

# UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 1 (33), 2024

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## RECOVERY

### Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest  
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

### Publisher:

Published by NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation" (Ukraine),  
Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the  
Representation of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Ukraine,

**UA: Ukraine Analytica** is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English  
on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed  
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### Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>  
e-mail: [Ukraine\\_analytica@ukr.net](mailto:Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net)  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>  
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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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# BUILDING BACK BETTER. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SECURITY IN UKRAINE'S SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

Dr Andriy Korniychuk<sup>1</sup>

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of  
Sciences Foundation for European Progressive Studies

*The renewed, full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022 has served as a further catalyst for grassroots nation-building efforts, highlighting the need for a comprehensive social model, prioritising inclusivity, stability, and long-term prosperity. While military victory against a brutal aggressor remains an existential necessity, being a key factor for Ukraine to protect its territorial integrity, the nation must continue to address long-standing socio-demographic challenges exacerbated by an ongoing war, leader-driven political projects, and short-sighted policymaking. Ukraine and its international partners can pave the way for sustainable peace and democratic resilience — both crucial for defending its sovereignty against future threats — by navigating through (post)war recovery with an inclusive, citizen-centred approach.*

## Redefining Resilience: The Role of Social Security in Ukraine's Future

Anno 2024 sees Ukrainians continue to confront future-defining, existential challenges pertaining to the democratic development of their country, due to Russia's full-scale onslaught on their country. The situation on the battlefield deserves considerable attention, because it will determine Ukraine's prospects for successful post-war recovery and a democratic future – having a direct impact on sovereignty, right to self-determination, and territorial integrity.

A military victory is a precondition for Ukraine to embark on a successful path to a peaceful transformation. At the same time, for the unfathomable pain, unimaginable suffering and incredible sacrifices not to be futile, the society and its political elites must reach consensus on the (social) model of the country they are fighting for so bravely. Devastating economic, human, and social losses due to a full-scale war, which have already changed the socio-demographic composition of the population<sup>2</sup>, make such a decision no longer a matter of choice but one more existential necessity.

1 Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

2 UN estimates (UNHCR, IOM) have spoken of over 6 million internally displaced persons and close to 8 million citizens who have left Ukraine since the start of full-scale invasion in 2022. In 2024, with many having returned in 2022-2023, the number is estimated at 6-6.5 million. For a detailed overview see: UNHCR. Ukraine Refugee Situation, 14 March 2024, <https://bit.ly/3VZHTxz>. UN in Ukraine. With no let-up for war-affected Ukrainians, UN launches humanitarian and refugee plans to respond in 2024, 2024, <https://bit.ly/45Fq5L8>. International Organization for Migration. Millions Assisted, Millions More Still in Need Two Years into Ukraine War, Says IOM, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3RDWQmj>.

Such a debate is yet to be conducted systematically and comprehensively. Despite the immense socio-economic pressure of holding an ideological discussion during an ongoing war, the reaching of a nationwide consensus on the preferred post-war social model would nevertheless considerably benefit Ukraine's war effort, the process of its post-war recovery and its (economic) modernisation. Moreover, it can help to prevent a scenario through which the social security of millions of citizens, already profoundly affected by the military atrocities, will be undermined as soon as the fighting stops (or at least its active phase concludes). In the case of such a suboptimal scenario, the social fabric of the society will be torn apart, internal polarisation will grow, and the resilience of Ukraine's democratic model will be seriously weakened.

A demand for a clear articulation of the preferred social model is yet to be mentioned explicitly by the international (donor) community supporting Ukraine. Such a decision may be attributed to the fact that the active phase of the war is far from over. Nevertheless, the importance of an inclusive sustainable recovery can already be traced to high-level international decision-making formats and expert discussions about Ukraine's future (e.g. OECD, WTO, so-called recovery conferences and US-led attempts to revive the spirit of the Marshall Plan etc.). In terms of a social recovery, the OECD points to the need for Ukraine to have "comprehensive social and employment strategies to address the long-term needs of its most vulnerable citizens"<sup>3</sup>. The ILO warns that "millions could be pushed into poverty, offsetting years of



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development efforts"<sup>4</sup>. The World Bank has assessed that GDP would decline by around 45.1 per cent in 2022, through displacement, damage, and disruption<sup>5</sup>. The European Commission, despite a positive opinion on Ukraine's application for EU membership, critically remarked that "the approximation to the *acquis* is still limited in the area of social policy and employment"<sup>6</sup>. It is therefore a matter of time, depending on the conduct of the war, as to when the question of social security will be in the spotlight of public opinion and expert discussions. Moreover, it should be expected that Ukraine's path to EU membership and its access to the relevant funding will be conditional on successful reforms in the social realm. As a result, in this analysis, I elaborate on the rationale behind the need for a strong and dignified social contract (as defined by the Nestor Group of experts and public intellectuals)<sup>7</sup>.

### **Beyond Survival: Crafting a New Narrative for Ukraine**

Prior to the last decade, Ukraine's state and nation-building track records have been predominantly unsuccessful, due to centuries of oppression from its neighbours. And while

3 OECD. *Social policies for an inclusive recovery in Ukraine*. 2022. <https://bit.ly/3RF13HL>

4 ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe. *Support for Ukraine recovery, 2022*, [https://www.ilo.org/budapest/WCMS\\_861948/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/budapest/WCMS_861948/lang--en/index.htm)

5 World Bank. *Relief, Recovery and Resilient Reconstruction: Supporting Ukraine's Immediate and Medium-Term Economic Needs*, 2022, <https://bit.ly/45Hf7o1>

6 EU Enlargement Policy, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/ukraine/>

7 Y. Hlibovytskyi, *Vijna jak kontrevolucija hidnosti* (War as a counter-revolution of dignity), 2024, <https://bit.ly/3XBpE2s3>

*de jure* Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, *de facto* its society and elites remained under Russia's tight economic, cultural and political grip. Moreover, strong opposition towards the power of central authority is deeply rooted in Ukraine's socio-cultural code and is often traced back to the hetman-Cossack heritage. The Soviet legacy has only exacerbated the distrust towards the prevailing political ideology, while the representatives of political elites were perceived as untrustworthy and corrupt. As a result, a phenomenon which Ukrainian writer Andrii Kurkov describes as a democratic anarchy matrix allows citizens to effectively resist attempts at the usurpation of power (shown in three successful large-scale revolutions since 1991)<sup>8</sup>. Still, it also makes Ukraine's democratic model volatile and unpredictable. Its version of democracy has developed a distinctly individualistic character, while the political and policy landscape for nearly three decades has been leader-driven and characterised by the lack of clearly defined ideological and programme-oriented parties.

With over 350 political parties registered at the Ministry of Justice, elections have often constituted a popularity contest amongst many *de facto* business projects, which marketed an individual vision (promise, idea) of Ukraine's development, irrespective of any ideological backbone. Such a situation resulted in the lack of a consolidated, long-term, nationwide reform and development plan, not to mention the absence of a clear foundation behind many decisions. This is also why Ukraine's fragmented market economy model has been characterised by "the multiple trajectories of development of different agencies and institutions, which are often defined by the personal preferences of

the decision-makers, who are inspired by certain examples and role models from more developed countries".<sup>9</sup>

For over three decades, Ukraine's domestic affairs have been characterised by a high degree of volatility. Leader-driven political projects have dominated political life. Political action plans were often based on a five-year electoral cycle. Subsequently, the preferred timespan of implemented policies has been short-term due to the dominant 'quick wins' approach. A considerable number of political projects turned out to be short-lived, which did not allow for a continuous reform effort. Moreover, there is an evident scarcity of political movements which can be well-positioned on a traditional ideological spectrum — therefore, able, willing and persistent enough to invest political capital over time, into much-needed reforms. Quite the opposite, Ukraine's political scene has been replete with catch-all political parties and populists, unwilling to take risks, which potentially may threaten their chances of being (re)elected. Instead of adopting at least some of the previously successful practices, the frequent reaction from those newly elected has been to start out by completely undermining the work of their predecessors. Therefore, the importance of continuity and investment in the development of institutions, mechanisms and practices in Ukraine should not be left unheeded.

Due to this complicated history, the image and vocation of a politician in Ukraine remains tainted, associated with shady practices and/or corruption. The political campaigns are focused on bringing in the so-called "managers and professionals" into decision-making. This leads to a questionable level of competence in parliament, as unfortunately

8 A. Kurkov, *Ukrainians. From A Historical Matrix to the Present Day in Ukraine in history and stories*. Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals, V. Yermolenko (ed), 2019, Kyiv: Internews Ukraine, UkraineWord.

9 K. Gryniuk, *The Mechanisms of Bridging the Skills Gap in Post-Communist Countries. Case study of Ukraine, Poland, and Estonia*, 2019, Doctoral Dissertation at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. P. 196. <https://rcin.org.pl/ifis/dlibra/publication/273219/edition/236879>

cases of buying one's way into the forefront of politics have been common for a very long time. Although the last parliamentary elections in 2019 were expected to bring a wave of fresh faces onto the political scene, the post-election policy-making processes have already shown once again that the vast majority of new politicians have been learning on the spot, lacking the prior knowledge and competence to lead genuine empirical-based change. Such a state of affairs hampers key reforms because the latter usually come at a substantial political cost, and require expertise and long-term political investment.



***Investing in social security is not just a matter of welfare but a strategic imperative for Ukraine's journey towards lasting security, stability, prosperity, and inclusive democratic governance***

Against such a background, some Ukrainian political scientists have argued that broad, non-ideological movements were sufficient to address the needs of a nation which has constantly had to return to the question of “survival and defending sovereignty”<sup>10</sup>. The war with Russia, which originally started in 2014, and escalated in 2022, provided a strong impetus for the process of grassroots Ukrainisation to progress, contributing to the strengthening of a political nation, and putting the final touches to the nation-building processes. Therefore, the ongoing (and what majority hope to be a victorious) war against centuries-long oppression is likely to become a long overdue, transformative moment for Ukraine to finally

move away from being primarily “a world champion in survival” (in the parlance of modern Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko) to having the opportunity “to live and plan long-term” — having the capacity to define and proactively mould its own future<sup>11</sup>.

Finally, prior to 2022, many ideological niche movements (e.g., socio-democratic, eco-movements, etc.) could have been more effectively utilised. Yet, that was not for a lack of demand for them. As argued earlier in the analysis, the circumstances were hardly favourable, and society needed to be more mature and experienced enough to conduct serious, merit-based deliberations. The ongoing discussions between international and Ukrainian stakeholders suggest that the overarching framework for recovery and modernisation efforts is likely to be security driven. The latter is a sine qua non requirement to ensure the safety of the population and a key factor in attracting foreign investment, allowing Ukraine to modernise successfully. Yet, in the framework of “building back better”, it would be a considerable mistake to overlook the importance of social security as an integral element of societal resilience, which is now widely discussed by all involved stakeholders as a cornerstone of Ukraine's successful resistance against the Russian aggressor. Investing in social security is not just a matter of welfare but a strategic imperative for Ukraine's journey towards lasting security, stability, prosperity, and inclusive democratic governance. This is why it is so salient to raise awareness about the importance of agreeing on a comprehensive social model, which will allow the Ukrainian state to take care, in an inclusive, fair and transparent manner, of

10 Y. Shulha, (Ed.), Ukraine's party system: establishment, functioning, development, 2010, *National Security and Defense magazine* nr 5 (116). Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies named after Olexandr Razumkov.

11 V. Yermolenko (ed), *Ukraine in history and stories. Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals*, 2019, Kyiv: Internews Ukraine, UkraineWord.

those who are currently paying the highest price in the most brutal and devastating war Europe has seen in almost a century.


### **United in Diversity: Strong Social Fabric as a Cornerstone of Ukraine's Sustainable Development**

The conduct of a full-scale war underscores Ukraine's potential for transformation and modernisation, which hinges significantly on the nation's cross-society resilience, a concept articulated among others by Hanna Shelest<sup>12</sup>. I argue that this resilience necessitates a high level of inclusivity — all members of the society understanding their role, whilst feeling valued, taken care of and included in decision-making. The effectiveness of collective efforts is amplified when all members of society are actively engaged and empowered. Without the comprehensive mobilisation of Ukrainian society, accompanied by clear guidance on the nature and extent of individual contributions, resistance against Russia would have been considerably less successful. Similarly, without a well-defined strategy for citizen welfare and their active participation, the processes of (post)war recovery and EU accession could easily propel the rise of Eurosceptics and populists, who would argue that decisions are led by technocrats, disconnected from societal realities.

The lack of human capital has been a serious problem for the development of Ukraine in the past, and will continue to be a key factor in the process of its reconstruction. As shown previously, various estimates (e.g., by UNHCR, IOM) point to approximately 6-6.5 million people, who appear to have left Ukraine since the start of the full-scale

war in 2022. In looking for an answer to this problem, the authorities should strive to create an environment which is conducive to demographic growth. According to experts "such environment — in both war and post-war periods — has four major components: basic security, proper housing, a balanced labour market, and supportive living conditions"<sup>13</sup>. The relatively short nature of my analysis prevents me from delving deeper into all pertinent policies required to improve the discussed demographic situation — be it effective health policy, labour market reform, educational policy, (affordable) housing, inclusion, and the protection of vulnerable groups such as single mothers, the elderly and the youth. At the same time, I would like to draw attention to those overarching challenges, which may not be under the spotlight of most such analysis.

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 ***Another pertinent issue concerning Ukraine's future socio-demographic landscape is the notable underrepresentation of women in decision-making, both at the local and national levels. Despite the active involvement of women in grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, and increasingly in the military, their presence in leadership positions and the decision-making nexus remains limited***

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The government's key strategic documents lack active mechanisms for engaging and cooperating with the diaspora (for the purpose of the paper used in the broadest definition). Although the National Recovery

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12 H. Shelest, *Defend. Resist. Repeat: Ukraine's lessons for European defense*, 2022, Policy Brief. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/defend-resist-repeat-ukraines-lessons-for-european-defence/>

13 E. Libanova, *Ukraine's Plans for Demographic Recovery*, 2024, Kennan Cable nr 88. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-88-ukraines-plans-demographic-recovery>

Plan acknowledges the importance of repatriating refugees as a priority, members of Ukraine's diaspora (including migrant communities, and Ukrainian minorities in countries like Poland, Slovakia or Romania) abroad are not recognised as standalone actors or significant partners in the recovery process. The Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014 has underscored the immense potential of such communities to advocate for the country's democratic development and to mobilise human, financial, and political resources. In previous scholarly initiatives, I have emphasised the critical role of including the diaspora in Ukraine's identity-building and democratic progress. Functional mechanisms for engaging with the Ukrainian diaspora, which will likely expand after the war, are essential for Ukraine's commitment to inclusivity and multi-stakeholder engagement. Decision-makers must be prepared to acknowledge diasporic groups as crucial partners in Ukraine's recovery and democratisation, consulting and actively involving them in the country's transformation. As an example, according to the authors of the 'Blueprint for Recovery of Ukraine,' the significant influx of refugees, including students, researchers, and highly-skilled workers to the EU presents an opportunity to establish enduring relationships in the field of research and development<sup>14</sup>.

The full-scale defensive war has fostered an unprecedented sense of unity within Ukrainiansociety,pavingthewayforabroader consensus on the nation's future direction. As early as 2022, the Ukrainian authorities introduced a national recovery plan with the overarching objective of ensuring decent living standards for all citizens<sup>15</sup>. However,

the overall socio-economic landscape has significantly influenced the feasibility and success of reforms, particularly in the social sphere. Over the past three decades of independence, Ukraine has weathered multiple large-scale protests (revolutions) and a prolonged war with a neighbouring state deliberately targeting the civilian population and infrastructure. These events have precipitated political upheaval, severe economic downturns, and significant emigration. Additionally, like many other nations, Ukraine has grappled with the profound challenges posed by the Covid-19 Pandemic. The absence of sustained peace and stability, coupled with persistent external threats, has hindered the establishment of conducive conditions for effective social welfare programmes. Moreover, since 2014, security concerns have largely dictated policy priorities, with little indication of the onset of imminent change. The high level of trust enjoyed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, particularly in comparison to other state institutions, serves as a poignant reminder of these circumstances.

Another pertinent issue concerning Ukraine's future socio-demographic landscape is the notable underrepresentation of women in decision-making, both at the local and national levels. Despite the active involvement of women in grassroots initiatives, civil society organisations, and increasingly in the military, their presence in leadership positions and the decision-making nexus remains limited. Currently, only 20% of sitting parliamentarians in Ukraine are women, with even lower representation among ministers (14%) and with few members of local governing bodies (30%)<sup>16</sup>. While there

14 T. Becker et al. *A Blueprint for the Reconstruction of Ukraine*, 2022, The Centre for Economic Policy Research. <https://cepr.org/about/news/blueprint-reconstruction-ukraine>

15 Ukraine Recovery Conference. *Social Recovery*, 2022, Lugano [https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/621f88db25fbf24758792dd8/62bd01b9049cb35af0bbe702\\_ENG\\_Social%20Recovery\\_URC.docx.pdf](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/621f88db25fbf24758792dd8/62bd01b9049cb35af0bbe702_ENG_Social%20Recovery_URC.docx.pdf)

16 UN Women. *Local government country profile*, 2024, <https://localgov.unwomen.org/country/UKR>

has been some progress observed in the last parliamentary elections<sup>17</sup>, the importance of the meaningful participation of women in Ukraine's recovery and modernisation efforts must not only be acknowledged but also ensured. This is particularly crucial given the impending challenge of gender-sensitive policymaking, exacerbated by the significant emigration of primarily women since the onset of the full-scale war. One of the fundamental precepts outlined in the Lugano Recovery Principles underscores the importance of gender equality and inclusion. Ukrainian stakeholders and their partners should work towards integrating this principle into Ukraine's recovery and modernisation initiatives, ensuring that women have an equal opportunity to contribute to the country's development.

### **Ukraine's Security Dilemma: Protecting Society While Safeguarding Democratic Values**

Ukrainian society holds the ultimate decision-making power regarding its future. However, it is imperative for those who stand in solidarity with Ukraine to discuss the potential challenges associated with a certain path towards development and recovery. Increasingly, experts and policymakers view a militarised democracy as a viable and even necessary model for Ukraine to defend its sovereignty in the foreseeable future. Likewise, civil society organisations, exemplified by the inaugural Civil Society Manifesto from Lugano, prioritise national and human security in their strategic communication. Given the persistent threat from neighbouring Russia and recent first-hand experiences of war's brutality, strengthening the defence and security sectors is likely to become a defining aspect of Ukraine's recovery and post-war development. A growing consensus among experts and decision-makers

suggests that without robust state security, comprehensive recovery and modernisation efforts may falter. Furthermore, the Ukrainian authorities perceive military-tech as a catalyst for economic modernisation and transformation.

In the midst of an ongoing war, one might argue for the existential necessity of such a model for Ukraine. However, there is another important perspective to consider. Situated in a region that historian Timothy Snyder termed the 'bloodlands,' Ukraine has lacked the opportunity to develop instruments and structures for effective dialogue among its diverse societal groups. Instead, it has endured high levels of repression, trauma, and violence. Since the onset of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and Russia's annexation of Crimea, I have personally participated in activities arranged by organisations focusing on fostering a genuine culture of dialogue in the country. This entails the capacity to comprehend and address the varied needs and expectations of different societal groups, through non-violent means and instruments such as dialogue and non-violent communication. Silence, distrust, and distancing, remnants of the Soviet legacy, have often been coping mechanisms for dealing with difficult situations and emotions. Having already had limited time and opportunity to properly address past traumas, the Ukrainian nation now finds itself navigating yet another significant outbreak of violence and destruction.

From 2014 until early 2022, news outlets did report incidents, some of them fatal, involving war veterans and civilians. While in relative numbers these incidents are not to be described as frequent, they highlighted an existing challenge. Since 2022, a significant portion of the population, including prominent figures in public life

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17 One of the parties which entered the Parliament, namely "Holos" has even aimed for a gender-balance on its party lists.

have witnessed and experienced the harsh realities of war. They carry these experiences into their professional and personal lives. Meanwhile, overarching issues such as addressing domestic violence remain pressing tasks. Despite Ukraine's relatively advanced legal framework, which includes the Istanbul Convention (though ratified only in late June 2022), there has been little direct change in socio-economic practices, which still lag behind European standards.



***Increasing militarisation of the public sphere, driven by the existential threat posed by Russia, is seen by some experts as having a negative impact on the state of Ukraine's democracy***

Moreover, during the full-scale invasion, the number of supporters of firearm ownership more than doubled<sup>18</sup>. In a traumatised society lacking comprehensive firearms policies, this surge does not necessarily have to, but nevertheless could lead to further problems if left unaddressed — particularly concerning the demobilisation of armed volunteer groups who fought in the war. If these phenomena are disregarded or overlooked, the proliferation of weapons, war trauma, and the absence of a genuine dialogue culture are likely to continue tearing at the social fabric of Ukrainian society. Furthermore, experiences from other regions in the world demonstrate that vulnerable groups, such as women and minorities, disproportionately bear the brunt of this violence. Whether Ukraine's democracy remains more or less militarised, sustaining it will prove challenging if these issues remain unaddressed.

Increasing militarisation of the public sphere, driven by the existential threat posed by Russia, is seen by some experts as having a negative impact on the state of Ukraine's democracy. The Covid-19 Pandemic, as seen in many other regions globally, heightened the securitisation of the public sphere, potentially compromising the quality of democratic governance<sup>19</sup>. Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine's public sphere has experienced a dramatic increase in securitisation. The war has prompted the imposition of martial law, resulting in top-down governance through regional military administrations, and extensive restrictions on freedoms and rights. If this trend continues, it could significantly undermine the foundations of Ukraine's resilient democracy, including horizontal social connections, decentralised governance, a vibrant civil society, and a robust private sector. Safeguarding against such developments is crucial, particularly during the recovery phase, let alone considering Ukraine's ongoing path to EU membership.

## **Conclusions**

The famous resilience of Ukrainian society has its limits and needs to be replenished. The sooner this is understood, the greater the chances for Ukraine to emerge victorious in the war, and successful in post-war rebuild. Cross-society resilience is stronger once various aspects of a nation's social security are addressed. This means engaging and ensuring that all segments of society are seen as essential not only for Ukraine's war effort, but also for its transformation and modernisation. Additionally, one has to be ready for dialogue and a recognition of the challenges posed by the militarisation of Ukraine's democracy and the securitisation of public sphere, exacerbated by external

18 Rating Group, *Eleventh National Survey. Personal freedom, Security and Arms*, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4csN3HS>

19 Freedom House, *Democracy during pandemic*, <https://freedomhouse.org/issues/democracy-during-pandemic>

threats like the full-scale Russian invasion and, previously, the Covid-19 Pandemic. Without addressing these issues, the resilience of Ukraine's democracy will be seriously compromised, allowing the Russian aggressor to advance its brutal onslaught through conventional military and/or hybrid means. This is why proactive measures are required, to safeguard democratic principles and foster genuine societal dialogue.



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***Cross-society resilience is stronger once various aspects of a nation's social security are addressed. This means engaging and ensuring that all segments of society are seen as essential not only for Ukraine's war effort, but also for its transformation and modernisation***

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Another critical aspect is the need for comprehensive policy frameworks, to address the multifaceted challenges arising from the vulnerable situation Ukraine found itself in due to the unprovoked aggression. In addition to policies which should target

citizens' welfare, efforts to integrate the experiences of war veterans, mitigate the risks of firearm proliferation, and tackle issues like domestic violence will emerge as crucial for societal cohesion and democratic stability. Furthermore, the recognition of the importance of aligning policy priorities with European standards and values — be it gender-sensitive policies or human rights protection — is imperative for Ukraine to succeed in its European aspirations. Overall, even though the fog of war has not yet lifted, it is important to remember the significance of fostering a culture of inclusivity, dialogue, and democratic governance, in order to navigate the complexities of post-conflict recovery, ultimately allowing Ukraine to become a fully-fledged, active member of the EU.

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*Andriy Korniychuk, PhD in social sciences, works as a policy analyst at the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. He is also a member of the European Studies Unit at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Andriy's research interests include the analysis of the ongoing transformational processes in the EU and its neighbourhood, and their international context.*

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Issue 1 (33), 2024

ISSN 2518-7481