

BRIEF

WAR AND SOCIETY

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE SERIES 2
NO. 3

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 tested the functioning of both Ukraine's state apparatus and its entire society. During the period 2022-24, the relationships between civilian society, the political elite, and the military have reflected two distinct phases of the war. The first phase occurred during 2022 when Ukrainians were engaged in an existential struggle for their nation and was marked by a surge in civic consciousness, a high level of self-organisation, and a constructive relationship between the military, elite, and civil society. From early 2023, however, the war became 'routinised'. This second phase has been characterised by war fatigue, habituation to war as the new normal, and a division in society between those who are included in the war's infrastructure and those who mainly focus on their own lives.

THE FIRST PHASE

War has its own logic of development. It goes through various stages, during which both the picture on the battlefield and the attitude of

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citizens can change. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 naturally had significant impacts on political and social dynamics. The first year of the war was seen as an existential struggle against the historical threat posed by the Russian Federation.¹ This phase of the war was marked

by high indicators of individual, social, and community resilience, morale, and hope; and at the same time, high indicators of distress and of a sense of danger.² This contradictory mosaic facilitated the mobilisation of society and government, promoted the multi-level self-organisation of society, and encouraged new approaches to communication between the elite, military and civilian society.³

Community resilience also played an important role at the start of the full-scale invasion. Better indicators of community resilience have been shown to have directly affected the ability and effectiveness of communities in Ukraine to resist the attempted occupation.⁴

Before the full-scale invasion, sociologists had noted geopolitical, cultural, political, and other divisions in Ukrainian society. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine has conducted research on the measurement of civic identity. According to the results of its surveys, the feeling of being a citizen of Ukraine increased over 20 years from 41.1% to 62.6%, with significant jumps during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity.⁵

In 2022, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 84.6% of the population of Ukraine considered themselves to be citizens of their country above all, with no major differences between various social and demographic categories such as age, region, language, ethnicity, and gender. One of the most significant changes to have occurred in 2022 is the disappearance of regional differences between Ukrainian residents when it comes to

civic identity. The vast majority of respondents identified themselves primarily as citizens of Ukraine, and almost all respondents reported that they were proud of their Ukrainian citizenship.⁶

Civilian society in 2022 also demonstrated high levels of support for both the institutions of the President of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine as well as personally for President Zelenskyy and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Zaluzhnyi.⁷ At this point in the war, no friction or misunderstandings between the political and military leadership were visible: the military-political establishment presented a united front alongside society against Russia's aggression.

ROUTINISATION OF THE WAR

The main obstacle to the further deepening of the relationships between the political elite, the military, and civilian society has been the routinisation of the war and its psychological consequences. The routinisation of war among the civilian population arises from psychological fatigue, and a desire to escape from the war and to normalise life in conditions of permanent threat and fear. In such a situation, the deepening of relations across the civilian-military divide is problematic, as a significant part of society is immersed in daily routine. In essence, a significant cleavage has arisen in Ukrainian society between the communities involved in the war (soldiers and their families, volunteers, activists, businesses) and those who distance themselves from it.

This cleavage can be measured in quantitative terms such as the decrease in donations for the army, and the increase in attempts to hide tax revenues and to illegally leave the territory of Ukraine.⁸ Oleg Karpenko, deputy head of the Come Back Alive Foundation, has said that it is becoming more and more difficult to raise funds. In 2023, the charity raised nearly \$177 million and supported 580 military units. But the volunteers do not expect to reach this level in 2024 due to a decrease in international interest and a more difficult situation inside the country.

A key question for Ukraine today is thus how to overcome this routinisation of the war in society.

One answer may be to find ways and means to move beyond the present war of attrition. Here, the government can take decisions that may positively affect the behaviour of society. First, it might pursue a significant change in the quality of the training of military reserves. Evading mobilisation and attempting to leave Ukraine are often associated with a lack of trust in the state's ability to assess individuals and give them appropriate positions in the security and defence forces. Unfortunately, despite the need for intelligent recruitment that would ensure that everyone can be as useful as possible in the war effort, little progress on this issue has been made.

Second, the state needs to adjust its information policy. The United News Marathon, through which five broadcasters pooled resources to cover the war, was relatively effective in the early days, but has today, as the sole and uncritical voice of the government, lost the confidence of citizens and attracted criticism from abroad.⁹ Even during a period of martial law it is necessary to maintain multiple sources in the information field and not to pressurise or target government critics. Furthermore, the

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content of messaging needs to reflect reality and avoid the excessive optimism that leads in turn to inflated expectations and, ultimately, frustration.

A CHANGING PICTURE

Another significant challenge associated with the routinisation of the war is the decrease in public optimism regarding the prospects for victory, and a corresponding slow decline in support for the civilian and military leadership. In 2024, the share of those who believe that things are developing in the right direction has decreased; in fact, for the first time there are now more people who believe that things are heading in the wrong direction (46% definitely or rather wrong, 44% definitely or rather right).¹⁰

Regarding the political leadership, President Zelenskyy's level of trust, which had soared to 90% after the invasion in 2022, fell to 77% in December 2023 and to 65% in February 2024. Meanwhile, in the same month, public trust for General Zaluzhnyi stood at 96%.¹¹

Even before the war, the Office of the President had assumed executive power, leaving mostly administrative functions with the Parliament. However, the public's increasing trust in Zaluzhnyi and the strong influence of the armed forces pushed the political elite to consolidate power and concentrate it further in the Office of the President.¹² One result is that the role of the Cabinet of Ministers has become difficult to identify—today, it acts mostly as an extension of the Office of the President, implementing its wishes.

Even during wartime, however, democracy needs a system of checks and balances. There is a large body of empirical evidence to suggest that while wars are usually started by autocracies, they are usually won by parliamentary republics, which are able to take account of different strategies for waging war, listen to the views of the political opposition and take account of public opinion.¹³ Writing about Finland in 1939-40, for example, Ilmari Käihkö noted the vital importance of “reconciliation, democracy, and societal reforms that boosted economic growth increased national cohesion and allowed strengthening of the defence sector.”¹⁴

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A better strategy for Kyiv would thus have been to take measures to ensure a continuing plurality of opinions even if this meant ceding some influence to the Parliament (Ukraine is a parliamentary-presidential republic, meaning that the Parliament and Cabinet of Ministers should anyway hold more power than the President). But like Finland, Ukraine has been forced to transform itself at a time of significant crisis and must simultaneously resist Russia's military aggression, reform Ukraine to meet EU membership criteria, reform the defence sector to substantially increase production of military

equipment and ammunition, and pursue an anti-corruption agenda.

In addition to Zaluzhnyi's high rating, other factors have led to a noticeable friction between the civilian leadership and the military since the end of 2023. The failure of Ukraine's counteroffensive in 2023 shook Zaluzhnyi's position with the political elite and President Zelenskyy has repeatedly stressed that mistakes in the planning of operations must be answered for, and responsibility borne.¹⁵ There has also been a growth in corruption scandals related to army procurements, the discovery of 'elite' units that are guaranteed to be kept away from combat zones, and complaints about extremely slow institutional changes in the structure and functioning of the armed forces.¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

In the period 2022-24, the dynamics of the relationships between civilian society, the political elite and the military can be understood in the context of a transition from an existential struggle to a routinisation of the war. The consequent changes in trust in the political and military leadership have significantly complicated cooperation between these parts of Ukrainian society.

Three conclusions that might be useful to other countries may be drawn. First, overcoming cleavages in society is essential in building the resilience necessary to resist an aggressor.

Second, the consolidation of power as a response to the challenge of external aggression is to be expected, but it is not the optimal management solution. Political plurality, freedom of speech and the ability of the opposition to criticise the authorities without pressure and propose better solutions are necessary for effective governance, even if some restrictions are necessary in wartime as mandated by the constitution. A parliamentary or parliamentary-presidential form of government is the best institutional solution for preserving democracy. Third, civil-military relations need to be distanced from personalities and based on a robust culture and a framework of inter-institutional cooperation. The Ukrainian system of power has become hyper-personalised, which negatively affects its effectiveness.

ENDNOTES

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