

# Political-Economy Analysis: Ukraine's Resilience and Unity Third Year into The War: The Role of Civil Society

## Introduction

With nearly 30,500 civilian casualties,<sup>1</sup> 10.2 million displaced citizens<sup>2</sup>, \$152 billion in direct physical damage<sup>3</sup> and estimated cost of reconstruction ranging as high as \$1 trillion,<sup>4</sup> Ukraine has endured two years of its just and defensive war against Russia. Ukraine's endurance can be attributed to a) an inexplicable resilience of Ukrainian people; b) the unity of Ukrainian society; and c) support from international allies. While international solidarity with and support to Ukraine remains critical,<sup>5</sup> that support will be of little help unless Ukraine is able to, **first and foremost, maintain resilience and unity at home.**<sup>6</sup>

## War Context

In February, Ukraine marked two full years since Russia's invasion with the increasing depletion of ammunition and equipment, while Russia has taken the initiative. The fall and winter months of the war saw Ukraine struggle to hold its 1,000km eastern frontline against Russia's offensive efforts, with the eventual seizure of the eastern town of Avdiivka in February<sup>7</sup> and further threats to Kupiansk and other towns along the frontline. In parallel, Russia increased air strikes towards the end of 2023 and early 2024 which, despite mostly successful air defense efforts,<sup>8</sup> caused more death and destruction across Ukraine. Intensified attacks on Ukraine's military-industry capacities and on the energy grid<sup>9</sup> across the country caused significant damage in the last few months.<sup>10</sup>

Ukraine has sought to hit back and weaken Russian capacities by attacking Russia's military facilities in Crimea<sup>11</sup> and critical military infrastructure in the temporarily occupied areas as well as in the Belgorod and Kursk regions.<sup>12</sup> However, the dire shortage of artillery, access to adequate air defense missiles and other missile stocks has already affected military strategy and will likely be a key challenge as spring fighting increases in 2024. Ukraine has criticized its allies for delays in delivering up to half of the military equipment promised over the past year.<sup>13</sup> Even if delivered, dwindling stockpiles of allied supplies, an unwillingness to increase arms production and their own internal political divides have put in question the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/02/15/updated-ukraine-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-assessment-released>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/resilience-reconstruction-recovery-the-path-ahead-for-ukraine/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1380&page=2>

<sup>6</sup> <https://projects.liga.net/2024-bifurcation-point/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/17/world/europe/avdiivka-russia-ukraine-war.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/with-arrival-of-spring-a-look-at-russias-winter-strikes-on-kyiv/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-says-russian-strike-hit-ukraines-largest-dam-during-mass-strike-energy-2024-03-22/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-war-latest-russia-launches-large-scale-attack-across-ukraine-hitting-energy-infrastructure/>

<sup>11</sup> In response, most of the Fleet has been moved to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-crimea-russia-annexation-occupied-jet-skis-operation/>

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/2024-03-24-Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240312-pro-ukrainian-armed-groups-launch-incursion-into-russia>

<sup>13</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-anniversary-ammunition-shortage-kyiv-a8909760655d83d2ffc0d67ad2a491ec>

reliability of future resources. This combined with the shortage of military personnel<sup>14</sup> and increasing citizens' resistance to actively fight<sup>15</sup> are stymying strategic offensive options and leave Ukraine with fewer options for pushing back against Russia's new offensives or taking back the occupied Ukrainian territory.<sup>16</sup>

### Political Context

Efforts to maintain democratic governance standards and push forward with more reforms were tested by elite level political infighting and continued revelations of large-scale war time corruption scandals. The European Commission (EC) report, released in November and the EU's subsequent decision to open membership talks in December<sup>17</sup> gave the government a domestic and international 'win' while providing a clear signal that reform commitments should be front and center even as the war continues. Initially criticized by human rights and advocacy organizations, the adoption of the law on Fair Lobbying (Reg. No. 10337) in February<sup>18</sup> to address EC requirements as part of its anti-oligarchic action plan was a clear signaling to Brussels. These actions, including the adoption of legislation in December to resume the requirement for officials to submit electronic asset declarations,<sup>19</sup> were part of the government's efforts to fulfill its reform obligations.

At the same time, progress on other reforms and reactions to other legislation have been more mixed. Overall, anti-corruption reforms have been uneven with the ability of the 'anti-corruption ecosystem of relevant agencies partially constrained<sup>20</sup> and with high level corruption scandals particularly related to war time procurements<sup>21</sup> and mobilization corruption shaking public confidence. April's legislative passage of legislation that aimed to address mobilization issues more fairly was particularly noted as lacking articulated measures for mobilization duration limits, something that is a growing concern.<sup>22</sup>

### Socio-Economic Context

In comparison to 2022, Ukraine's 2023 economic recovery had an estimated GDP growth of over 5% (when it shrank almost 29 per cent), but still at least a quarter lower than in 2021.<sup>23</sup> Mostly food and metal exports continued to recover partly thanks to the opening of the Ukrainian Sea Corridor but were further slowed by the Polish blockade of the land border.<sup>24</sup> Economic growth outlooks for 2024 are estimated at 3.6%, which reflects the war effects on businesses due to shelling, power outages, logistics challenges, and shortage of labor force.<sup>25</sup> Inflation rates continued to slow, with February 2024 figures dropping to the

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<sup>14</sup> The military declines to state numbers of soldiers injured or missing, but President Zelensky stated that 31,000 soldiers had been killed since the 2022 invasion. <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-troops-killed-zelenskyy-675f53437aaf56a4d990736e85af57c4>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-faces-an-acute-manpower-shortage-with-young-men-dodging-the-draft/> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68255490>

<sup>16</sup> <https://ecfr.eu/article/ukraines-survival-three-scenarios-for-the-war-in-2024/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-moldova-eu-membership-talks-european-council-georgia-bosnia/32731037.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/247484.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/as-ukrainian-officials-begin-filing-asset-declarations-controversies-surface/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/the-fog-of-war-in-the-fight-against-corruption-what-preceded-the-european-commission-s-decision/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/28/world/europe/ukraine-corruption-defense.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/world/europe/ukraine-war-mobilization-bill.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://ces.org.ua/en/economy-tracker-special-edition/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/20/world/europe/blocked-by-polish-truckers-ukraine-turns-to-the-black-sea-to-boost-trade.html>

<sup>25</sup> <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2024/03/20/2024-PAKT-1-January-2yay.pdf>

lowest since November 2020<sup>26</sup>. While citizens rate affordability of goods roughly equally as in March 2023, 44% of households reported struggling to meet basic needs.<sup>27</sup>

For the population, death, destruction and displacement remain ever key threats. As of January 2024, an estimated 6.5 million Ukrainians were still outside the country due to the war.<sup>28</sup> The Internally displaced population (IDPs) is estimated at almost 4 million. Both sets of displaced populations face potential reduction in social benefit support, due to many countries reducing benefits or making them more stringent in relation to the beginning of the war.<sup>29</sup> Domestically, budget deficit and fears of reduction of foreign financial assistance<sup>30</sup> have caused the government to “optimize” the system of social benefits to IDPs. Currently 2.5 million receive some type of social benefit. The most vulnerable individuals are likely to continue qualifying for aid, while others will be encouraged to integrate more fully into host communities and seek support through social services, which may struggle to handle the increased demands.<sup>31</sup>

Frontline communities across the east and the south of the country continue to be hit hardest with over 3.3million requiring emergency assistance. However, no area of the country is safe from aerial assaults with 47,000 incidents involving armed clashes, airstrikes and other attacks across Ukraine targeting civilians and infrastructure during 2023 and increasing toward the end of the year.<sup>32</sup> Russia’s recent airstrikes on critical energy infrastructure further affected access to electricity and vital services, increasing general civilian hardships and misery.<sup>33</sup>

## International Context

Western support for Ukraine continued to be declaratively strong, but cleavages amongst EU members and within the US affected allies’ ability to deliver the same level of political and economic support as earlier in the war. On one hand, Western allies continued to demonstrate unyielding political support with the December decision to open EU membership talks with Ukraine<sup>34</sup> hailed as a key sign of long-term commitment. The February 27<sup>th</sup> EU decision to allocate 50billion euros in aid for Ukraine over four years further signaled an EU-wide commitment. Hungary’s disruptive role and disagreements with Poland and Slovakia over agriculture interests<sup>35</sup> challenged EU solidarity, testing the Union’s ability to find acceptable solutions for all member states.<sup>36</sup> US economic support got stymied in domestic

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/ukraine/news/inflation/inflation-declines-to-lowest-level-since-november-2020-in-february/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://unric.org/en/2024-un-humanitarian-forecasts-for-ukraine/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

<sup>29</sup> <https://ces.org.ua/en/ukrainian-refugees-third-wave-research/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/chart-ukraine-struggles-to-cover-budget-needs-for-2-months-in-a-row-as-foreign-financing-dwindles/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2024/03/20/2024-PAKT-1-January-2yay.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> [https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ukraine?\\_gl=1%2a1kmiwqo%2a\\_ga%2aNjU2NTIzMjM4LjE3MTEzNTk3NzQ.%2a\\_ga\\_E60ZNX2F68%2aMTcxMTM1OTc3NC4xLjEuMTcxMTM1OTc4My41MS4wLjA](https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ukraine?_gl=1%2a1kmiwqo%2a_ga%2aNjU2NTIzMjM4LjE3MTEzNTk3NzQ.%2a_ga_E60ZNX2F68%2aMTcxMTM1OTc3NC4xLjEuMTcxMTM1OTc4My41MS4wLjA)

<sup>33</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/humanitarian-impact-recent-attacks-critical-services-across-ukraine-flash-update-3-enuk>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67722252>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/farmers-pressure-eu-for-more-safeguards-on-food-imports-from-ukraine/>; <https://theukrainianreview.com/the-polish-border-the-release-of-zaluzhny-and-financial-aid-top-5-themes-in-ukraine-in-february/#toc> worse than it was poles resumed protests on the ukrainian border

<sup>36</sup> <https://kyivindependent.com/orban-says-he-is-willing-to-compromise-on-ukraine-aid-package/>

partisan politics with the legislation for \$60 billion in assistance to Ukraine stuck in Congress since October.<sup>37</sup>

Overnight, the Israel-Gaza war reshaped the geopolitical landscape, affecting the level of international support for Ukraine. US attention has been diverted, as it seeks to influence events in Gaza. Conversely, Ukraine's support for Israel has shaken its opportunities for potential support from Global South and BRICS countries who see double standards in Ukraine's calls for solidarity against fighting Russia while standing with Israel.

Military assistance was also slow from all allies, with transfers delayed due to shortages and political posturing.<sup>38</sup> US pre-election partisanship and the concern that a radical shift in US' foreign policy as a result of the November elections would undermine US support for Ukraine (as well as NATO) further created a sense of panic and urgency amongst European partners to consider how to potentially deal with 'got it alone' situation when it comes to political, economic, and military support for Ukraine and their own security after 2024.<sup>39</sup> A February Paris Conference<sup>40</sup> of Ukraine's allies was organized in part to signal European unity and commitment. The early April NATO proposal for a NATO \$100bn, five-year fund for Ukraine was a further attempt to show NATO and European commitment.<sup>41</sup>

## **Unity, Resilience and Activism: Analysis of Key Trends**

### **Initial unity**

Russia's war triggered an extraordinary level of civic solidarity and resistance among Ukrainians<sup>42</sup> and brought citizens' trust in state and non-state institutions to unprecedentedly high levels.<sup>43</sup> According to ENGAGE data,<sup>44</sup> the number of Ukrainians who were actively engaged in the life of their communities surged from 7% in September 2021 to 24% in August 2023. Participation in CSO activities has also seen an unprecedented growth. 15% of respondents said they actively joined the activities of civic organizations vs 4% in September 2021. Furthermore, in a ubiquitous mobilization effort to resist Russia's aggression, 72% of Ukrainians donated funds to support the army, humanitarian needs of fellow citizens and charity initiatives. Nearly 60% volunteered their time to support whatever was needed and 41% supported internally displaced people at shelters or provided free housing.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/will-congress-keep-ukraine-in-the-fight/>  
<https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/the-eu-needs-to-rethink-defending-democracy/>

<sup>38</sup> During the Munich Security Conference in February 2024, Zelensky called out allies on creating an "artificial shortage" of weapons. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68325022>

<sup>39</sup> <https://theukrainianreview.com/new-geopolitical-conditions-european-autonomous-security/> and [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en)

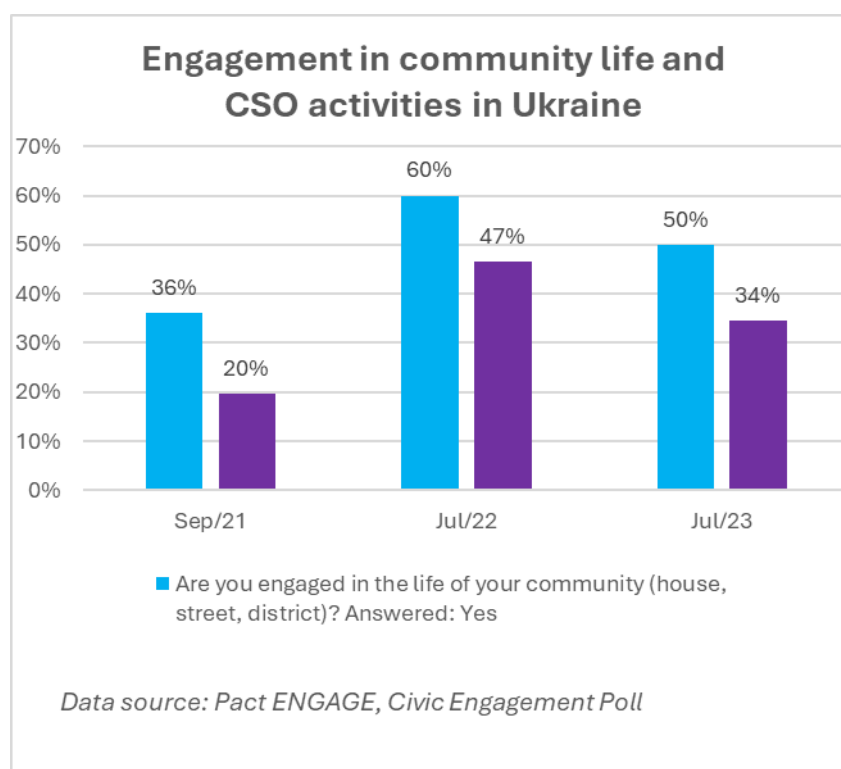
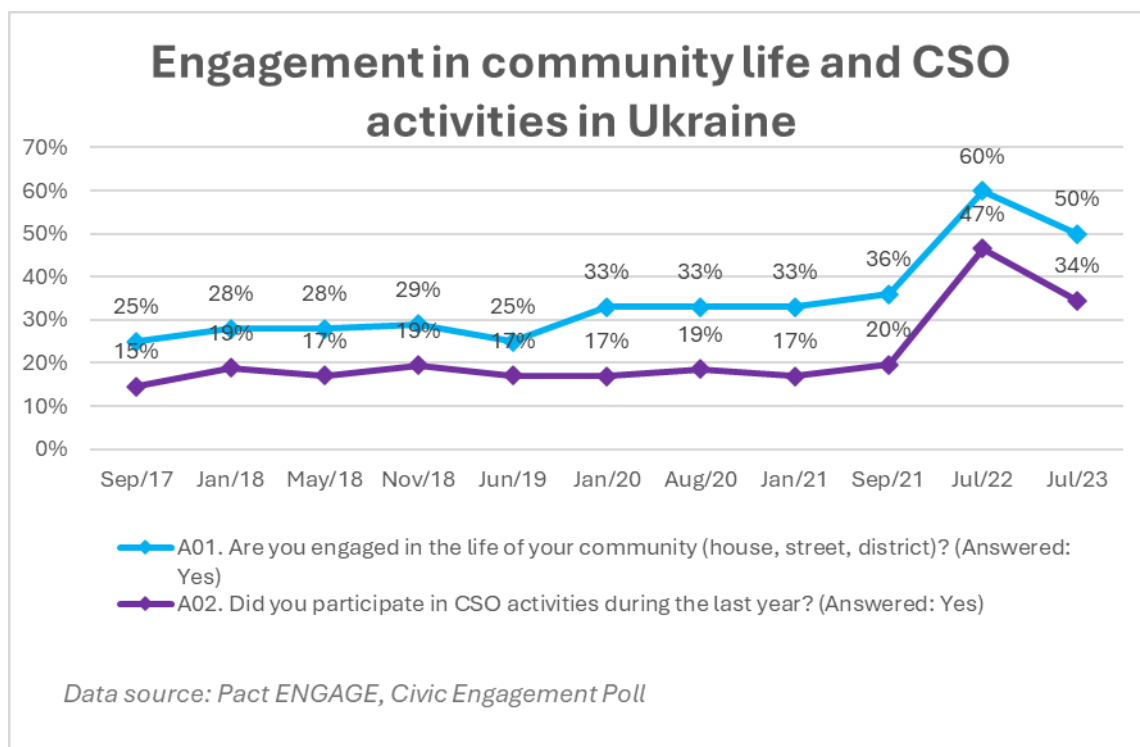
<sup>40</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/26/ukraine-allies-meet-for-conference-in-paris\\_6559280\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/02/26/ukraine-allies-meet-for-conference-in-paris_6559280_4.html)

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/natos-stoltenberg-floats-100b-five-year-fund-for-ukraine/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://engage.org.ua/eng/cep-2022-surge-in-civic-activism-overwhelming-support-to-resisting-the-enemy-and-fundamental-shift-in-perceiving-corruption/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://engage.org.ua/eng/national-corruption-perceptions-and-experience-poll-2023/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://engage.org.ua/eng/cep-2022-surge-in-civic-activism-overwhelming-support-to-resisting-the-enemy-and-fundamental-shift-in-perceiving-corruption/>



International donors and implementing organizations, in unison with Ukrainian society, provided Ukrainian CSOs with the flexibility of support needed to address wartime challenges.<sup>45</sup> Nearly all donors and implementers launched new institutional support facilities to help CSOs overcome sudden existential challenges. In response, CSOs took on multiple tasks after the invasion to provide emergency assistance, using their communication

<sup>45</sup> <https://engage.org.ua/eng/wartime-pivots-and-adaptation-usaid-engage-mapping-of-support-to-and-needs-of-advocacy-focused-csos/>

platforms as points of information and coordination, and enhancing their technical competencies to develop programming relevant to wartime conditions.

## Evolving disunity

### *Social Cohesion Challenges*

Prior to Russia's aggression in February 2022, Ukraine had not been considered a highly cohesive society,<sup>46</sup> with pre-war social cohesion trends mixed. While the Revolution of Dignity and the ensuing decentralization reform have empowered a more robust and united citizen participation at the grassroots level, the new legislation governing the language of instruction in public schools produced notable exclusionary effects. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the consolidation of civic initiatives, but simultaneously deepened disparities at the community and individual levels in terms crisis resilience.

After the start of Russia's war, those that were displaced externally and internally appear to be particularly vulnerable to discrimination and unfair treatment. For IDPs, over 22% noted discrimination related to social assistance or employment. For returnees, 10% noted unfair treatment.<sup>47</sup> Communities across the country have felt the strain of hosting millions, experiences stresses on local resources and the challenges of shifting populations. Overall, 15 million Ukrainians are estimated to be needing the assistance of mental health professionals, while up to 4 million will require pharmaceutical therapy<sup>48</sup> to overcome irritability, poor sleep, and anxiety.<sup>49</sup> In the circumstances of a protracted war, mental health issues are likely to mount and precipitate citizens' isolation, intolerance and even aggression towards each other.

### *War Fatigue Challenges*

*"Ukrainians have been holding for 724 days. 724 days! Would you have believed 725 days ago that this was even possible?"*<sup>50</sup> – asked President Zelensky addressing the participants of the Munich Security Conference on February 17, 2024. Czech and Polish Foreign Ministers stressed that Ukrainians *"are brave, but not superhumans."*<sup>51</sup> While endurance against a more powerful enemy attests to the amazing resilience of Ukrainians, war fatigue is real and growing on the frontline and behind it. Several reasons stand out. First, there has been a shift in war trajectory (primarily back) to defensive and loss of territory. In November 2023, the-then Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief admitted that the five-month counter-offensive, that was a boost to morale at first,<sup>52</sup> has failed and that the war had reached a stalemate.<sup>53</sup> That stalemate assessment may have been overly optimistic, as since November 2023, Ukrainian troops had to retreat from the strategic town of Avdiivka while Russia made territorial advances elsewhere<sup>54</sup> and continues to press hard.<sup>55</sup> Making matters

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<sup>46</sup> <https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-545656da-7ea3-4e69-aec8-9db2c7cbf5f7>

<sup>47</sup> <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-thematic-brief-social-cohesion-and-public-trust-general-population-survey-round-14>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/vpliv-vijni-na-psihichne-zdorovya-kolosalnij-viktor-lyashko>

<sup>49</sup> [https://gradus.app/documents/307/Gradus\\_Research\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Report\\_full\\_version.pdf](https://gradus.app/documents/307/Gradus_Research_Mental_Health_Report_full_version.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-na-myunhenskij-konferenciji-z-pitan-bezpeki>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2024/03/14/7181690/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/ukraine-counteroffensive-blitz-morale-boost-1.6581778>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/11/01/ukraines-commander-in-chief-on-the-breakthrough-he-needs-to-beat-russia>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/03/what-russias-momentum-in-ukraine-means-for-the-war-in-2024/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-2-2024>



all the worse, there is anecdotal evidence and reports<sup>56</sup> to suggest that anger and war fatigue are growing along the frontline, where Ukraine is now on the defensive. This is occurring amidst mounting casualties, shortage of ammunition and soldiers and stalled support from the US.<sup>57</sup>

Second, there has been a 'return' of total aerial war against all citizens. Away from the frontline, the atmosphere has been evolving along the same trajectory. Russia's changed its tactics to attack various cities across Ukraine, with a combination of drones, cruise, and ballistic missiles.<sup>58</sup> This has resulted in lower Ukrainian Air Forces' interception effectiveness<sup>59</sup> and growing fear among citizens.<sup>60</sup>

Third, willingness to participate in mobilization has significantly declined. Ukraine has been in desperate need of more troops for some time.<sup>61</sup> However, the government's mobilization campaign has faced significant challenges as citizens perceive as being unjust and poorly organized.<sup>62</sup> The BBC estimates<sup>63</sup> that nearly 650,000 Ukrainian males of fighting age have left the country over the past two years, and there is widespread evasion of conscription<sup>64</sup> among those who remain. Paradoxically, a most recent poll shows that 54% of Ukrainians can sympathize with those who evade mobilization, citing the belief that "no one wants to die."<sup>65</sup>

Fourth, there are pressing questions of what to do with the veterans. Another evolving challenge that remains to be addressed is reintegrating the veterans. A survey<sup>66</sup> conducted in February 2023 among nearly 2,500 male and female veterans and active military personnel showed that 4% of respondents believed that veterans "do not receive" respect from civilians at all. This figure more than doubled to 9.8% in October 2023. The overall share of veterans who are convinced of the public showing a complete lack of proper respect for them has also increased, amounting to 44.1% in October 2023 compared to 25.4% in February 2023. In addition to veterans' own disbelief in proper treatment from the society, research shows<sup>67</sup> that they are facing high risks of being stigmatized because of a dissonance in socially perceived and actual needs and risks of those returning from the frontline.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/18/shock-anger-and-war-fatigue-ukraines-two-years-of-agonny>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-06/us-weighs-tapping-army-funds-for-ukraine-as-aid-bill-stalls>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-bombs-cities-across-ukraine-in-massive-overnight-assault/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-01-23/russia-uses-new-tactic-to-bomb-ukraine-and-overcome-its-air-defenses.html#>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/30/1222272915/ukrainians-fear-being-forgotten-as-russian-missiles-strike>

<sup>61</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/31/why-is-ukraine-s-effort-to-mobilize-more-troops-facing-trouble\\_6666954\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/31/why-is-ukraine-s-effort-to-mobilize-more-troops-facing-trouble_6666954_4.html)

<sup>62</sup> <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/challenges-of-the-ukrainian-mobilization/>

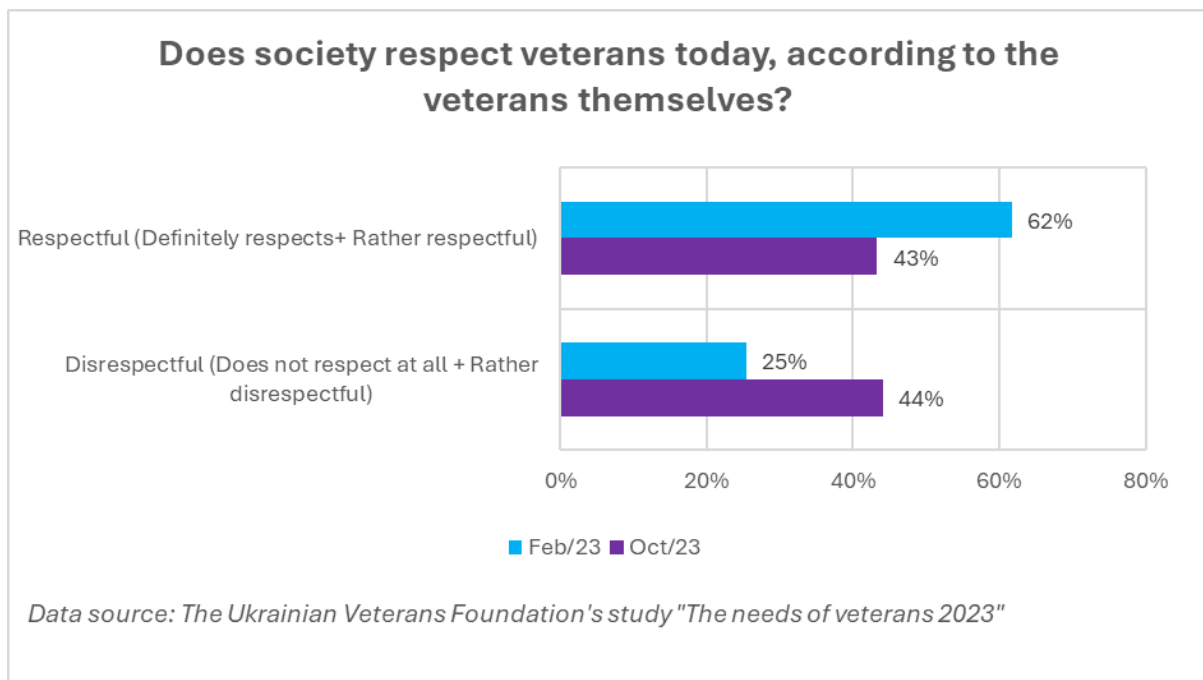
<sup>63</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cd1px4z922wo>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-faces-an-acute-manpower-shortage-with-young-men-dodging-the-draft/>

<sup>65</sup> <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/press-conference/977337.html>

<sup>66</sup> <https://veteranfund.com.ua/en/2023/11/20/uvf-presented-the-results-of-another-online-survey-portrait-of-a-veteran/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/shlyah-veterana-vikliki-stereotipi-ta-perspektivi-1700436907.html>



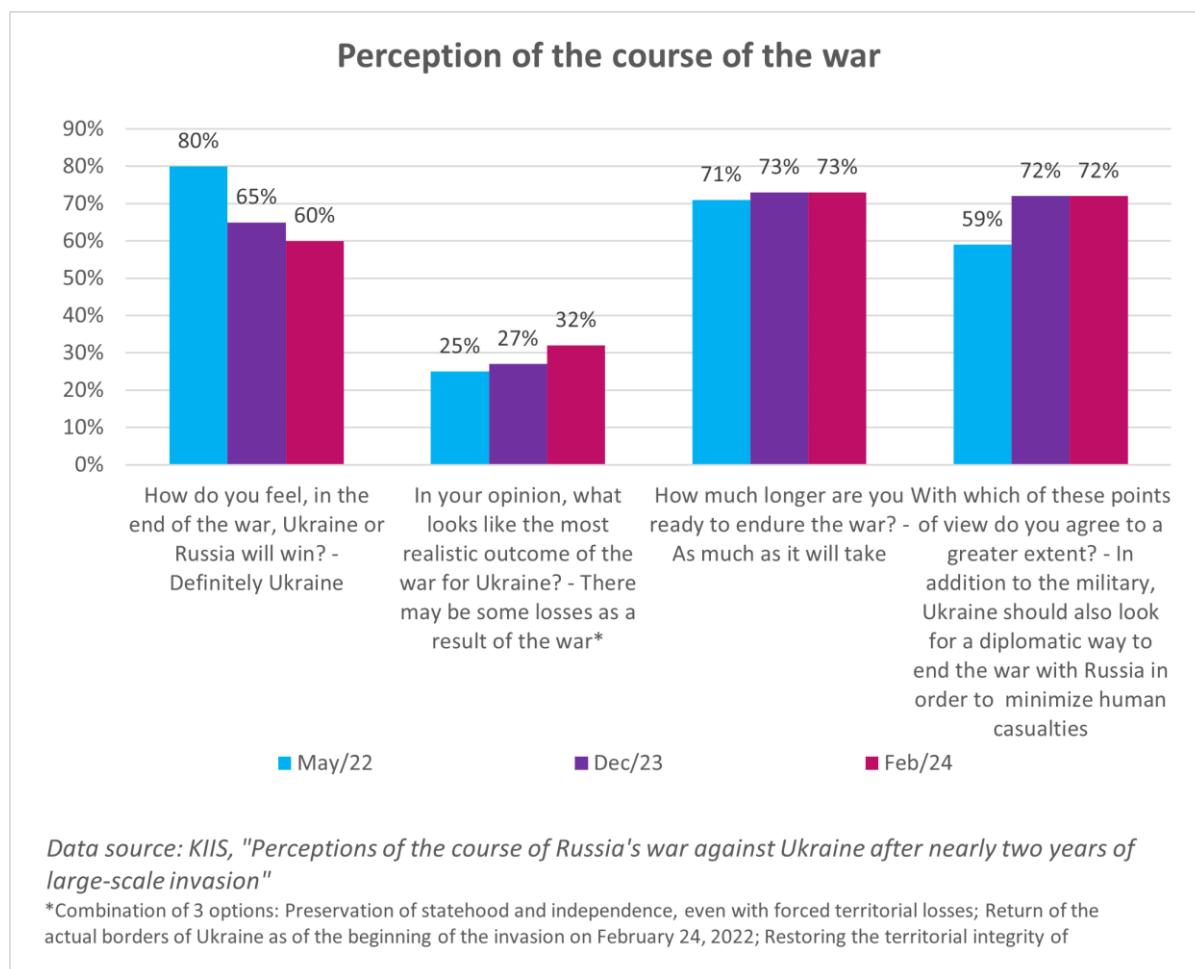
## Risk Of Increasing Disunity

### *Changing Perceptions of the Victory and the Strive for Peace*

Third year into the war, there appear to be a changing perception of what would constitute a victory for Ukraine. Citizens are more and more seeing a 'victory' as withdrawal of Russia's troop from territories captured since 2022 rather than a return of Crimea and the earlier occupied parts of Donbas.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, while still a significant majority, the percentage of citizens which have confidence that Ukraine will win has diminished while those that recognize some territorial losses and negotiations are inevitable has increased.

<sup>68</sup> In March 2023, 30% of respondents agreed, and almost 42% disagreed with the statement that the withdrawal of Russia's troops from the territories captured since February 24, 2022, would be rightfully considered a victory for Ukraine, and the return of Crimea and part of Donbass should be achieved through further negotiations. In March 2024, public opinion has almost reversed: 40% of Ukrainians agree with this understanding of victory, and 26% disagree. <https://interfax.com.ua/news/press-release/977315.html>



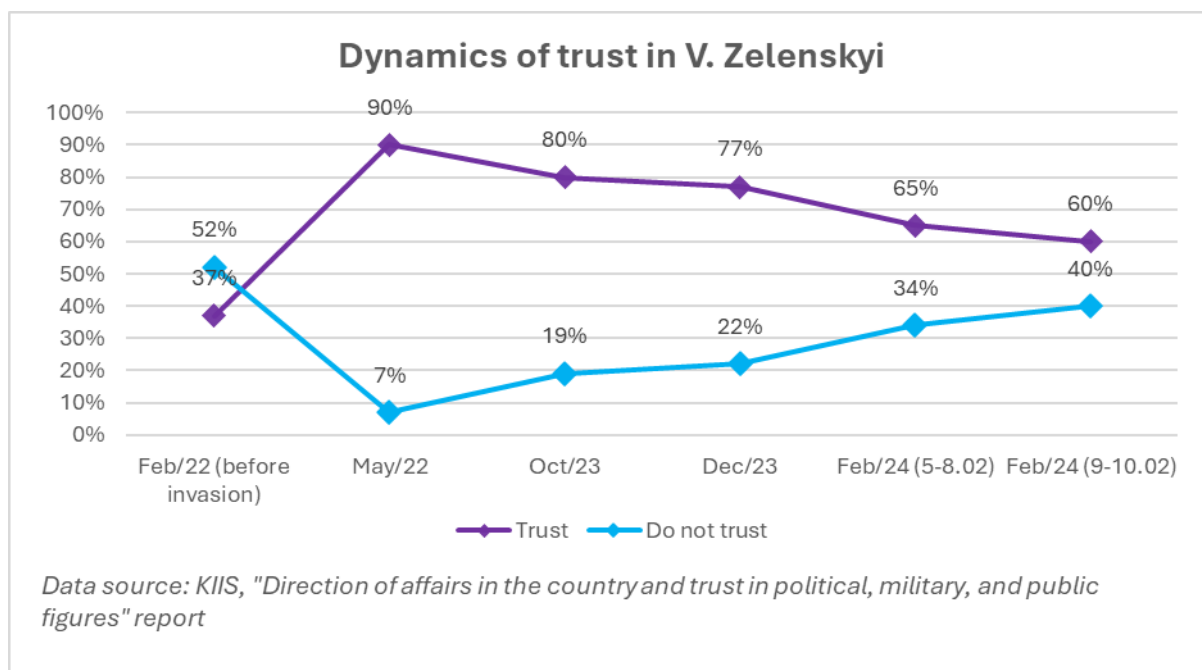


### *Declining Trust in Public Institutions and in the Country's Direction*

Trust in formal institutions is a key enabler of political stability<sup>69</sup> and is an important factor in increasing a society's resilience to major crises.<sup>70</sup> In contrast to the beginning of the war, polling suggests that Ukrainians' trust in national authorities has been declining. Trust in Ukraine's president, whose role has been key to sustaining the nation's unity, has been declining. President Zelensky's trust ratings skyrocketed from 37% before the war to 90% few months into it. Since that time, Ukrainians have been consistently showing declining trust towards their President with 80% in October 2023 and 60% by February 2024.

<sup>69</sup> [https://books.google.pl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=j0LC6XZtH84C&oi=fnd&pg=PT9&ots=dKX-Dbzmmb&sig=MbBJRQeTTpbJqbR7Mkxf9XEJwk&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?hl=en&lr=&id=j0LC6XZtH84C&oi=fnd&pg=PT9&ots=dKX-Dbzmmb&sig=MbBJRQeTTpbJqbR7Mkxf9XEJwk&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>70</sup> [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/unf\\_research/33/](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/unf_research/33/)



This is juxtaposed against a continued high trust in the military, particularly in the former Commander in Chief General Zaluzny.<sup>71</sup> The dispute between Zelensky and Zaluzhny over the military's performance<sup>72</sup> (but also as potential political rivals) took center stage over past months (ending in Zaluzhny's dismissal in February)<sup>73</sup> and has arguably undercut internal as well as external perceptions of unity within Ukraine's elites.

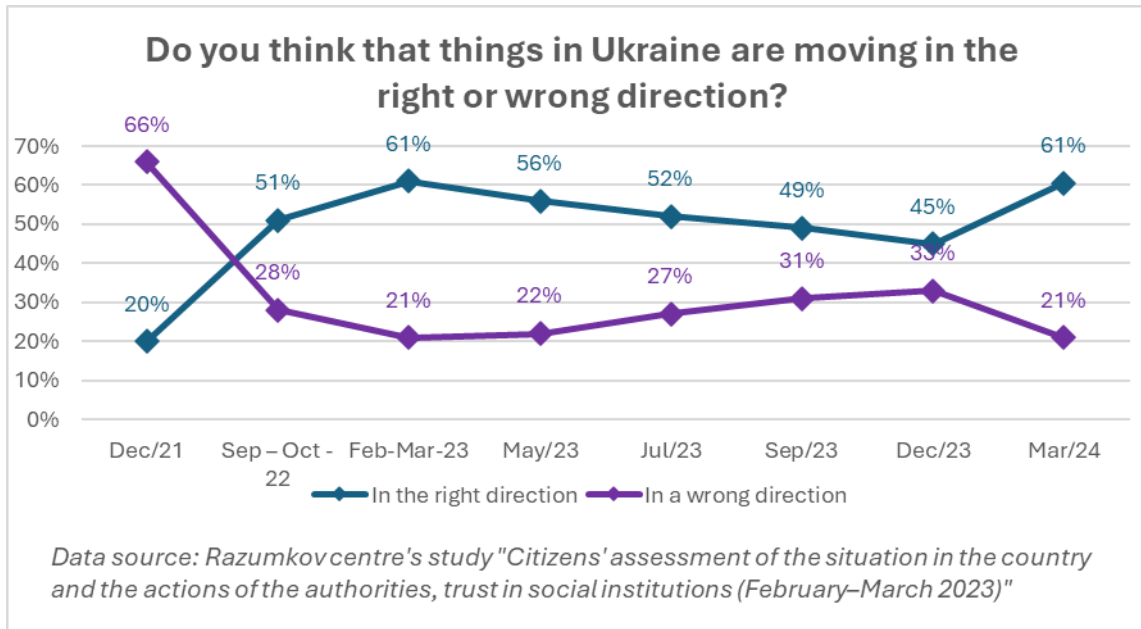
The dispute and speculation also displayed the increasing maneuverings of internal political actors, both in opposition and aligned with the government to articulate 'what next' in political leadership. While all political parties agreed with the decision to delay elections given martial law and war time challenges,<sup>74</sup> 'politics are back' in Ukraine. This creates further risks to Ukraine's unity as both domestic political opposition and the Kremlin are likely to exploit the issue of an "illegitimate President" to destabilize the situation.

<sup>71</sup> 96% expressed trust in the military, like December 2022; 88% expressed trust in Zaluzny. <https://kyivindependent.com/poll-ukrainians-trust-in-zelensky-declines-trust-in-zaluzhnyi-is-high/>

<sup>72</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91611>

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68244813>

<sup>74</sup> Nearly 70% believed, as of February 2024, that he should keep his post until martial law is abolished while only 15% thought new elections should be held. <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1371&page=4>



At the community level, polls suggest<sup>75</sup> that there remains higher trust in local authorities than in the national government. Yet, according to others<sup>76</sup>, in the fall of 2023, there was a deterioration in the relationship between the population and civic activists with local authorities, coupled with mass protests in regional centers against the improper use of community funds, and insufficient support for the army.

Finally, despite the reforms and EU accession negotiations, the share of Ukrainians who believe that the country is moving in the right direction has been steadily decreasing (68% in May 2022 vs 44% in February 2024)<sup>77</sup>. In February 2024, for the first time since the start of the war, the number of those who believe the country is moving in the wrong direction exceeded those who remain optimistic (46% vs 44%). And in relation to this nearly 70% of Ukrainians, compared to 43% last year, believe that the government is profiting from war and is sinking deeper into corruption<sup>78</sup>.

### What Can Be Done to Sustain and Reinvigorate Unity and Resilience?

The erosion of, or at least the perceived erosion, of unity and its potential impact on resilience and Ukraine's ability to continue its fight call for a clear-eyed conversation among stakeholders. The whole-of-society effort<sup>79</sup> that Ukraine has exhibited for so long appears to be at risk and requires all actors to step up their work – citizens, formalized and informal civil society, the private sector, international organizations, and the government.

<sup>75</sup> <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-sytuatsii-v-kraini-ta-dii-vlady-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-institutiv-politykiv-posadovtsiv-ta-gromadskykh-diiachiv-sichen-2024r>

<sup>76</sup> <https://voxukraine.org/en/transparency-or-army-aid-what-influences-trust-in-local-government-in-ukraine>

<sup>77</sup> <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1368&page=4>

<sup>78</sup> <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/press-conference/977336.html>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/publikationer/english-publications/building-resilience-for-the-future---lessons-from-ukraine.pdf>

Civil society, particularly advocacy and watchdog organizations, as fundamental actors in Ukraine's initial resilience and unity, must employ their analytical, watchdog, advocacy, and engagement skills to lead this conversation and set priorities for 2024. We posit questions to begin this discussion.

*First, how can civil society with its dual role as watchdog and cheerleader articulate a blueprint of 'positive' unity while pointing out the challenges?* Here, it would be important for civil society to consider, as with their StratComm efforts, how to present a framework of unity while also allowing a framework for criticism. This approach would establish a narrative that accurately captures the complexities of the political, social, and wartime situations, framing them in a way that honestly identifies deficits and outline steps for national progress.

*Second, how can civil society more effectively articulate and represent the grievances that are straining the fabric of unity, and consider policy solutions to address these issues?* IDP socio economic grievances brought on by the war, continued corruption grievances and veteran and fighter grievances are key topic areas amongst others that civil society needs to grapple with more comprehensively. Some of these might be outside CSOs' comfort zones, but these are areas where citizens are most frustrated and where they see little support from state or external actors. These appear to be areas that matter to them and that necessitate clear watchdogging and advocacy based on relevant, trauma- and victim-centered ideas.

*Third, how can civil society better facilitate a national conversation about what victory and peace could look like?* Two years of war have influenced citizens' perceptions of "winning the war and the peace" and what those would entail. It is likely that diverging opinions amongst citizens will continue to increase. Civil society, unlike the government can play a critical role in managing and facilitating this national conversation in a way that presents and allows honest debate on the options and their effects on different segments of society and parts of the country.

*Fourth, how can civil society effectively articulate and advocate for a governance system that instills trust and confidence in its citizens?* Civil society since before Maidan has been primarily focused on democratic governance reforms, and this needs to continue. Engaging with sensitive governance topics, directly linked with EU accession, needs to be a crucial ongoing 'bread and butter' effort of Ukrainians watchdog and advocacy organizations.

*Fifth, how can civil society use Ukrainian culture domestically as a factor of unity?* If there is a direct link between a nation's cultural heritage and its ability to maintain a unique identity, independent statehood, and determine its future, then protecting Ukrainian cultural heritage from Russia's military and information warfare and safeguarding it against internal challenges is paramount for achieving Ukraine's victory in the war. It would consequently lead to preservation of sovereignty and advancing the country's European aspirations. Civil society has been successful in promoting Ukrainian culture abroad to bolster international solidarity. Using some of these tactics at home, civil society should consider how best to amplify and leverage Ukraine's unique cultural legacy that provide comfort, pride, and shared experiences in innovative multi-media and citizen accessible ways.

*Seventh, how can civil society re-invigorate citizens and local level civic activism?* There has been considerable effort to reach out and work with new informal groups and for established civil society to link up and engage with citizens across the country. This effort needs to be intensified and expanded, experimenting in ways that brings innovation in engagement and motivate citizens to continue caring for, advocating for, and building their communities.

*And finally, how can civil society most effectively work with international peers and donors to articulate and receive support for these efforts?* Ukrainian civil society actors have been instrumental in promoting unity for Ukraine alongside European counterparts. Now, they need to clearly articulate and gather support for this enhanced blue print of unity crafted by Ukrainian civil society, to bolster domestic efforts further. Support from donors in broadening thematic areas of focus and methods of engagement will be a key component.