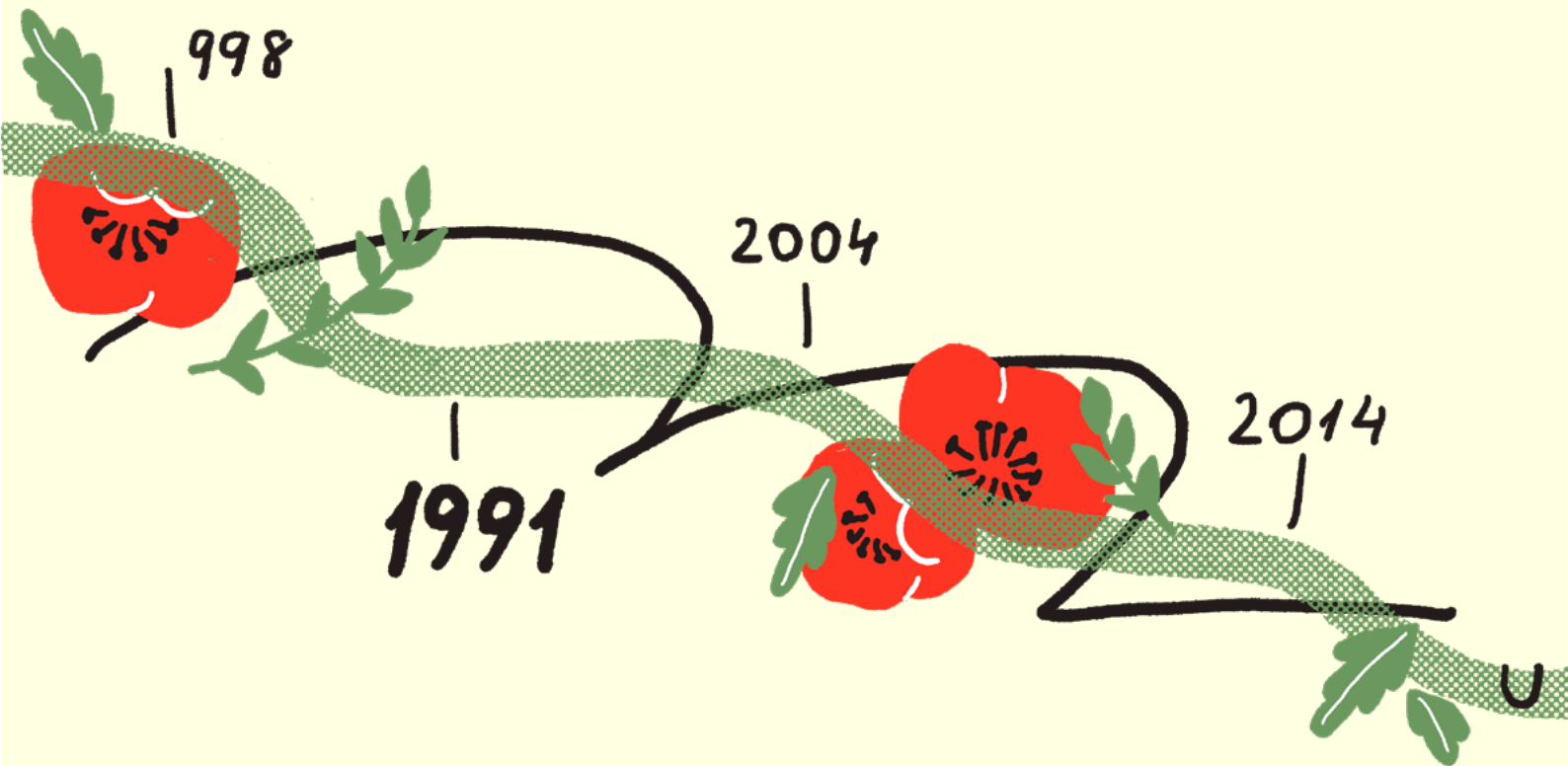




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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Ukraine at 30:

From independence to interdependence

What unites Ukrainians and what divides Ukrainians after 30 years of independence



ABOUT

Arena is a research programme dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation and malign propaganda that endanger democracy. Arena seeks to foster a pluralistic and resilient public sphere fit for the digital age.

Based since 2021 at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, Arena's initial projects were conducted at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Our projects bring together academia, media and civil society – computer scientists and story-tellers, social science and the humanities – in order to analyse disinformation campaigns, to understand their impact on audiences and to design innovative counter-measures. Unlike many academic or think tank projects, Arena does not simply analyse the changing nature of information. Instead we create content and then measure its impact, using a methodology rooted in academic rigor and practice.

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Focus groups carried out by
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Executive summary

Ukraine at 30:

Patterns and paths forward



This August marks 30 years since Ukraine gained independence. Turning 30 is an important moment, as we remain young enough to achieve anything, yet we are also old enough to look back on our experiences and to learn from them.

Now is the time to reflect on Ukraine's journey so far, and to find ways to guide the country towards an even more successful future. What do people all across Ukraine think of the key events of the last thirty years? Which values, passions, and behaviours unite? And which only divide? What makes Ukrainians proud and what do Ukrainians aspire to? What, ultimately, does independence mean to Ukrainians?

These are the kinds of questions we have been asking in more than 20

focus groups carried out over the last six months, with participants from a range of ages, demographics, and regions. “We” are a group of Ukrainian and British social researchers, journalists, historians, and political scientists. The constraints of the pandemic have meant that our focus groups have had to shift online, and recruitment in the temporarily occupied territories is particularly challenging.¹ But we have been both surprised and inspired by what we have learnt, with clear patterns in people's attitudes emerging alongside viable means of strengthening Ukraine's resilience, democracy, and cohesion.

Four of these focus groups involved participants in the temporarily occupied territories. This requires some sensitivity, and we adapted our questions accordingly, focusing less on recent politics and more on history, values, and aspirations.

¹ The team recognises that recruitment challenges affected representativeness of the data collected in the NGCAs. All precautions were taken to prioritise respondents' safety.

Our results will be of particular interest to those actors who play a role in Ukraine's public discourse: most obviously the media, old and new, but also political communicators, ad agencies, civil society groups, and indeed anyone with a social media account that cares about this country.

This report first discusses the main patterns observed before moving on to a fuller summary of the research.

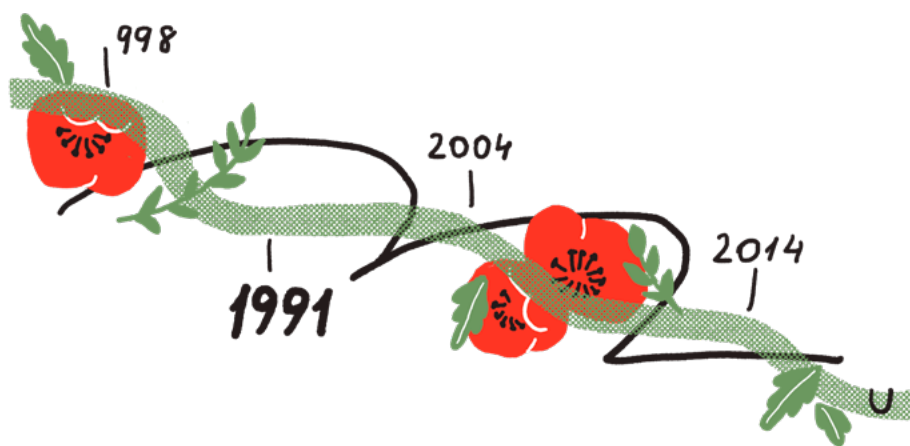
We also draw on some lessons from our previous research into how to overcome “memory wars” in Ukraine² and how to engage audiences vulnerable to conspiratorial propaganda.³

² See From Memory War to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine, Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ygFlgh>

³ See Why conspiratorial propaganda works and what we can do about it: Audience vulnerability and resistance to anti-Western, pro-Kremlin disinformation in Ukraine. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3wmsHKG>

A • Independence is a process, not an event

Let's start at the beginning: when did Ukraine become independent?



It seems like an easy question, but we found that Ukrainians take different views on when Ukraine really became independent. Many say 1991, for example, whereas others cite the start of the war with Russia in 2014 as the moment when Ukraine truly gained independence. Some told us that even to this day Ukraine cannot be considered truly independent. However, most now agree that Ukraine's independence has come with two major benefits: first, freedom of movement after

1991 and visa-free travel more recently; and second, the chance to shift decision-making away from distant Moscow and towards the national capital Kyiv, or even to the local level.

As we celebrate the important occasion of Ukraine's 30th birthday, we invite you to **think not just of a date but rather of the process through which Ukraine became the success story that it is today.**

B. United through hardship, resilience, dignity and tolerance



One common cliché about Ukraine is that it is deeply divided, whether ethnically, linguistically, or around political events like the Orange Revolution and partisan politics. We find that this cliché is some distance from the truth. There are strong ties that bind Ukrainians together especially in terms of specific everyday attitudes and behaviours.

Let's start with people's common experience of hardship and resilience. The euphoria of becoming independent in 1991 was quickly replaced by hardship, instability, and fear during the economic crises of the 1990s (which were due largely to the cumulative deficiencies of the Soviet planned economy). People across Ukraine proudly remembered how creative and hardworking they had to be in order to adapt to an unfamiliar and hostile environment. Against the odds, they managed to find new jobs that required new and unfamiliar skills. They modestly say that they had to provide for their families, but it is the effort, sacrifice, and creativity of each and every Ukrainian

during those volatile times that have made it possible for Ukraine to survive and succeed as an independent country.

This was a common refrain amongst our participants: Ukrainians come together in times of hardship and crisis.

This common reservoir of resilience needs to be stressed much more in public discourse.

We should explore this toughness that Ukrainians have acquired as a result of hardships. This is a subtle but important shift from merely complaining how tough things have been for Ukrainians, which can lead people towards more paternalistic attitudes. Articulating past traumas should lead to resilience, pride, and agency.

When we broached some of the supposedly most divisive political events of the last 30 years, such as the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, people frequently spoke of the unifying aspect of these events, particularly in the case of 2014. Despite differences on party politics in these revolutions, we found Ukrainians across the country agreed on the

underlying values that inspired them: they agreed that having your vote counted is a right, that the falsification of votes in 2004 was wrong, and that police beatings of students in 2014 were an outrage. Ukrainians stood up for their dignity, to protect their future, and to prove that they would not be silent when red lines were crossed. And it did not matter which region you were from, what language you spoke, or what your ethnicity was. Revolutions are a source of pride for Ukrainians. They feel proud of Ukrainians' efforts to fight for their civil rights, often criticising their neighbours for their "inefficient attempts to take a government down". **These underlying, common, bottom-up values should be factored in whenever we explore these topics, which can easily seem purely divisive at first glance.**

Likewise, Ukrainians have tended to be united by the war, and they have come to value the country's independence even more. Some of those who might feel somewhat sceptical about the 2014 revolution are ready to take up arms and defend Ukraine. They feel something very fundamental has been violated by Russia, that a red line has been crossed, that "we" and what is "ours" are under attack.

But it's not just attitudes and values that unite Ukrainians. Perhaps even more important are shared, near-unconscious behaviours that have been shaped by the many centuries of Ukraine's pluralistic history. Despite the existence of different and sometimes incompatible views, we found that people's disagreements rarely translated into deep-seated attitudes of intolerance. On the contrary, no matter how heated political discussions become, on an individual level Ukrainians tend to be more lenient towards other perspectives than we often give them credit for. While focus

groups in the UK might find "Brexiteers" and "remainers" at each other's throats, this was not something we came across in our focus groups.

A good example is how people clearly realise the differences in historical memories of different parts of Ukraine and the need to reconcile them with care while avoiding top-down impositions: "Decommunisation [...] is perhaps positive in one part of Ukraine, while in another part it's like a red rag to a bull [...] possibly, it should have been done differently."

[West, small s.] When they were originally adopted in April 2015, decommunisation laws – which included a ban on Soviet symbols, street names, and many statues – proved to be politically divisive. Yet our focus groups ultimately revealed that many people have a far more nuanced understanding of the need to approach such issues with real sensitivity.

This very Ukrainian tolerance may come as a surprise given the often divisive nature of political debate. But if we look back at Ukraine's history, at the daily culture of such cosmopolitan places like Lviv and Kharkiv, of Chernivtsi and Odesa, then it seems far less surprising. Even a small town like Mukachevo has a historical memory of many different groups living within it. The many ingredients in this social soup have left Ukrainians with a taste for tolerance. **Perhaps the endless debate about what "ideas" unite Ukrainians could now move on to also highlighting how Ukrainians are united by patterns of behaviour that are more core than abstract. How can TV shows, town hall debates, advertising campaigns, and reforms make more of this common ground?**



It is important to note though that societal tensions do exist, however, when it comes to two groups in particular: “politicians” and “people from non-government controlled areas (NGCAs)”.

Politicians are blamed for everything. All of them. Irrespective of what they did before holding office, once they are politicians they simply cannot act in the interests of the people. Little recognition is given to politicians for the many positive changes that people do mention: better services, roads, visa liberalisation, the prized fruits of decentralisation. For many Ukrainians, it can only be a case of “to sia zrobyt” (it will get sorted on its own). Some of this is healthy scepticism, but ultimately these kinds of opinions need to be based on evidence rather than prejudice. **The media can do more to highlight the bridges that can connect people with politicians who act in the common interest.**

Regarding people from the NGCAs, a lack of common ground is perceived on both sides of the front, but this is something that can be fixed. Respondents from the NGCAs feel forgotten and marginalised, and it doesn’t help that the rest of Ukraine sees them as “victims of the Russian propaganda”. In fact, NGCA participants in our focus groups proved themselves more than capable of understanding and analysing the propaganda all around them. The vast majority we spoke to wanted to “return to normality” and were nostalgic for their lives before 2014. The war was seen as the most traumatic event of their lives. As such, **greater exposure to honest stories about life in the NGCAs, about what keeps people there and the difficult choices involved, would help everyone in Ukraine to feel more connected.**

Even sports support in the NGCAs can give us a glimpse (albeit only a glimpse!) of how they identify with broader (national) communities. When talking about “us”, there was no consistency:



Mostly they refer to Ukraine:
“I’m still rooting for Ukraine.”
[Luhansk]

Sometimes to Russia:
“Russia and Ukraine – they’re all ours.” [Donetsk 1]

Other times to the city of Donetsk:
“Shakhtar – neither from Donbas, nor from Kyiv, they were ours.” [Commuter]



Many of the people we spoke to – largely students and less educated demographics – felt not only abandoned but also angry about human rights abuses by separatist authorities. People expressing such attitudes may not be fully representative of the region as a whole, but this shows that they are out there. Ukrainian media and other communicators can engage with these groups to show how reintegration with Ukraine and “normality” could be possible. For young people in the NGCAs, Ukraine can provide this normality by opening up a path towards a European future, including educational, work and travel opportunities.

C “When do you
feel proud to be
Ukrainian?”

This is another question
that received a unified
response – and a
particularly surprising
one: people feel
proud when Ukraine
gets international
recognition.



People feel honoured to be recognised abroad as Ukrainians (and not Russians). Parents of young people working or studying in other countries proudly speak of their children's successes abroad. Many dive back into their memories of past international sports events like the Olympic Games, recalling how their hearts skipped a beat when the Ukrainian flag was raised.

The majority saw UEFA Euro 2012 as the most unifying event for the country. The event was also praised for stimulating infrastructural development, driving economic growth, and especially improving Ukraine's global image. One

respondent from the NGCAs stressed that this “meant that the country is also succeeding politically”.

It is vital to keep in mind this deep desire to be recognised internationally when talking about Ukraine. This means going beyond depictions of Ukraine as a victim, begging for assistance, in order to explore how Ukraine and Ukrainians are making a positive contribution to the world. After all, Ukraine is standing up to a dangerous enemy, a pariah in the international community, to protect universal democratic values and human rights. Despite the war it manages to hold free and fair elections. These are things to be proud of.

D. From independence to interdependence

While we found many attitudes, desires, and behaviours that unite Ukrainians, we also found that one critical element was largely lacking. Strong nations need a sense of interdependence.

People from one region understand how their livelihoods and wellbeing depend on the rest of the country. In Ukraine this feeling is weak.

Most Ukrainians we talked to are convinced that **oblasts and regions do not depend on each other:**



“We are not dependent on each other. I think every oblast, every region, they are practically self-sufficient. Bread, potatoes, carrots, and beetroot grow everywhere.”

[West, small s.].



Only the younger generations and those who have moved between regions talked about regional interdependence and the unique features of different oblasts. Even those were stereotypical: the West is the “heart” of Ukraine, the East is a ‘strong industrial hub’. Many oblasts, such as Sumy, Vinnytsia, and Mykolaiv, simply do not appear on the mental maps of Ukrainians.

IN →
INTER ←
DEPENDENCE



Ukrainians are understandably excited about decentralisation and its implied relocalisation of capital and power, seeing the ability to regain power from distant authorities in the capital as a key benefit of independence. But this drive for local empowerment must be tempered by serious efforts to explain how different regions depend on each other. Reimagining the country as a united and complementary collection of different regions must become an inclusive national exercise. These **interdependencies really do exist, but they also need to be narrated, discussed, and recognised publicly in everything from talk shows through to entertainment TV and government communications.**

There is also a chance to establish a new relationship with people in the NGCAs and a new understanding of their role in Ukraine. The war is destroying the myth that “Donbas feeds Ukraine”. Participants in the NGCAs at times voiced the concern that Donbas is not indispensable and therefore Ukraine “can cope without the region”:



“Donetsk, Donbas - it’s an important and needed region, but I wouldn’t say it’s so unique.” [Donetsk 2]



This opens up the space for a new conversation about the role of the Donbas in Ukraine and how it can truly contribute to a common good.

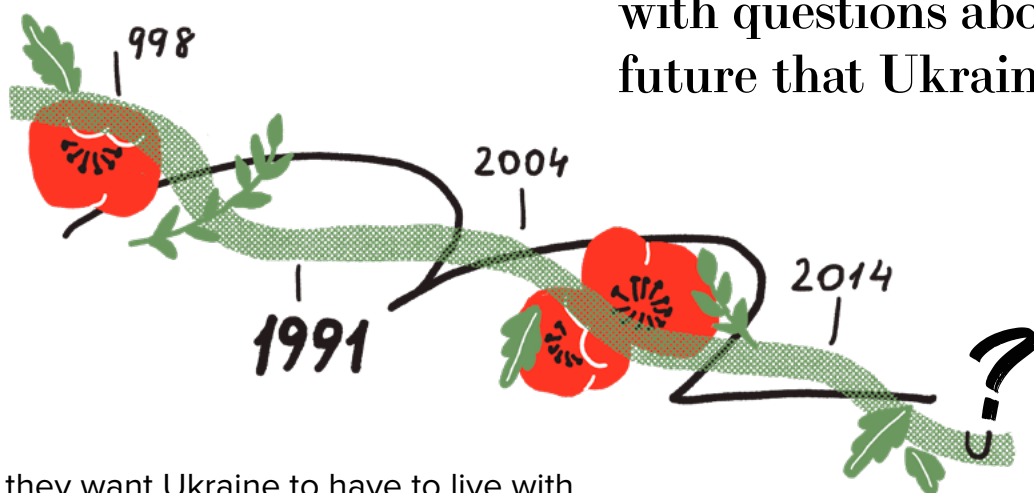
This lack of a sense of interdependence also undermines how Ukrainians see world affairs. Many of the people we spoke to equate “independence” with freedom from any international commitments. Part of the problem is a lack of civic education that explains the rules of international cooperation and the role of different international organisations. But there could be deeper issues, and this topic requires further research.

On a personal level, the majority of the participants in our focus groups associated independence with financial independence and the ability “to do whatever you want”. Only a small number saw freedom also as implying responsibility, an inevitable balance between personal goals and communal needs. Strengthening neighbourhood cooperation, a media focus on engagement, and programmes highlighting the role of every citizen in every region in the life of the community could help to reverse this trend. Only when people understand that their daily behaviours collectively construct the wellbeing of their communities will they recognise their responsibility and real influence on the life of their regions, their country, and the wider world.

In short, Ukrainians need to better explore how they are interdependent both within their country and at the international level, but that could well start with more recognition of their interdependence on a micro level.

E • History for the future

We asked people about the Soviet Union. People from across the country, including the West, asserted that something “positive” had been lost: free healthcare, good education, industrial potential. At the same time almost all of our participants – including people from Eastern Ukraine – acknowledged the destructive powers of the USSR: the Holodomor, Chernobyl, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact were all mentioned, along with the paternalistic mindset that still hinders Ukraine’s development.



Do they want Ukraine to have to live with the kinds of human rights abuses that went on in the USSR? What sort of social security system do they want to leave behind for their children? The truth of the “great” Soviet industries that were in fact close to death, unfit for the modern world, needs to be made common knowledge. But it must also be stressed that these industries are not “lost” as such, but rather reformed and reshaped to allow them to serve new markets and satisfy people’s everyday needs. What has indeed changed is that they have moved away from the Soviet model, which prioritised geopolitical status through military advancement over social welfare.

It is possible to explore this mixed relationship with the past in a constructive way. Much more needs to be said about the negative legacy of the USSR, about issues like the real state of medicine and the widespread practice of pseudo employment.

But any assessment should be made in a way that contrasts the Soviet past with questions about the future that Ukrainians want.

Some Ukrainians feel scared about the future, but the majority feel optimistic. They want the country to continue to develop so that, as one NCGA respondent put it, “democratic values are not compromised by totalitarian displays of power”. Outlining a future path for the country is as important as analysing just how far Ukraine has come. This should be a national discussion, but also deeply embedded in the international context: how does Ukraine’s future relate to its place in the international community? This is a daily exercise in acknowledging strengths while also maintaining the space and the good humour to recognise weaknesses, which together can allow Ukrainians to plan for the future with boldness.

F. What can the media do?

First, we must acknowledge one particularly hard fact.

Few Ukrainians follow the news. They are tired of the constant barrage of negative and political messages. Burdened with their everyday struggles, Ukrainians find relief in culture and entertainment.

In practice, this means mostly pop culture on TV (for older generations) and on social media (for younger groups). It turns out (surprise, surprise!) that pop culture remains the most widespread form of communication with wider audiences, as is common elsewhere in the world.

While people in focus groups could often sound tired and bored when talking about politics, they were bursting with enthusiasm as they thought back to the 90s, when everybody would watch Masky show, 95 Kvartal, Eurovision, Terytoriya A, Karaoke on Maidan, and Roksolana. Participants all referred to the same pop stars, such as Ruslana, Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, Oleksandr Ponomarev, Iryna Bilyk, and a national hero from West to East: Kuzma. For our respondents, the most unifying and enjoyable event in the history of Ukraine was UEFA Euro 2012.



It was also clear that participants in the NGCAs consume Russian lifestyle channels, which tend to project a very “Western” lifestyle. Paradoxically, this means that it is, Russia, a country ostracised by the international community, that represents a Western lifestyle in the NGCAs through the dominance of its media outlets. Ukrainian media should capitalise on this demand for Western lifestyle programming, gaining a competitive advantage by showing that Ukraine offers this aspirational lifestyle and the practical opportunities to realise it, not least via visa-free travel and the international integration that it represents.

Popular culture, whether channelled via old or new media, is the furnace in which a new Ukraine can be forged. The responsibility that this places on the shoulders of creative producers and entertainers is enormous.

We need to knock down the wall between what is fun and what is socially responsible. Media content can and should be both. In order to win the hearts and minds of Ukrainians producers and content creators must ask themselves what values they are bringing to the table. This is not about “marketing” Ukraine; it’s about taking a more conscious approach that can start a healthy conversation with viewers about

who Ukrainians are and where the country is going. In this way, the media can make a positive contribution to the building and shaping of a stronger and more open public sphere.

Our research finds that three principles are key: engagement, interdependence, and recognition.

1 Engagement:

People feel a sizable gap between themselves and authorities. They also distrust the media, with many feeling that they are not being listened to.

The media need to take an active role in helping people to feel engaged in society. This will entail a radical shift in the process of deciding what gets made and how. Media producers need to employ social research to understand people’s concerns. They must draw on the latest techniques in “engagement journalism” to make their content more responsive to people’s needs.⁴ Engagement journalism means that the media go beyond providing content and become a public service. The media become a force through which people can enact change in society. This means everything from allowing people into the editorial process so they help to decide what is covered, right through to following up on the impact of content to see first-hand how it has empowered people. It means trying out formats which encourage civic participation: calling in to the studio, taking part in social-media polls, attending digital town halls and public discussions. Media-driven engagement and



empowerment should go hand in hand with a government strategy to open up political decision-making to online participation. Ukraine should look to global experiences of initiatives like online participation in local budgeting, for example.⁵ Our research shows that Ukrainians see the devolving of power from distant elites to lower levels of governance as one of the key benefits of independence. How can traditional and social media be used to strengthen this process?

But this kind of engagement-focused approach is about much more than just political issues. It means using drama and entertainment to explore the deeper issues that affect people but which often go unarticulated in popular culture. Arena’s research has shown, for example, that Ukrainians have a deep need to explore the turbulent years of the 1990s, as well as late Soviet traumas

⁴ For example, see Engagement Journalism programmes by [Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism](#) and work by [Hearken](#).

⁵ See:
- Knowledge: Participatory budgeting and the Porto Alegre Model. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2UHziZG>
- Applebaum, A.; Pomerantsev, P, How to Put Out Democracy’s Dumpster Fire. The Atlantic (April 2021). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BbAsq>

like the war in Afghanistan.⁶ At its best an engagement-focused approach allows communities to explore the issues that eat away at them, helping to bring them

6 See From Memory War to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine, pp. 8, 41, 60–1, 64. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ygFlgh>

2 Interdependence:

A strong state is based on communality on the feeling within a group of people that they need each other to succeed. This kind of feeling was often lacking among our focus group participants. The irony is that of course Ukraine is deeply interdependent – but someone needs to turn this reality into stories.

We need the media to speak up on how Ukrainian businesses bring people from different parts of the country together; how different people help each other in times of trouble to fight for universal rights; and how this is all done through a peculiarly Ukrainian spirit of tolerance and empathy.

This can be achieved in part via the classic genre of talk shows that showcase voices from across the country, but other, more entertaining reality and drama formats could also prove effective. Consider a docusoap about Ukrainian factory workers moving from Soviet to modern production methods, for example, or a drama about ordinary Ukrainians helping each other to survive against the odds during the hardships of the 1990s: these kinds of shows, which focus on how Ukrainians often work together for the future, could easily spark a sense of pride and solidarity.

into the light of public discourse. As long as they are suppressed in society, this stagnant reservoir of unease can be exploited by propagandists. Media and popular culture need to be “closer” to the people than the propagandists.



3 Recognition:

People need to see their lives represented in a nuanced way and to feel a sense of dignity. Focus groups across the country also showed how important it was for people that Ukraine be recognised internationally, whether for its sporting successes or its scientific achievements. Media content could help to give audiences this sense that they are connected to a community that is integrated into – and recognised by – the wider world.

One event that participants in focus groups kept coming back to is **Euro 2012**. For people in the NGCAs, it engendered a sense of nostalgia for the time before war broke out. For Ukrainians across the country, it was a symbol of how Ukrainians can work together and create something successful that is respected and appreciated on the global stage. Euro 2012 also created a sense of openness to the world, with friendly foreigners visiting Donetsk and other Ukrainian cities. Next year is its anniversary, and also a golden opportunity to revive and reinforce these feelings.



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