarianism decreased to 9.5%.

Another paradox of the public perception of democracy and authoritarian structures was noticed by the Ukrainian scholar Oleksander Reznik. He admitted that in May 2023, 28% of respondents backed the idea of a military regime as a form of government¹⁰. However, 91% of such citizens considered a democratic regime as the best for Ukraine. Reznik explains that the faith in the arrival on the scene of “strong leaders” is more a hope for effective governance than a desire for ruthless dictatorship.

A good explanation of the true motives behind Ukrainian attitudes towards democracy and dictatorship was given by the prominent Ukrainian sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina in 2009. She asserted that the fate of democracy in Ukraine depends on people’s general vision of its future – as a democratic, prosperous European state, where human rights are respected and where citizens are able to really influence the actions of the government¹¹. Bekeshkina’s observation proved to be relevant during the war. In December 2022, a DIF poll conducted at the request of “Evropeiska Pravda” showed that an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians (79%) supported Ukraine’s full membership¹² of the EU. In addition, 60% of respondents thought that the national

8 Oleksandr Reznik, Osoblyvosti avtorytarnykh oriyentatsii ukraiintsiv pid chas viyny, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 3.08.2023, available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/osoblyvosti-avtoritarnikh-orientatsiy-ukraiintsiv-pid-chas-viyny>

9 Suspilno-politychni oriyentatsii hromadian Ukraini (traven 2023), Razumkov Centre, 21.06.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/suspilnopolitychni-oriyentatsii-gromadian-ukrainy-traven-2023r>

10 Oleksandr Reznik, Osoblyvosti avtorytarnykh oriyentatsii ukraiintsiv pid chas viyny, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 3.08.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/article/osoblyvosti-avtoritarnikh-orientatsiy-ukraiintsiv-pid-chas-viyny>

11 Cited from Oleksandr Reznik, Support democracy in Ukraine during the war, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 18.01.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/article/support-democracy-in-ukraine-during-the-war>

12 Petro Burkovskiy, Serhii Sydorenko, Pivden ta Skhid poviryly v NATO ta vymahaiut reform: shcho dumaiut rehiony pro maybutnie Ukrainy, Evropeiska Pravda, 30.12.2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2022/12/30/7153365/>

government must carry out every reform demanded by the EU institutions. This means that Ukrainian citizens consider themselves as Europeans, and are determined to demand the respective high standards of governance from elected and appointed officials, even during the war.

Thus, we can conclude that there is a low risk that Ukrainians would accept any kind of authoritarian rule, even if it is run by a popular military or political leader. People have learned how to survive and achieve success without external guidance. Since many Ukrainians have lost their friends and relatives during the war, and continue to make everyday sacrifices, they will not accept any situation when their freedom or opportunities for a better life are limited in the interests of a certain leader, party or national government. Finally, Ukrainians believe that Ukraine must join the European Union and implement all necessary reforms, first and foremost in the sphere of the rule of law, which includes strong checks and balances against authoritarian policy-making.

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On the other hand, the public readiness to support strong leaders who do not limit their actions according to law indicates another formidable risk of the establishment of populism in Ukraine. An authoritarian

consciousness can encourage people to reject alternative points of view and dissenting opinions, contrary to the use of critical thinking and openness that populist politicians often exploit.

 ***the Ukrainian people are fighting Russia to deliver a European future to their children and the next generations***

This risk must be kept in mind because the DIF/KIIS poll conducted in July 2023 showed that Ukrainian society remains susceptible to populist practices, despite the war¹³. So far, the antagonism between the population and the ruling elite has not become pronounced. However, we have detected a high level of support for populist ideas, which carries risks for the post-war restoration of competitive political life, when the prevailing political leadership could once again be considered “inefficient” and “corrupt”.

Conclusions

To conclude with, we can outline the key factors that are shaping Ukrainian democracy during the war and are likely to beyond it.

A high level of patriotism and civic consolidation are impossible without strong public dedication to grass-roots democratic practices and volunteer activism. This creates the demand for political leadership which respects civil liberties and implements policies according to high standards of accountability and inclusiveness.

13 Oleksandr Reznik, Populistski oriyentatsii naseleennia Ukrainiiny vprodovzh sotsialnykh transformatsiy, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 22.09.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/article/populistski-orientatsii-naselennya-ukraini-vprodovzh-sotsialnykh-transformatsiy>

Next, the seriousness of the Russian threat and the high human and material costs of the war justify the concentration of powers, but it does not permit making it permanent. Moreover, the Ukrainian people demand achievements from the national government and obligatory respect for the laws. In August 2023, the majority of Ukrainians demanded strong anti-corruption measures from the President of Ukraine¹⁴. Since Ukrainians have been showing zero tolerance to corruption, a constant feature of dictatorship, that makes it very hard and dangerous for anybody to attempt to limit civil liberties, even under a martial law regime.

Then, the Ukrainian people are fighting Russia to deliver a European future to their children and the next generations. Therefore, people will not allow their government to change the direction of policies or to enact legislation which threatens such a vision of the nation's future.

All in all, Ukrainians remain vulnerable to populism and the risk of populist decisions, and the distortion of elections through populist practices will be the main challenge to the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

Petro Burkovskiy is Executive Director of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, where he has been working since 2017. Before joining DIF, Petro Burkovskiy worked for 14 years in the National Institute for Strategic Studies, including as head of the Centre for Advanced Russia Studies (2019-2020) and head of the Department for Political System Development (2016-2019). Petro Burkovskiy holds an MA with distinction in Political Science from the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (2004). He is an alumnus of the George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies (2007). In 2014, he participated in the High-Level Expert Program in the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.

14 Spryiniattia zahrozy koruptsii hromadianamy: otsinka vlady ta vymohy do zmin pid chas viiny, Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 11.09.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/article/spryinyattya-zagrozi-koruptsii-gromadyanami-otsinka-vladi-ta-vimogi-do-zmin-pid-chas-viyni>

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