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## DEMOCRACY

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## DEMOCRACY

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# DEMOCRACY AT WAR: WHAT UKRAINIANS THINK

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***While Ukrainian citizens' resistance has surprised the world, it has not been seen as a miracle by Ukrainians themselves, who since 2014 have been involved in volunteer movements and knew well what aggression means. Despite the inevitable concentration of power during the war-time martial law, there is a widespread belief among Ukrainian experts that there would be no monopolisation of power. Analysis of the changes that occurred within Ukrainian society between 2014 and 2022 testifies that Ukrainians are fighting not only for national freedom, but that they reject Russian authoritarianism, and nationalistic revisionism***

The resistance of Ukrainians to the full-scale invasion of Russia since February 24th 2022 has impressed the world. It has happened against the backdrop of the slow arrival within the first weeks of the war of military support from the Western partners. Some EU leaders believed that in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine would collapse in a week or so. Even now some Western intelligence sources suggest that there were "pretty small factors" like Ukrainian air defence effectiveness which prevented the capture of Kyiv.<sup>1</sup> However, the question still remains, after almost two years of the war, as to why the Russian army has not taken control of any regional centre, even cities like Kharkiv, that had been

perceived as mostly Russian-speaking, and situated just 40 km from the border with Russia.

On the contrary, for Ukrainians such resistance was not a surprise. Ukrainians had already experienced lines of volunteers outside military recruiting offices in 2014. The same but on a much larger scale happened in the first, the most dramatic days of the Russian attack on Ukraine: lines of people from the very old to the very young, speaking Russian and Ukrainian, volunteering to take up arms. Also, since then, almost 70% of Ukrainians have been involved in supporting the army or internally displaced persons.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Berlingske. Danish military intelligence suggests drug-induced megalomania may have influenced Putin to invade Ukraine, 30.12.2022, <https://www.berlingske.dk/internationalt/danish-military-intelligence-suggests-drug-induced-megalomania-may>

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

*But to what extent can we trust polls in the country facing full scale invasion? As Kyiv International Institute of Sociology stresses in its press releases: under conditions of war, in addition to the specified formal error, a certain systematic deviation is added. However, despite certain factors that may affect the quality of the results in "wartime" conditions, in general, respectable major companies believe that the obtained results still retain a high degree of representativeness and allow for a fairly reliable analysis of the public mood of the population.*

Moreover, the polls on the eve of the Russian invasion showed that in the event of war half of Ukrainians were ready either to fight or to assist the armed forces in every possible manner. All this, despite the fact that one fifth of respondents did not expect the war to start, and an additional one fifth responded that they would simply try to survive if the war started.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that these polls were well publicised and openly published, neither Russian nor European politicians or media took them seriously, so the population's high level of resistance came as a surprise to many.


What helped Ukrainians to resist so successfully? Different factors can be named, but among them, we would emphasise the democratic regime, developed civil society, so called horizontal ties and a sense of solidarity. But also, the understanding of common Ukrainians that this was a fight not only for independence and territorial integrity, but also for democracy against dictatorship.

### **Background: Ukraine's "Pluralism by Default"**

We argue that the main trends in the public opinion of Ukrainians regarding the Russian aggression were based on Ukraine's development during the years of independence. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian society and the political establishment chose a different path of transformation from that of Russia. Ukraine differed from many Soviet republics, as it gained its independence peacefully and without internal ethnic conflicts, thanks to the tacit agreement between three main forces:

the ruling so-called "national communists", the national democratic opposition and, finally, the workers' movement from the east and south of the country, which by 1991 supported independence<sup>4</sup> (the last fact is forgotten by many present-day international commentators).

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In the 1990s, the West appreciated the democratic principles of Ukrainian transition:

- 1) Ukraine was the first CIS state to completely re-elect both the president and parliament in the 1994 democratic elections.
- 2) In contrast to Russian President Yeltsin's 1993 constitution, which after a violent struggle with the parliament established an authoritarian model, the constitution of Ukraine was passed in 1996 as a compromise between the president and parliament, and between the left- and right- forces in the parliament.
- 3) Also, in contrast to Russia, the political opposition in Ukraine was much stronger. In fact, only one president, Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004) has been re-elected during 30 years of independence.

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

4 Strike. Donbas Miners Recall Protests of the '90s, Hromadske, 20.09.2019, <https://hromadske.ua/en/posts/strike-donbas-miners-recall-protests-of-the-90s>

4) All Ukrainian governments also had to consider the interests of the different regions.

Thus, this system, called by Western scholars “pluralism by default”<sup>5</sup>, was much more balanced than the Russian model.

Attempts to create an authoritarian system in Ukraine led to massive protests from below called the “Maidans”<sup>6</sup>: the 2004 Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan/Revolution of Dignity in the winter of 2013-2014. Despite some stereotypes based on Russian narratives, both of the Maidans were non-violent, and people were standing for days when the temperatures were -20 °C. The violent phase of the Euromaidan started only after authoritarian Ukrainian President Yanukovich pushed for the so-called “draconian laws” aimed at creating a Lukashenko-type regime. Moscow used the fact that the latter fled to Russia as a pretext for aggression in Crimea, planned long in advance. The 2014 Russian aggression became a critical point in forming Ukrainian public opinion, and in turn the 2022 invasion led to the people’s war for independence.

## Democracy and the State During the War

Despite the challenges of war and the traditional Ukrainian distrust of any authorities (which was a result of centuries-long foreign domination), 60% of Ukrainians in August 2022 believed that events in Ukraine were developing in the right direction (24% considered they were

developing in the wrong direction). The last time positive assessments prevailed had been in 2019, after the presidential and parliamentary elections, when most citizens showed a high degree of confidence in the new authorities, and had positive expectations for future reforms in the country.<sup>7</sup> However, as is traditional in Ukrainian society, shortly afterwards, negative assessments of developments in the country predominated again in 2020-2021, as those expectations were not met.

The predominance of positive assessments in 2022-2023 is obviously not because citizens consider a full-scale war to be a positive phenomenon. More likely, the full-scale war has changed the prism through which Ukrainians assess the situation in the country. In the context of a full-scale war, the Ukrainian state and people have faced an existential threat. Both the state and the people have shown the will to resist, and Ukraine has been effectively resisting the aggressor for a year and a half. Most likely, positive assessments now prevail precisely because of the growing value of their state in the eyes of Ukrainians, who have never faced such large-scale threats to their existence before.

This was confirmed by the growing trust both in the state and social institutions. The largest positive “trust balance”<sup>8</sup> (70%-90%) in August 2022 was placed in: The Armed Forces (in first place with 90%); the State Emergency Service (responsible, in particular, for countering blackouts, fires, and the effects of bombardments); the

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5 E.g. Lucan Way, *Pluralism by Default: Weak Autocrats and the Rise of Competitive Politics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/43833>

6 “Maidan” means “square” in Ukrainian, the place where people gather and can express their will. The central square in Kyiv where huge rallies take place is named “Independence Maidan”.

7 DIF. Independence Day of Ukraine: Way to Victory, Identity, and Perception of the State’s Value Amid the War, 27.08.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/independence-day-of-ukraine-way-to-victory-identity-and-perception-of-the-states-value-amid-the-war>

8 Calculated as the difference between the share of those who trust and those who do not.

National Guard; “volunteers” (in Ukrainian lexicon – civil society, providing material support to the military); volunteer military formations; and the president of Ukraine (70%). Ukrainians traditionally place least trust in political parties, the judicial system, commercial banks, and the parliament. These institutions have the most negative trust balance.<sup>9</sup>


Ukrainian society has had a paradoxical attitude towards democracy for a long time. On the one hand, there is a persistent demand for “a strong hand”, though this is decreasing from 75% in the late 2000s to 58% during the war.<sup>10</sup> Usually, after every such poll, Western journalists start to bombard Ukrainian experts with a question: is there a new threat to democracy in Ukraine from within?

But, on the other hand, democracy is certainly considered the preferred type of system for Ukraine, with the highest support in time of war: 64 % against 14% of those “who think autocracy can be better than democracy under certain circumstances”.<sup>11</sup> Given these results, Ukraine performs better than some Western societies, as its far right and far left do not poll as high as the election threshold. Just compare this with the successes of the National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, “Alternative for Germany” or the right-wing populists in the USA.

It is all the more important that talk about the “threat” from the far right did not come true during the war. Those on the extreme right mostly paused their political

activity, joined the armed forces, and are fully controlled by them. In general, in the armed forces of Ukraine you hear Ukrainian and Russian spoken, and you meet representatives of different ethnic groups: Ukrainians, Russians, Belarussians, Crimean Tatars, Hungarians from Transcarpathia etc. The Ukrainian president is an ethnic Jew, and the minister of defence is a Muslim Crimean Tatar. A saying became popular in Ukraine that Putin’s attack against Ukraine united Ukrainian Jews and Muslims who are together defending their country.

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***aggression became a critical point in forming Ukrainian public opinion, and in turn the 2022 invasion led to the people’s war for independence***

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Indeed, there are restrictions to civil liberties in war-time Ukraine. The opposition supported the government and voted for martial law in February 2022. The role of the oligarchs substantially decreased. There is an agreement in the society not to excessively criticize the government. However, the level of freedom of speech remains extremely high, despite the disputed situation with the TV channels’ operations in times of war. It is unjustified that the authorities excluded three opposition TV channels from the “United News” “Marathon” on TV, (TV channels united their efforts and share the air, co-presenting in different time slots) as well as from the “social TV package” (TV channels available

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9 DIF. Trust in State: How to Save National Unity for the Victory, 30.09.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/trust-in-the-state-how-to-save-national-unity-for-the-victory>

10 DIF. Independence Day of Ukraine: What Unites Ukrainians and How We See the Victory in the Sixth Month of War, 24.08.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/independence-day-of-ukraine-what-unites-ukrainians-and-how-we-see-victory-in-the-sixth-month-of-war>

11 Ibid.



in each household for free),<sup>12</sup> but it is possible to reach those channels' broadcasts via widespread cable TV and online. Apart from this, the Internet media and Internet newspapers, very popular in Ukraine, offer a pluralism of views – they openly criticise the authorities, and discuss the effectiveness of government actions.



***despite the inevitable concentration of power during the war-time martial law, there is a widespread belief among Ukrainian experts that there will be no monopolisation of power.***

Facing the dilemma of how to criticise the government in times of war, the author of this article follows a simple rule: never publicly criticise military operations or the Ukrainian general command. Ukrainians know about the mistakes of the political leadership on the eve of the war, but the widespread belief is that we will discuss this after the victory. However, we do not feel restrained from criticising cases of corruption, the ineffective use of resources, that is to say, about non-war-related misconduct.

According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), in May 2022 (at the beginning of the invasion), the majority of Ukrainians preferred to avoid any disputes at all. At that time, 68% believed that all disputes should be postponed,

while 26% insisted on the admissibility of criticism. In October 2023, the situation became diametrically opposite: now 70% of Ukrainians consider it is important to criticise the possibly wrong decisions of the authorities, while 25% insist on avoiding any disputes.<sup>13</sup> So, Ukrainians would like to retain the ability to openly disagree with the government. This confirms that they are not only fighting for the freedom and liberation of the occupied territories. Russia and Ukraine are waging a war of values today.

There are definitely some tendencies in the government according to which some personalities may aim to exploit the present situation and solidify their authority (first of all, Andriy Yermak, the presidential chief of staff). President Zelenskyy demonstrated messianic inclinations even before taking on the highest post. Today, he has become the world's hero. And there is a danger that, when the victory is won, his belief in his messianic self may increase. However, the war has unleashed huge energy in the civil society. At every attempt to monopolise power, Ukrainians respond with an outburst of resistance, as they did in 2004 and 2014.

Regarding the eternal dilemma of freedom and well-being, the August 2022 poll demonstrates that one-half of Ukrainians are ready to suffer economic difficulties for the sake of freedoms and full guarantees of civil rights (and the higher their educational status, the higher is the figure who believe that), while only one third of respondents would agree to give away some freedoms in order to receive better public welfare.<sup>14</sup>

12 For the period from May 2022 to October 2023, there was a decrease in trust in the “United News” TV “Marathon”. Although the TV “Marathon” maintains a positive trust-distrust balance, at the same time, those who trust it have decreased from 69% to 48% (and instead, those who do not trust it have increased from 12% to 39%), See, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 31.10.2023, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1321&page=1>

13 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2.11.2023, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1323&page=1>

14 DIF. Independence Day of Ukraine, 24.08.2022.

Therefore, despite the inevitable concentration of power during the war-time martial law, there is a widespread belief among Ukrainian experts that there will be no monopolisation of power. The EU candidate status received by Ukraine in June 2022 strengthened this view. This status is viewed as a powerful tool for the domestic transformation of Ukraine. The majority of Ukrainians consider that EU's pressure for domestic reforms to be justified.<sup>15</sup>

### **Elections During the War?**


Since the start of the Russian aggression in 2014, Ukraine has conducted two presidential and two parliamentary elections (in 2014 and 2019), as well as local elections (in 2015 and 2020). However, before the 2022 invasion, the war had a limited character (in Donbas), and martial law was not introduced.

Since 2022, under Russia's full-scale invasion, the situation has drastically changed. The whole of Ukraine has been bombarded, one fifth of Ukraine's territory is occupied, and martial law was introduced. According to the Ukrainian constitution, parliamentary elections cannot be conducted under martial law (article 83). Indirectly (article 71), there are limits to presidential and local elections during war as well (though the final judgement depends on the Constitutional Court). Is it possible to change the constitution during the war? No, under martial law one cannot do this either. So, there are no legal grounds for elections to be held.

Secondly, the security situation remains risky. If you have bombardments of the whole territory of the country, how would

you secure the electoral campaign and the actual polling day? How would soldiers vote? How would millions of refugees, both inside and outside of Ukraine (1/4 of the whole population) be able to participate in the campaign? These are just a few of the questions to be asked.

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***100 strong Ukrainian civil society organisations issued a joint statement against elections during the war***

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However, the main argument is the following. Ukrainians need elections not to tick that box. We need real, competitive, democratic elections, with strong debate between the authorities and the opposition. But this cannot be done under martial law. Even more, if the political campaign is hot-blooded, the enemy will be the first one to benefit from the internal fighting.

Therefore, it was quite strange to hear some voices from the West speaking about the necessity to conduct elections in Ukraine. Facing strong counterarguments, these voices disappeared quite quickly, but then they emerged in Ukrainian political discourse from the presidential side and that of the president's supporters. Their interest is evident. The popularity of Zelenskyy is still high, but it could decrease. Therefore, some of his team would like to conduct elections now, to secure his position.

It is not surprising that 100 strong Ukrainian civil society organisations issued a joint

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15 DIF. Results-2022: Under the Blue-Yellow Flag of Freedom! 5.01.2023, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/results-2022-under-the-blue-yellow-flag-of-freedom>

statement against elections during the war.<sup>16</sup> As many as 80% of Ukrainians would like to postpone elections until after the war.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the president himself has expressed the opinion that it would be wrong to hold elections during the war.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusions

Democracy is in constant danger, even in democratic countries. Dictators from outside try to destabilise democracies, by using democratic freedoms and manipulating one political force against another. But threats come from inside as well, from populists and radicals, both of the left and right. These threats vary in different countries, and Ukraine is no exception to this list.

Analysis of the changes that happened in Ukrainian society between 2014 and 2022 testifies to the fact that Ukrainians are fighting not only for national freedom, but that they also reject Russian authoritarianism, nationalistic revisionism, and hatred.

Social changes caused by the Russian invasion that started on 24 February 2022, have strengthened the trend existed since the important dates of 1991 and 2014. The Ukrainian society has completely broken its ties with the Soviet past, and with modern authoritarian Russia. Ukrainian democracy appeared to be stronger than expected

and, despite all the wartime problems, there is a strong background belief in its maturing after the war. Elections are just one manifestation of these democratic trends, thus should be analysed carefully, considering not only the democratic process but also security concerns.

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16 Reanimation Package of Reforms. Statement Against Holding Elections During the War, 29.09.2023, <https://rpr.org.ua/en/news/statement-against-holding-elections-in-ukraine-during-the-war/>

Olha Aivazovska. Wartime Elections in Ukraine Are Impossible, OPORA, 17.07.2023, <https://www.oporaua.org/en/vybory/24803-wartime-elections-in-ukraine-are-impossible-24803>

17 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. When Elections Should Be Held. The telephone survey conducted on 30 September – 11 October 2023, 30.10.2023, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1309&page=1>

18 Zelenskyy: There Will Be No Elections During The War, Fakty, 6.11.2023, <https://fakty.com.ua/en/ukraine/20231106-zelenskyj-vyboriv-pid-chas-vijny-ne-bude/>

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