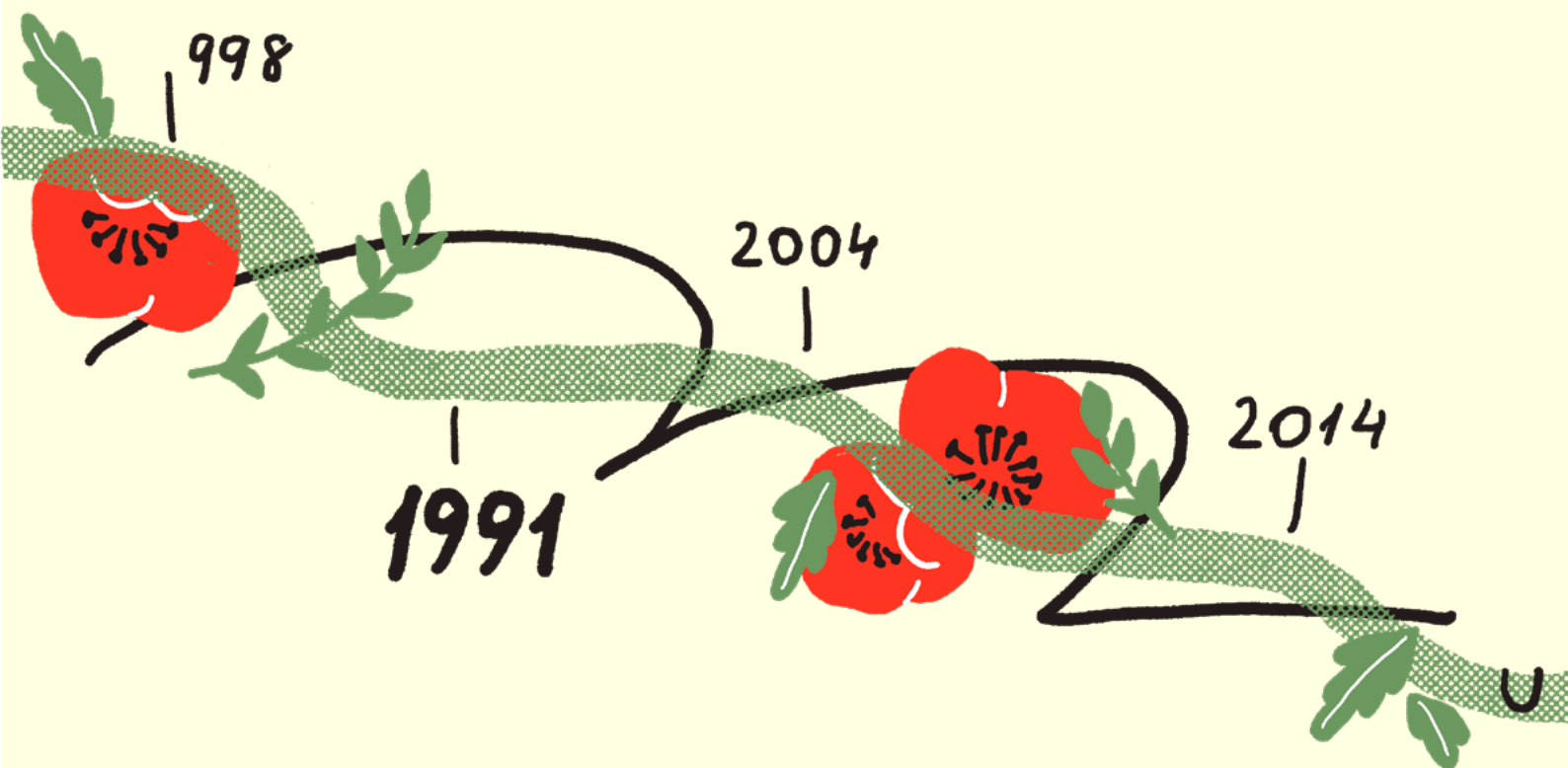# Ukraine at 30:

From independence to interdependence

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

ABOUT ARENA

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

Arena is based at the London School of Economics and Johns Hopkins University, and our team also works closely with in-country NGOs. For the project Ukraine at 30, Arena researchers collaborated with the Public Interest Journalism Lab, our partner organisation in Ukraine, and the Kharkiv Institute for Social Research.

ABOUT PIJL

Founded by Ukrainian journalists Nataliya Gumenyuk and Angelina Kariakina, the Public Interest Journalism Lab (PIJL) is an interdisciplinary coalition of journalists and sociologists, who seek to popularise best practices for public interest journalism in the digital age.

Experts research public opinion and test content among audiences, and media architects develop editorial strategies based on sociological research and analysis of the reactions of different audiences.

ABOUT KhISR

The Kharkiv Institute for Social Research (KhISR) is a non-profit and non-governmental organization, founded in 1999. The Institute is independent from influence of any bodies and organisations, both public and private. KhISR's mission is to support the development of an open civil society and democracy, respect for human rights and freedoms, and raising legal awareness among Ukrainian citizens.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Research team:

Peter Pomerantsev, Director, Arena

Jaroslava Barbieri, Doctoral Researcher, University of Birmingham

Oksana Lemishka, Associate at the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development; Freelance consultant

Denys Kobzin, Director, Kharkiv Institute for Social Research

Maria Montague, Projects Manager and Researcher, Arena

Nataliya Gumenyuk, Co-Founder, Public Interest Journalism Lab

Angelina Kariakina, Co-Founder, Public Interest Journalism Lab

Volodymyr Yermolenko, Analytics Director at Internews Ukraine; Chief Editor at UkraineWorld.org

Focus groups carried out by Kharkiv Institute for Social Research

Illustrations: Myroslava Shevchenko
Report design: Anna Shakun

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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.

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1   The team recognises that recruitment challenges affected representativeness of the data collected in the NGCAs. All precautions were taken to prioritise respondents' safety. For more information, see p. 19

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 Ukraine[2] and how to engage audiences vulnerable to conspiratorial propaganda.[3]

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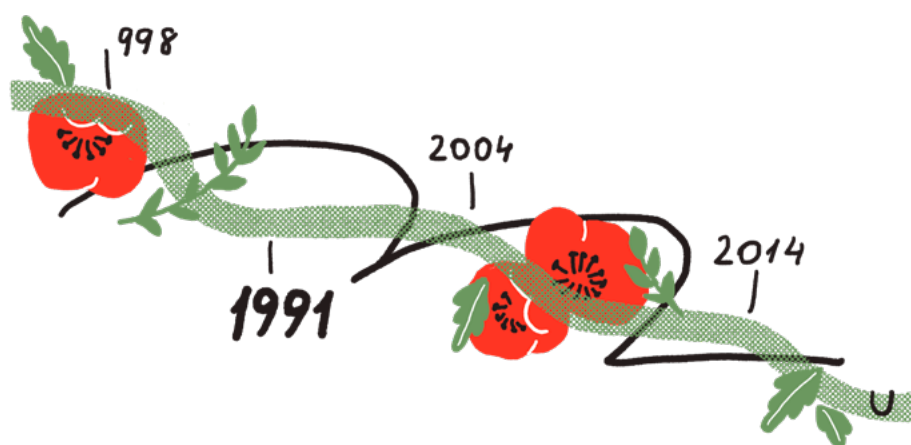
1991 and visa-free travel more recently; and second, the chance to shift decision-making away from distant Moscow and towards the national capital Kyiv, or even to the local level.

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, Vinnytisa, and Mykolaiv, simply do not appear on the mental maps of Ukrainians.

IN DEPENDENCE
INTER

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, Chornobyl, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact were all mentioned, along with the paternalistic mindset that still hinders Ukraine's development.

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.

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.

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 poptainment 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 Ukranians have a deep need to explore the turbulent years of the 1990s, as well as late Soviet traumas

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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

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.

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.

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.

Introduction

The 30th anniversary of Ukraine independence represents a unique opportunity to reboot the discourse about what Ukraine is and where the country is heading. This study reflects the aspiration to replace externally imposed nation-building narratives with a new vision for Ukraine, as seen through the eyes of Ukrainians in all their diversity of background and attitudes.

This report summarises the main findings from a research project on Ukraine's first 30 years of independence which was conducted by researchers from the **Arena Programme** in collaboration with the **Public Interest Journalism Lab (PIJL)** and the **Kharkiv Institute for Social Research (KhISR)**. This study relied on 20 online focus groups (mixed in age and split evenly by gender). They were conducted in three rounds between January and March 2021. The project was supported by USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) within the framework of the Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative II (UCBI II).

This report builds on our previous study "From Memory War to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine", in which we found that Ukrainians are ready to engage constructively with sensitive topics related to historical memory (especially Soviet legacy) when these are being narrated through a "bottom-up" rather than a "top-down" approach to story-telling, with a focus on personal experiences and a future-oriented outlook.[7] This report takes a similar approach for engaging with key themes emerging from country-wide discussions on what Ukrainian independence means and where it is heading.

The recommendations provided at the end of this report are primarily addressed to representatives from Ukrainian media and civil society, who together play a key role in shaping public discourse both in Ukraine itself and about Ukraine abroad.

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7   See From Memory War to a Common Future: Overcoming Polarisation in Ukraine, pp. 10–11 and 64–5. Available https://bit.ly/3ygFlgh

*The original quotes in footnotes illustrate how the points made in the report were derived from participants' responses. Respondents are identified by their macro-region [**West/Centre/East/South**][8], the size of their settlement (more or less than 50k inhabitants) [**big s./small s.**], whether or not they are resident in the NGCAs [**NGCAs**][9], and whether or not they belong to our younger cohorts (aged 18-24) [young]. Our hypothesis that (lack of) economic security would be correlated with certain types of responses was not confirmed, which is why respondents' self-assessment of their economic situation was not included.*

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8   Responses in footnote from the focus groups involving participants who have moved from one region to another within Ukraine are [movers].

9   Responses in footnote from the second round in the NGCAs also specify [Donetsk], [Luhansk] and [commuters] (across the contact line).

One methodological note is in order. As data from the temporarily occupied territories remains scarce, any additional insights into the worldview of people residing there are extremely valuable in their own right. That said, focus groups conducted in the NGCAs face methodological challenges that do not apply to the rest of the country, and recruitment difficulties in the NGCAs inevitably affect our samples' representativeness. In other words, participants willing to participate in these kinds of online discussions are unlikely to be representative of the broader regional population, which remains informationally isolated and whose people could be put at risk where they choose to exercise freedom of speech.[10] Readers should thus adopt a cautious approach when evaluating the findings derived from focus groups in the NGCAs.

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10   All participants from the NGCAs were given the option of turning their videos off during online discussions.
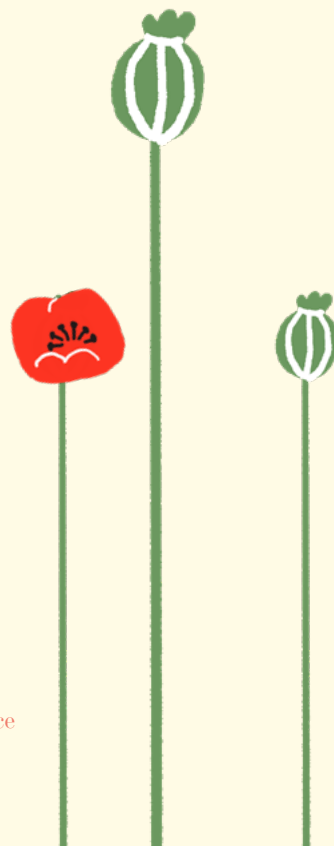
Focus groups

First round

1 **West, big settlements**
(>50k inhabitants)

2 **West, small settlements**
(<50k inhabitants)

3 **Centre, big settlements**
(>50k inhabitants)

4 **Centre, small settlements**
(<50k inhabitants)

5 **South, big settlements**
 (>50k inhabitants)

6 **South, small settlements**
(<50k inhabitants)

7 **East, big settlements**
(>50k inhabitants)

8 **East, small settlements**
(<50k inhabitants)

Second round

9 **Donetsk** (1)

10 **Donetsk** (2)

11 **Luhansk**

12 **Commuters across the contact line**

13 **All with economic security, mixed regions, mixed settlements**

14 **All without economic security, mixed regions, mixed settlements**

15 **All from big settlements, mixed regions, mixed self-assessment of economic security**

16 **All from small settlements, mixed regions, mixed self-assessment of economic security**

Third round

17 **All aged 18-24 residing in the non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs)**

18 **All aged 18-24 from Western and Central Ukraine**

19 **All aged 18-24 from Southern and Eastern Ukraine**

20 **All have moved from one region to another within Ukraine, mixed regions**

Key findings

1 Independence as a process, not an event: Ukraine is becoming a success story

Young Ukrainians, including in the temporarily occupied territories, have high expectations of their country. They want to see higher living standards, better social services, more job opportunities for young people, and further lifting of travel restrictions.

W hen asked about what they expect **from their country,** young participants across Ukraine emphasised **increasing job opportunities for young people,**[11] *raising living standards, and improving the overall economic situation* so that pensioners "do not have to count their pennies when going to the supermarket".[12]

Some respondents also stressed the importance of **improving the healthcare and education systems,**[13] **extending freedom of movement through visa liberalisation,**[14] and **ending the war**[15]. One participant criticised Ukrainians for "blaming the government for everything" without sufficiently working on themselves to improve their "intellectual" and "moral" development.[16]

In a similar way, responses from young people in the NGCAs also indicated clear expectations of state institutions and **high levels of both media literacy and political maturity.** In particular, they voiced **implicit criticisms of the poor performance of the de facto authorities**, especially in terms of **low living standards** and **poor public services.** In the words of one participant, "people earn enough just for a piece of bread" and can no longer "live normally" as under Ukrainian rule, while the region's financial situation needs to be stabilised

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11 "More opportunities for young people, [...] a lot of young people leave to go abroad [...] because we simply don't have the opportunities here, there aren't enough jobs." [young, Centre, small s.]

12 "an increase in wages, so that our pensioners do not count their pennies when they enter the supermarket." [young, Centre, big s.] || "From the country I would like the country to develop and increase its financial position, GDP, etc." [young, Centre, small s.] || "For the country to be financially stable." [young, East, big s.]

13 "What I want from the country is for what is written in the constitution to be fulfilled, that is for education and healthcare to be free of charge." [young, Centre, small s.] || "in my city, the education is very bad, I would like this to be improved." [young, East, small s.] || "Our healthcare system isn't the best compared to other countries and as for the education system [...] it's of a low level across the board." [young, East, big s.]

14 "It would be super if free travel was further developed… the visa-free regime." [young, West, small s.]

15 "I would like for the war to end." [young, South, big s.]

16 "I don't expect so much from the government as I do from Ukrainian citizens – that's development [...] in an intellectual [...] and moral sense [...] we're not used to valuing what we have got. People are always trying to blame the government for all mortal and immortal sins." [young, South, small s.]

so that "they" (i.e. de facto authorities) "will stop stealing from us"[17]. One participant mentioned "basic human rights" as a key expectation of the government, yet they saw only "displays of totalitarianism" coming from the de facto authorities' leadership[18]. Against this background, youth in the NGCAs expressed **positive attitudes towards Western living standards, public services, and educational opportunities.**[19]

"My expectation from the state is to uphold basic human rights. Where democratic values are not compromised by totalitarian displays of power."
[young, NGCAs]

Although young participants in the NGCAs insisted on the importance of voting, they were **critical of low levels of political maturity among voters.** One young respondent suggested the introduction of "political literacy tests".[20] Another lamented the legacy of the Soviet "totalitarian past", which left post-Soviet peoples with the ingrained principle that "everything has been decided", making it hard for them to believe that they can "influence the authorities".[21]

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17   All [young, NGCAs]: "At the moment, the salary is such that people earn enough just for a piece of bread. We cannot afford to travel somewhere, to have a holiday, to make a decent salary to live normally, even to live as we did before all these events in Ukraine. [...] The financial issue is now the most pressing one for us. [...] At a minimum, we need those in power to stop stealing from us." || "I want to self-realize, and the financial question plays a role, I would like us to be able to earn more." || "Improving the economy, lifting the standard of living at least by a little bit, [...] establishing a banking system that so far is totally lacking."

19   All [young, NGCAs]: "European countries attract people because the standard of life, the standard of healthcare, the standard of education [...] there is higher than here [...] There are a lot of opportunities that, unfortunately, we don't have here." || "In Europe, it's possible to do sciences, to do research [...] they are trying to attract people from around the world."

20   "Only people who have taken a test in political literacy or who have some kind of basic education should be able to vote." [young, NGCAs]

21   "The belief that everything has been decided, this principle has been rooted in the minds of people in the former Soviet countries, among whom this democratic transition has not yet taken place, basic democratic values have not yet taken root, we don't yet have the understanding that we can change who is in power, that we can somehow influence the authorities. This is the mark left by the totalitarian past." [young, NGCAs]

Although many young Ukrainians make plans to move abroad permanently (mostly for professional reasons), a growing number understand **migration as a formative experience that will enable them to make a positive contribution to their country upon their return.**

"I would go abroad for a certain period, to get some new knowledge that it's not possible to get in our country, and then I'd come back and do something for the country with this new knowledge."
[young, East, big s.]

Most young respondents aspired to **succeed in their professional lives** and **achieve financial stability** in the near future.[22] Roughly half of the respondents stressed the **need to move abroad due to a lack of suitable job opportunities in Ukraine**.[23] However, responses were mixed, and the same proportion of respondents emphasised that they **would like to return to or stay in Ukraine** so as to contribute to the

country's development.[24]

Here there are some interesting parallels with the responses derived from participants in the NGCAs. Generally speaking, **uncertainty appears to be the default state of mind among residents in the temporarily occupied territories**. While displaying a general sense of fatigue with the conflict, virtually all participants in the NGCAs are forced to focus exclusively on the present and thus **struggle to make**

22   "I've set myself the goal to learn programming of some kind, and to find a job in this sphere." [young, West, small s.] || "To finish university, that's the first thing. [...] to somehow develop, to develop and learn lots of languages." [**young, West, big s.**] || "I would study insurance in more depth, and get into German and French languages, [...] to start making a good financial cushion." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "to finish university, to get a job somewhere, but I don't have anything concrete in mind." [**young, Centre, small s.**]

23   "I see my future probably not in Ukraine, I'll go abroad, I want to work in the IT sphere." [**young, South, big s.**] || "Maybe I'll go abroad, since in Ukraine, unfortunately artists aren't valued highly and people don't really appreciate them." [**young, East, small s.**] || "I would of course like to find a job in Ukraine, [...] But I don't see any opportunities in Ukraine in my professional sphere, so that I could earn a decent salary and a stable job, so, naturally, I'll try to go abroad." [**young, East, small s.**] || I plan to develop myself in my chosen sphere [...] But, sadly not in our country, [...] as we don't have such opportunities." [**young, Centre, small s.**]

24   "I would like to travel around the world, [...] so that I could come back to my country and do something useful, not only abroad." [**young, East, big s.**] || "I also think about going abroad, to gain some knowledge, or learn about the culture of different countries and try to earn some money there, but all the savings that I make, I will try to bring this back to my native country, so that Ukraine develops and progresses." [**young, East, small s.**] || "I would go abroad for a certain period, to get some new knowledge that it's not possible to get in our country, and then I'd come back and do something for the country with this new knowledge." [**young, East, big s.**] || "I would like to learn something that is not in Ukraine and implement it in Ukraine, I would also like to help my country's development thanks to this." [**young, South, big s.**]

plans for the future.[25] One participant said that they felt like the region had been set back 100 years.[26] Another participant lamented that "the feeling of independence has disappeared" with the events of 2014.[27]

> **"Since 2014, the feeling of independence has disappeared."**
> [Donetsk 2]

> **"At the moment, it's difficult to consider what the future might look like for our region, because we don't even have a clue what things will look like tomorrow."**
> [young, NGCAs]

Young people in the NGCAs are no exception to this general trend in the temporarily occupied territories.[28] However, their responses revealed a **higher sense of agency compared to older participants.**[29] For example, two young respondents placed great importance on **"self-realisation"** while bemoaning the challenges connected with the uncertain political situation.[30] This strong sense of agency could also be detected in the various interpretations given to the meaning of "success". Participants cited "self-realisation" in one's professional field,[31] "leaving your mark",[32] continuous achievement of certain goals,[33] alongside more straightforward notions such as living in "comfortable enough conditions" [34]

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25   "In this unstable situation, it's impossible to talk about anything. We live only in the here and now." [Luhansk] || "If in 2014-2015 we thought that this would all end soon, now we know that this will never end, we live in a constant state of war." [Commuter] || "It is unrealistic to predict something, because you do not know what will happen in a month, or in two months or in a year, you cannot be prepared for anything." [Commuter] || "We don't have any certainty. I am desperate for some certainty, even if this is certainty of something bad. At least we would know what to prepare for and how to plan our next steps. Unfortunately, we don't have such certainty. So I don't think ahead to the next 10 years at all." [Donetsk 2]

26   "In the past 30 years, things started to become calmer, there was some kind of stability, but now it's as if we've been thrown back 100 years. As if we're in 1917." [Luhansk]

28   **All [young, NGCAs]:** "At the moment, it's difficult to consider what the future might look like for our region, because we don't even have a clue what things will look like tomorrow." || "Our region will remain unrecognised for a long time, which will have a very bad effect on its fate." || "It's very difficult to imagine it, things change every day and you don't know what tomorrow will bring." || "It is very difficult to make any guesses about the future of our region, given that the situation changes every day." || ""You can't make any long term plans, because everything is dependent on the situation in the government."

29   **All [young, NGCAs]:** "90% depends on me, on my desire, my abilities. 10% is the external circumstances." || "For me also it's about 80% that depends on me." || "My future depends on me for about 70%" || "Everything is dependent on you personally."

30   **All [young, NGCAs]:** "We will wait for our political situation to improve. Our young people will be able to self-realise." || "For me, it's very difficult to realise my goals. In my profession it's going to be very difficult for me to develop here."

31   "It's about self-realisation in the professional sphere." [young, NGCAs]

32   "To be successful means to leave your mark." [young, NGCAs]

33   "Success is when we work really hard towards something, and in the end, we manage it." [young, NGCAs]

34   "It's to live in comfortable enough conditions, to receive the resources that you need." [young, NGCAs]

and "family and financial well-being".[35] Although one could argue that this strong sense of agency stems directly from the lack of dependable institutions in the NGCAs, **this strong sense of agency and professional aspiration remains an untapped resource in Ukraine – a kind of human capital "in reserve".**

This becomes even more salient if we consider that **younger participants in the NGCAs openly expressed nostalgia for pre-2014 Ukraine**. Alongside their dissatisfaction with the de facto authorities, they **didn't conceal their desire to go back to the status quo ante,** i.e. being part of pre-2014 Ukraine.[36] However, it is also worth mentioning that despite their pro-Ukrainian sympathies, one participant did reluctantly consider the possibility of having to adjust if the self-proclaimed "republic" eventually gains international recognition.[37] In a similar vein, another mentioned that "our republic has a long way to go",[38] suggesting that a "republican" identity could be starting to compete with a Ukrainian national one.

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35   "Family and financial well-being." [**young, NGCAs**]

36   All [**young, NGCAs**]: "I was born and grew up in Ukraine, I am very close to this culture. My home is in Stanitsa, [...] Stanitsa is part of Ukraine, I would really like to see my relatives, my friends, I love Ukraine [...] I really want to go back." || "I love Ukraine, I would like to return, I think that Ukraine will be able to get onto a stable path, and keep moving along it."

37   "The biggest achievement would be to gain recognition in the international arena – but for me this isn't the most important thing." [young, NGCAs]

38   "Our republic has a long way to go." [young, NGCAs]

2 Resilience and tolerance as behavioural patterns constituting Ukraine's national character

People's **first impressions of independence** were mixed. Some participants recounted the sense of **euphoria** (followed by disappointment) that they felt about Ukraine's achievement of independence. Other participants shared memories of the anxiety that they felt about the economic difficulties of the early 1990s following the collapse of the USSR; paradoxically, this created fertile ground for Soviet nostalgia. What these two sets of responses have in common is a **sense of pride in being a nation** that has proved **resilient and inventive, capable of withstanding the many grave challenges involved in becoming an independent state.**

Participants' memories on how they had to adapt,[39] change jobs,[40] and reinvent themselves to **"survive" the hardships of the 1990s** was a source of pride. In particular, some participants from virtually all of the regions recalled a **sense of euphoria followed by disillusionment** as economic problems took hold during the early 1990s.[41] But for many, the first years of independence coincided with **economic deprivation**, thus representing a moment of deep **uncertainty** and **fear**.[42] One participant was

39   "I learned how to make cutlets, and to this day, [...] I made them out of grains and then I put it through a meat grinder and the stew that I exchanged. Pilots were given chocolate, and technical staff received food rations and stew. I'd give them chocolate, and they'd give me stew. So that's how I learned to prepare cutlets and new dishes. This is how we survived." [**South, small s.**]

40   "My husband, who had a diploma and a golden medal from school, went to work as a train conductor. That was the hardest thing. But we got through it all. Now we remember with a smile, but back then we had to get out of that situation in this way. Otherwise we wouldn't have survived." [West, small s.] || "I switched professions. Previously I had worked in culture, and I went to work in a food factory, because we had to survive somehow." [East, small s.]

41   "At the beginning there was some hope, of course [...] but very quickly, it came to nothing." [**East, small s.**] || "At first I felt cheated, as there were a lot of expectations, but none of them became a reality." [**East, big s.**] || "I heard [...] that there was a possibility for Ukraine to become independent. I understood that this would lead to very big difficulties." [**West, big s.**] || "We were expecting this independence – there was this euphoria, this sublime state, people believed in something bright, a future that we'd develop, [...] But then we saw what it all turned into." [West, big s.] || "I thought that Ukraine would become truly independent. But in fact, to this day it hasn't become independent in the way I had thought." [**Centre, big s.**]

42   "There was a feeling of fear – what is waiting for us, what will things look like? And then we saw…" [**South, big s.**] || "when independence was declared, at the time of independence – there was a feeling of fear and horror. I remember my work, it was a time when people walked 70 kilometres by foot, on the ice, there was no transport, there was no fuel, there was nothing and this went on for years." [**Centre, small s.**] || "The shops were empty, no one had any money, coupons were introduced [...] There was no light at the end of the tunnel, no sense of the future. It was scary." [**East, big s.**]

"At the beginning there was some hope, of course [...] but very quickly, it came to nothing."
[East, small s.]

"When independence was declared, at the time of independence – there was a feeling of fear."
[Centre, small s.]

disillusioned with the idea of independence as they felt its promise of economic prosperity had proved to be hollow: "We were told we'd feed the entire world with salo, now we are being fed salo".[43] It is worth noting that some participants admitted that they were **indifferent** about the **declaration of independence** at the time. They were essentially uninterested in major geopolitical transformations because their primary concern was stability, [44] especially if they had to provide for their

43   "The shops didn't have anything, the shelves were empty, we became miserable, poor. We were promised that if we became independent, we'd immediately become rich. [...] We were told that when we're independent we'll feed the whole world with salo. But now it's the rest of the world feeding us with salo." [**Centre, small s.**]

44   "I didn't notice this independence. I was independent in the Soviet Union too, I was working, I was young, financially independent, and to me this independence… back then there was stability." [**Centre, small s.**]

family.[45] By contrast, other participants, especially in the West and the Centre, associated independence with **freedom** and the **ability to choose.**[46]

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45   "I had a job and children, and when this referendum happened, I didn't understand anything, I was spinning, as if in a hamster wheel." [**South, small s.**]

46   "Choice, freedom, we got the right to self-realisation." [**Centre, big s.**] || "That's it, the end, freedom, thank God, a person can have some kind of choice." [**West, big s.**]

Ukrainians believe that **politicians are responsible for increasing polarisation around language and geopolitical orientation**, but on **an individual level** they tend to be tolerant towards other people's language use and interpretations of history.

M ost participants took the view that **Ukrainians are generally divided when it comes to language and geopolitical orientation.**[47] Yet, participants from all over the country insisted that language is not divisive per se. Rather, by **"inciting discord"** among the population, **politicians are to blame**

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47   "We're not united, because there are all sorts of issues with language matters, and political views." [**Centre, small s.**] || "language divides us, this is demonstrated by the war in Donbas […] People have many different opinions, and views differ." [**Centre, big s.**] || "Because some are in favour of Europe, others in favour of Russia. […] Some are in favour of Western Ukraine, speak in Ukrainian, others are in favour of Russia, I'm not for Russia, but out of habit I speak Russian. The attitude "it has nothing to do with me" has become more widespread." [**South, small s.**]

"Language doesn't divide us, and faith doesn't divide us. That's all just politicians."
[West, small s.]

for the polarising effect of language.[48] (Several "movers" were of the same opinion.[49]) Another source of division that participants flagged up was **political immaturity**: one participant claimed that a lot of people choose to believe what they are told by propagandistic TV channels. [50] However, one more optimistic participant saw Ukrainian unity as a gradual, long-term process – **a work in progress.** [51]

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48   "Our politicians incite discord between Russian-speaking and Ukrainian speaking Ukrainians, and we don't know how to find a middle ground." [**East, big s.**] || "Someone has divided us. That's our authorities. We have army officers coming here, also from different regions, and from Lviv, […] they are told something completely different about us, what we are, when they come here, they understand that we are ordinary, normal people here." [**East, big s.**] || "Language doesn't divide us, and faith doesn't divide us. That's all just politicians." [**West, small s.**] || "The divisions over language – that's simply a crime of our politicians, they do this." [**South, big s.**]

49   "Politicians, pro-Russian politicians." [**mover, Poltava**] || "The people who caused divisions were those who first said that without us you are nothing. […] We don't say that Kyiv region or Zakarpattya is this or Kharkiv is that. But without Donbas, without us – you're nothing, because it's us who do everything. This is what divides." [**mover, Kyiv**] || "Politicians, the media, […] want to divide, or somehow make money out of people." [**mover, Lviv**]

50   "We now have a lot of people who live by other people's thoughts, who live by other people's statements and stereotypes. That's why we're really divided." [**West, small s.**]

51   "We are slowly […] moving towards more unity. But I think that this process will take more than a decade for Ukraine to be truly united. And for the time being some divides exist." [**West, small s.**]

Conversely, a more sceptical respondent argued that unity is fundamentally a reactive phenomenon that arises only in "extreme situations" anyway.[52] Another from Southern Ukraine **acknowledged that unity is hard to achieve** as people in various regions speak different languages and honour different heroes.[53] However, despite this acknowledgement of ongoing challenges to Ukrainian unity, we could observe a great deal of **informal tolerance for other people's linguistic preferences and attitudes towards historical memory.**[54] For example, while commenting on Westerners' sympathy for Bandera monuments, one participant from Southern Ukraine nonchalantly said: "If someone likes Bandera and wants to put up his statue and honour him – let them!".[55] When asked which language should be used for a documentary on Ukraine's history since independence, participants from all groups, even Russian-speaking ones, agreed that

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52   "Unity is usually displayed in extreme situations." [South, small s.]

53   "There isn't any unity. If there is some unity – then that's in the regions." [South, small s.]

54   "At home, in everyday life, I have the right to speak Russian, [...] I speak Ukrainian pretty fluently, [...] and I'm not at all against learning Ukrainian. I have a lot of friends who speak Ukrainian, and we get on really well, with them speaking Ukrainian, and me speaking Russian." [Centre, small s.] || "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, not in a way that eradicates all roots making everyone angry, but at least wait around for a couple of years. The generation is changing." [West, small s.]

55   All [South, small s.]: "We're very tolerant." || "You can't say that we're united, because we're not all the same, us Ukrainians. We each have our own heroes. In the West they have Bandera – in the East they have their own heroes. Why shouldn't the authorities allow people freedom with these things? If someone likes Bandera and wants to put up his statue and honour him – let them! If someone wants to speak Ukrainian – go for it. If they want to speak Russian – then speak Russian."

"At home, in everyday life, I have the right to speak Russian, [...] I speak Ukrainian pretty fluently, [...] and I'm not at all against learning Ukrainian. I have a lot of friends who speak Ukrainian, and we get on really well, with them speaking Ukrainian, and me speaking Russian."
[Centre, small s.]

"You can't say that we're united, because we're not all the same, us Ukrainians. We each have our own heroes. In the West they have Bandera – in the East they have their own heroes. Why shouldn't the authorities allow people freedom with these things?"
[South, small s.]

"it should be in Ukrainian".[56] But this is about more than just one documentary; it's about "culture as a whole", and real change will take generations.[57] At the same time, people in the West whose first language is Ukrainian were open to the idea of watching the documentary in Russian in order to reach out to a Russian-speaking "target audience".[58] Overall, participants showed their open-mindedness by suggesting inclusion of Russian subtitles[59] or creation of a bilingual version that could reach those who don't speak Ukrainian.[60] Similar responses were detected among younger respondents as well.

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56   "I am used to speaking Russian, although I understand Ukrainian perfectly and can speak Ukrainian. If it is in Russian, I will watch it in Russian, although it should be in Ukrainian." [**East, small s.**] || "Films in Russian are closer to my heart than films in Ukrainian. But personally, I'm not used yet to watching them in Ukrainian. This is why it is necessary for the Ukrainian language to be introduced in movies as well, for our ears to get used to it and for us not to be tempted to listen to them in Russian later." [**West, big s.**]

57   "I do not mind. I understand Russian, most of the population we have speaks Russian, […] but I would like it to be in Ukrainian, because nothing depends on one programme only. It's about culture as a whole, it will take yet another generation for people to get used to speaking Ukrainian." [**East, small s.**]

58   "It's a question of what we want to convey. What is the target audience. If a person speaks Russian and somehow has a negative attitude towards the Ukrainian language, they will not be listening at all. But if we want to convey some message to them, then maybe it would make sense, now they have made a radio in Donbas and a TV channel, they speak Russian there […] so that they can engage with the person more closely, with the target audience." [**West, small s.**] || (If it's going to be in Russian, will you watch it?) "I will watch it. […] We have a lot of Russian-speaking citizens living in Ukraine, we must understand them and meet them half-way. It is not something that can be done overnight, it must be done gradually." [**West, big s.**]

59   "It's possible to add subtitles." [**West, small s.**] || "it's essential for it be in Ukrainian and Russian could be added." [**South, small s.**] || "I think it should be in Ukrainian, but also with Russian additions wherever necessary and relevant." [**Centre, small s.**]

60   "It has to be in two languages… I understand the state language, but there are people who don't understand." [**South, small s.**]

3   Ukrainians' willingness to fight for their rights as a driver of national pride and social cohesion

Ukrainians' view their r**eadiness to stand their ground** as a **national attribute** and a value that **overrides individual political orientations** (such as attitudes towards the two Maidans).

Based on the responses from some participants in the Centre and the East, pride in the Euromaidan stems from the realisation that Ukrainians can make their voices heard (an idea also expressed with reference to the Orange Revolution[61], which one participant from Eastern Ukraine referred to as "the first demonstration of such a scale for liberation"[62]). According to one participant from Southern Ukraine, the Euromaidan represented people's

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61   "Maidan in 2004, when the people rose up precisely for Yushchenko. Ukrainians expressed their opinion, were able to overcome the system. We take pride in this." [**Centre, small s.**] || "The Orange Revolution, when the entire nation rebelled." [**Centre, small s.**] || "I wholeheartedly supported the Orange Revolution […] It was then that I started to feel proud of being Ukrainian, and I feel proud to this day." [**East, big s.**] || "There was voting fraud, and the people wouldn't accept this, that's why there was a revolution." [**West, small s.**]

62   (in response to question about attitude towards Orange Revolution) "This was the first demonstration of such a scale for liberation […] from any dependence on the authorities." [**East, small s.**]

"I wholeheartedly supported the Orange Revolution [...] It was then that I started to feel proud of being Ukrainian, and I feel proud to this day."
[East, big s.]

fight for their "dignity"[63]. In essence, the Euromaidan allowed the Ukrainian people to "rise up"[64]. At the same time, one participant noted that the Euromaidan had helped consolidate Ukrainian national identity, with this event marking the moment when they "started to have a stronger feeling of being Ukrainian".[65]

"A time when I felt proud [...] was the Maidan, when the people stood up and proved themselves.
[Centre, small s.]

Here it is important to stress that this sense of pride was expressed even among people who didn't necessarily support the protests, suggesting that **fighting for one's rights is an important value for Ukrainians regardless of their political inclinations or their assessment of the immediate consequences of the protests.[66]**

Overall, responses from our younger participants were in line with those offered by older participants. In fact, **young people from all over Ukraine viewed the Euromaidan positively, seeing it as a demonstration of Ukrainians' willingness to stand their ground, even if they were disappointed with the immediate consequences (not least the human cost and the social chaos).[67]**

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63   "It was a fight for human dignity." [**South, small s.**]

64   "A time when I felt proud [...] was the Maidan, when the people stood up and proved themselves." [**Centre, small s.**] || "People were able to rise up." [**East, big s.**] || "People revolted, people from all regions went there to take part in the revolution." [**East, big s.**]

65   "After 2014, all these values have surfaced. Now we have a choice, there is a Ukrainian nation and we have our language. [...] I really started to have a stronger feeling of being Ukrainian than I had before." [**Centre, big s.**]

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66   "When Yanukovych was overthrown, I was proud, but it showed that we are not a herd of sheep, but we can demand something from the authorities. What this all led to is another conversation, but back Maidan truly... Pride took over." [**Centre, small s.**] || "The only plus of all this is that finally the people, people are trying and want to demand their rights. That's really the only plus, and the fact that it doesn't result in anything, and many innocent people are suffering, that's what I don't like." [**South, small s.**]

67   "In principle I have a positive attitude towards Maidan. But it's a shame that so many people laid down their lives, but all things considered this has still led to positive changes." [**young, West, small s.**] || "I was positive about the Maidan, because I'm glad that students took part, who wanted a visa-free regime, but how everything ended up, a lot of people joined the protests, and very sadly, a lot of people were killed, but eventually, the visa-free regime was introduced." [**young, West, big s.**] || "As for the Euromaidan, I feel neutral about it [...] People wanted to fight for their rights, [...] and in the end it turned into a bloody massacre." [**young, Centre, small s.**] || "Of course I supported the Euromaidan, because people came together for one idea, and against the system." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

"The Maidan has really solidified our nationality, our nation, our sovereignty, our state."
[young, Centre, big s.]

Similarly, when asked about how Ukrainian protests differ from those in Russia and Belarus, participants across Ukraine consistently asserted that Ukrainians "by their very nature, are freer"[68], being "stubborn"[69] defenders of freedom who are ready to "see things

through until the end."[70] This idea that Ukraine is a "freer" country compared to its neighbours was also expressed by one young participant.[71]

By contrast, **feelings of embarrassment** were associated with the idea of Ukraine being seen abroad as a sink for EU money,[72] with the brain drain of Ukrainian professionals due to the "meagre salaries" offered at home,[73] with poor levels of ecological awareness,[74] and with internal divisions around language or competing historical memories.[75]

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68   "In Russia, in Belarus, there are more dictatorial regimes, and there people are more Zombie-like and more afraid of the authorities than us. Our people, by their very nature, are freer."" [**West, small s.**] || "There, if there's some kind of protest, then it's [...] permitted [...] in Ukraine protests take place spontaneously." [**South, big s.**] || "Our protests are different from protests in Russia and Belarus. First, our people can take to the streets, we aren't afraid to do so and to say what we think. Second, whatever the government there, unlike Russia and Belarus, it starts to listen to the people in the first place." [**Centre, big s.**] || "We have a certain freedom. When you go to other countries, you feel this…" [**South, small s.**] || "There is freedom of speech in Ukraine, unlike in Russia and Belarus." [**Centre, big s.**]

69   ""What Ukrainians have achieved in their time, neither Belarusians nor Russians could have done. We are stubborn, we will achieve our goal, we are not intimidated by anything." [**West, small s.**]

70   "We take things by the throat and don't let go. Belarusians, you see, they protest for 6 months and think that Lukashenko will himself give up power [...] this needs to happen by force. Same for Russians [...] they get down on their knees and protest. But not us. We see things through until the end." [**West, small s.**] || We are open, we are ready for radical action. In Russia this wouldn't happen." [**East, big s.**]

71   "The Maidan has really solidified our nationality, our nation, our sovereignty, our state, even if you look at the protests in Belarus and Russia – the country I'd like to live in is Ukraine. Belarus and Russia are more despotic." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

72   "A German says to me: 'Ah, so you're from Ukraine', I say: 'Yes'. 'Ooh, what a lot of EU money you've eaten up.' And I think: 'that's not me, that's not us' but I feel ashamed of our state." [**West, small s.**]

73   "I'm ashamed of the meagre salaries of our doctors and our teachers. They are important specialists, there are a lot of them, it's just a shame that many of them go abroad, and they are unappreciated here." [**Centre, big s.**]

74   "It's a shame when you get out of the car on the roadside, in the campsites, and you see what's going on there." [**South, small s.**]

75   "I'm quite ashamed of the fact that there's disagreement between East and West for no apparent reason. [...] This is tension due to language issues." [**East, big s.**] || "I am ashamed when monuments are destroyed, because history, whatever it is, must be protected." [**South, big s.**]

Ukrainians tend to feel united around experiences of calamity and disappointment, although **Euro 2012** and, to some extent, the **Euromaidan** mark positive **moments of unity** (especially for younger generations).

An interesting but somewhat troubling finding is that Ukrainians tend to **feel united around experiences of "hardship".** [76] One participant recalled how they felt Ukrainian when locals treated them as "brothers in misfortune" during a school trip to Lithuania in 1990. [77]

This theme of Ukrainians being **united in times of trouble** emerged among **young people as well.** Examples included **Chornobyl** and the **two Maidans.** [78] As one participant from Western Ukraine pointed out, however, this is not something peculiar to the Ukrainian people: calamity strengthens a nation like "fire hardens steel". [79]

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76   "The thing that unites us, as always, […] is hardship." [**South, big s.**] || "when things get tough, we stick together, regardless of any political views or which part of Ukraine we are from." [**Centre, big s.**] || "When we face a real challenge, a real threat, then our country is united." [**West, small s.**]

77   "At the end of the 90s, I was still in school […] we went on a school trip […] to a small Lithuanian town, and I felt that I was Ukrainian, because when people found out that we were Ukrainian, they considered us 'brothers of misfortune'." [**East, big s.**]

78   "When the Maidan happened, when Chornobyl happened, I wished that not only hardships but also joy would unite us." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

79   "In general, when something bad happens, just as fire hardens steel, difficulties toughen up our nation, […] this is the case for other countries too that they become stronger due to hard situations. For example, during the Orange Revolution, […] our anthem was – together we are many, we shall not be overcome, and since then I think our country has become united." [**young, West, small s.**]

Ukraine at 30: From independence to interdependence

During the Revolution of Dignity, […] We had a sense of unity – one thought, one goal, the desire to achieve a goal."
[Centre, small s.]

Despite this pessimistic view, some participants from Central Ukraine saw the **Orange Revolution** as a **unifying moment.** [80] In Western and Central Ukraine, the **Euromaidan** was often mentioned for its unifying effects on Ukrainian society: "now we feel like a nation", [81] having "one thought, one goal". [82] One participant from Central Ukraine emphasised that the Euromaidan had meant that the **"two Ukraines" "disappeared"** to at last become united. [83] However, responses in Eastern Ukraine were mixed: participants from big

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80   "The Orange Revolution, when all the people rose up. Then Yanukovych. That is, there are some events that unite the country, the West and East come together to solve some state problems." [**Centre, small s.**] || "The first Maidan, when you know, there was genuine hope that something would change in our country." [**Centre, big s.**]

81   "Civil society has now been formed, now we feel like a nation." [**West, big c.**]

82   "During the Revolution of Dignity, there was a real belief that we were united, and all these changes would be for the better. We had a sense of unity – one thought, one goal, the desire to achieve a goal." [**Centre, small s.**]

83   "People became united. Before that there was left-bank and right-bank Ukraine, and after – this disappeared. Now we have one, united Ukraine." [**Centre, small s.**]

31

settlements tended to support the two Maidans,[84] whereas participants in small settlements (with one exception[85]) openly opposed the Euromaidan.[86] In Southern Ukraine responses were also mixed: a majority of respondents confirmed that in their experience the event had brought Ukrainians together[87] – people "joined the protests from different cities to show that we are Ukraine, together we are one big family".[88] That said, some participants did express a more ambiguous position,[89] or even outright scepticism,[90] about the idea of Euromaidan as a unifying moment.

It is important to stress that these **regional differences were virtually absent among younger cohorts.** On the contrary, younger participants from Eastern and Southern Ukraine insisted that as a result of the **Euromaidan** "people became more unified".[91] The event **contributed to societal cohesion** [splochennost] despite the significant human cost[92] and can therefore be viewed as a unifying moment: it helped Ukrainians learn how to support each other[93] while also "disconnecting from Russia".[94]

There seems to be a **broad consensus** around **Euro 2012** as a **unifying moment** [95]

84 **All [East, big s.]:** "I supported the Orange Revolution […] It was then that I started to feel proud to be Ukrainian, and I continue to feel proud to this day." || "I am proud of the Maidan."

85 "I supported the Orange Revolution ideologically, in my thoughts. But with the 2012-14 Maidan, I supported not only in thoughts, but also in action – and I joined the protests." [**East, small s.**]

86 **All [East, small s.]** "I didn't support neither the Orange Revolution nor the Euromaidan". || "I look at the consequences – only negative ones, nothing good came from this." || "Maidan – it was the beginning of all that is happening in the country. […] upheaval, instability." || "With this level of bitterness, I was afraid that it would either cause Ukraine to be split in half or a civil war."

87 **All [South, big s.]:** "People became united when the Maidan started in 2014." || "Above all, I would say that all the Maidans that we've had, they have strongly united people." || "Only the Maidans." ||

88 "people took to the streets, they came together and joined the protests from different cities, to show that we are Ukraine, we are one big family together." [**South, small s.**]

89 **All [South, small s.]:** "The country became united in order to… in the hope that something would change for the better." || "That revolution of ours – it's 50 / 50." || "We became conscious of the fact that no matter what, we're all Ukrainians and we must be a united nation, and this is good, but then came political games and maneuvers by different clans." || "I have negative emotions towards the politicians that led … Not towards people who started the protests, who fought for their rights, or those who died." || "I have positive emotions only about the fact that people came together and joined the protests, that they were unified […] But if you look at the whole picture, of course it's negative. Because of the deaths."

90 "I've never felt a strong sense of unity, unfortunately. There's always some point of contention… There's always hope for the future, for better relations and understanding, let's hope for that." [**South, big s.**]

91 "The country has become more unified and began somehow to defend it's point of view, and that's of course a plus." [**young, East, small s.**]

92 "The negative part of this Maidan was the fact that people were killed. But our country has become more united." [**young, South, big s.**] || "Of course it's bad that people suffered, but the good part that I would like to highlight is that Ukrainians stopped staying silent, and started to defend what is theirs […] The country has become more unified […] and that's of course a plus." [**young, East, small s.**]

93 "People started to support each other in various situations." [**young, South, small s.**]

94 "Overall, I'd say it has been a good thing, because we disconnected ourselves from Russia." [**young, South, big s.**]

95 "I remember the huge crowds, and everyone singing, Ukraine, Ukraine, everyone with flags, dressed up. A kind of unity." [**East, big s.**] || "thanks to Euro-2012, everyone was rooting for Ukraine, no matter what their political views." [**East, big s.**] || (in what way have you felt united) "At least for the reason that it's happening in your country. No matter whether you're from Lviv or Donetsk, it's your country, it's your country that the world sees." [**West, small s.**] || "It was unifying, because even people who don't care about football were proud and glad that such an event took place in Ukraine." [**South, small s.**]

that contributed positively to Ukraine's global image. The outbreak of the **war** in Donbas was also mentioned as a moment that brought Ukrainians together.[96] Participants in Southern and Western Ukraine made particular mention of the **"human chain" organised by RUKH** in January **1990. Eurovision**[97] was also often mentioned. Participants in Southern Ukraine pointed to the **2019 presidential election** as a moment of unity.

Younger participants mainly viewed **Euro 2012**, **the Olympic games,** and **Ruslana's victory at Eurovision** as drivers of unity among Ukrainians.[98]

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96   "Over these 29 years, there's only one time that I've seen our people totally unified – and that's when the active fighting started in Donbas."   [**Centre, big s.**]

97   "When Ruslana won at Eurovision. There was huge excitement, everyone was so happy, it united all of us." [**South, small s.**]

98   "When we hosted Euro 2012, [...], I remember I was a child, [...] everyone ran home with smiles on their faces to watch the football. And everyone was rooting for our team, and there was unity, support." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "there was also Eurovision, even Olympiads, each Ukrainian, I think, was not indifferent to those sportspeople, singers, supporting them how they could, even on social media, [...] then you feel Ukrainian." [**young, West, big s.**]

> **"When we hosted Euro 2012, [...], I remember I was a child, [...] everyone ran home with smiles on their faces to watch the football. And everyone was rooting for our team, and there was unity, support."**
> [young, Centre, big s.]

4 Popular culture as social glue

Ukrainians tend to speak reluctantly about politics, but **pop culture discussions help to bring people together despite regional divisions and political disagreements.** Kuzma, from the band Skryabin, emerged as a cultural figure inspiring trust among the vast majority of respondents across regions.

Older participants from all groups recalled enjoying watching **similar TV shows and films** *(e.g. Masky show, Dovhonosyky, KVN, 95 Kvartal, Eurovision, Terytoriya A, Karaoke on Maidan, Roksolana)* and **pop stars** *(e.g. Kuzma, Ruslana; Svyatoslav Vakarchuk; Oleksandr Pononarev; Irina Bilyk).*

Though the 1990s are generally perceived as traumatic, people were **more cheerful when talking about fashion trends** of the period (e.g. denim clothes, leather jackets, tracksuits, bright makeup) and their **first experiences of foods** that had been unavailable during Soviet times.

Unlike older participants, **young Ukrainians get most of their news and entertainment via the internet and social media (rather than TV)**. The fact that young people (especially in the NGCAs) consume Russian lifestyle channels (which essentially project a very "Western" lifestyle) points to a common search for a sense of normality and progressive worldviews, both of which are in short supply within the temporarily occupied territories. However, it is highly problematic that people access primarily through Russian rather than Ukrainian media information on what "Western" lifestyle means and looks like.

5 International recognition as a source of national pride

Ukrainians **feel pride** when they are **recognised abroad as coming from Ukraine, an independent nation** with its own culture and language. They are glad to be **distinguished from Russians** in their **personal experiences travelling abroad** and in **notable international events** like Euro 2012, the Olympics, Eurovision and, for some, even the Euromaidan.

Regardless of regional and age differences, all of our focus groups expressed a sense of pride in connection with **Ukrainian sporting achievements in international competitions**[99] (such as Vitaliy Klychko becoming a boxing

world champion or national athletes winning medals at the Olympics). The sense of pride associated with **Euro 2012** merits particular attention.[100] The event was praised for stimulating positive **infrastructural and economic development** on a massive scale.[101] Most importantly, **other countries could finally recognise and "learn that Ukraine exists" as a distinct nation** and a "civilised state".[102] In the words of one participant, Europe "trusted" Ukraine to organise a large-scale event, and

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99   "Ukrainians are the strongest people in the world. We take pride in the fact that we are the strongest nation." [**West, big s.**] || "There is pride when a Ukrainian wins some medal." [**West, small s.**] || "Boxing, Klitschko, such achievements are very pleasant for people, it's nice to feel that you are Ukrainian and for the country this is only a plus for its image." [**South, big s.**] || "For our boxers and footballers, there's great pride." [**South, big s.**] || "When I remember how we watched Olympiads, and our guys won, [...] I'm actually proud of my country." [**South, small s.**] || "I'm proud of the athletes who, in independent Ukraine, despite the fact that there's not enough training, we lack equipment, in all sports, even so they somehow manage to win first place in the world." [**Centre, small s.**] || "When our flag is raised, when the national anthem starts playing somewhere, especially at international competitions, it's like goosebumps, there's a feeling that it's yours." [**East, big s.**] || "when our athletes perform and take good places [...] I am always proud, and it's great when they compete with other prominent athletes from around the world." [Centre, big s.] || "I'm proud of being Ukrainian when our guys win at the Olympiads." [**Centre, small s.**]

100   "We can only be proud of culture and sports. When the Shakhtar team won the latest UEFA Cup, this was a big event for Ukraine. [...] Participating in the FIFA World Cup for the first time, where we finished fourth [...] – this is pride." [**South, small s.**]

101   **All** [**Centre, big s.**]: "It gave us a serious economic boost." || "I remember all the works in the city, the works on the road, because they were trying to transform Ukraine. The city where Euro 2012 was taking place – they tried to show that things aren't so bad."

102   "Not everyone even knows that Ukraine exists. But thanks to the Euro 2012, I think that our country was viewed more positively, and more recognised by the international community. They learned that Ukraine exists. [...] it's good for the world to know about us, to know that we're a civilised state." [**Centre, big s.**]

"Not everyone even knows that Ukraine exists. But thanks to the Euros, I think that our country was viewed more positively, and more recognised by the international community. They learned that Ukraine exists. [...] it's good for the world to know about us, to know that we're a civilised state."
[Centre, big s.]

the fact that Ukraine "showed its level"[103] indicated that the country "was moving in the right direction".[104] Foreigners could see for themselves that Ukraine was a nice country to visit rather than being a place where people "get killed in the streets".[105] Euro 2012 gave one participant from Western Ukraine a feeling of "freedom in the air", with "mutual respect" on show among people from many different countries.[106] In short, "the world found out about Ukraine"[107] and the country as a whole managed to "increase its "international prestige".[108]

It is important to note that **the same feelings about Euro 2012** were **observed among participants from the NGCAs** as well. The event was remembered as a "Ukrainian boom", a transformative moment which served to stimulate **infrastructural and economic**

"There was pride that this took place in our city, roads were built and trolleybuses appeared. There was simply pride in our city, that we merited such an event taking place here."
[Donetsk 1]

development.[109] Participants from the NGCAs looked back fondly on the arrival of large numbers of friendly foreigners who set up camp in Donetsk. This in turn gave local residents a sense that the world is actually open and friendly, which is a stark contrast from today's feelings of abandonment. Most importantly, Euro 2012 allowed Ukrainians to demonstrate that they are "worthy enough" of hosting such an important event.[110] **Ukraine was "put "on the map"[111]** and proved itself to

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103　"Europe trusted Ukraine to hold an event of such a scale. […] Ukraine showed its worth." [**South, small s.**]

104　"When we hosted Euro 2012, then everything felt like Europe, not in words, but in action. We had participants from all over Europe, built stadiums. […] It was positive. There was pride, there was a feeling that we were moving towards something better. There was definitely no feeling that we were heading for war. There was a sense of a bright future." [**Centre, big s.**]

105　"I'm a big football fan and I remember with such joy how people came to us from all over the world. They were scared that you could get killed in the streets in our country […] Many came, and felt safe and at ease here." [**East, big s.**]

106　"Something was in the air, a kind of freedom, probably because people were happy, many tourists came, everyone respected and felt positively towards each other." [**West, big s.**]

107　"The world found out about Ukraine." [**West, small s.**] || "The Euro football championships […] people took notice of our country." [**South, small s.**]

108　"The international prestige of our country grew." [**South, small s.**]

109　""We travelled 2000 km by train, and from the train window, we saw how everything was being built, everything was being painted, the stations were revamped, tiled were laid, all of this really, like a Ukrainian BOOM […] everything was being transformed. […] In 2012 it was just amazing, a general energising feeling, with the government preparing for something big." [**Donetsk 2**] || "It was a real celebration, and in preparation for this celebration, Donetsk was significantly transformed." [**Donetsk 2**] || "There was pride that this took place in our city, roads were built and trolleybuses appeared. There was simply pride in our city, that we merited such an event taking place here." [**Donetsk 1**]

110　"There was real pride, that we got right onto this list, that we were worthy enough." [**Donetsk 1**] || "There was pride that this took place in Ukraine." [**Commuter**]

111　"It wasn't only a sports achievement, but also to some extent a political achievement. That this country is on the map." [**Luhansk**]

be "on an equal footing" with other countries.[112] It is in this sense that Euro 2012 became a **source of national pride:** it was perceived as a political achievement and thus treated as a **proxy for the country's success**.[113]

Roughly half of the participants from the NGCAs also expressed sentiments of pride[114] about **Eurovision** (as did those in the rest of the country[115]). The other half, however, were either uninterested or believed that the competition had become obsolete[116] or excessively politicised.[117]

Only in the West was this sense of recognition linked to the obtainment of **Tomos** (the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine[118]). For one participant from the South, this sense of pride was particularly strong **in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union**, when other countries started

distinguishing Ukraine from other former Soviet countries.[119]

A similar sentiment was also expressed in connection to the **Euromaidan**: at long last **"people around the world know about" Ukraine** being a separate state from Russia.[120]

Participants occasionally connected this sense of pride to moments when they were recognised as Ukrainians in positive terms and distinguished from Russians while travelling

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112   All [Donetsk 2]: "It was a tremendous event [...] it really showed that [...] we are part of the large, global world. [...] we are part of the world on an equal footing, they come to us and they are the same as us." || "As if we are all joining together. People come to our country, we communicate, they get to know us."

113   "I felt proud of our city, I felt proud of our people, that's it. I felt proud of our country." [Donetsk 2] || "it showed that the country had reached a certain level." [Luhansk] || "people were proud of their country, because such an event took place, there was pride in the country, that it was a success, that finally something like this was achieved." [Luhansk]

114   All [Donetsk 2]: "There was pride in the country, in Ukraine." || "Pride in our people, that we have such talented people."

115   "I was so happy when we hosted the UEFA Championship in 2012 and Eurovision. I was so proud that we are Ukrainians, that all this was happening here." [West, big s.] || "Ruslana was very popular then, since she also won Eurovision, so the pride was crazy for our singer." [Centre, big s.]

116   "It outlived itself as a music festival long ago." [Luhansk]

117   "These days it's purely political." [Luhansk]

118   "It has been recognised that we also have the right to have our own independent church." [West, big s.]

119   "We were all Russians before. We were one country – the Soviet Union. And then later, sometimes I've felt proud of Klitschkos, that they are from Ukraine. When Ukrainian athletes win something, I don't know, there's some pride that people hear about our country." [**South, small s.**]

120   "Up until the events in 2014, people didn't even know that Ukraine existed. You would tell someone you're from Ukraine and they'd reply: oh, you're from Russia. People thought Ukraine and Russia were the same place. Now we are properly separate states, and people around the world know about our country." [East, small s.]

"Up until the events in 2014, people didn't even know that Ukraine existed. You would tell someone you're from Ukraine and they'd reply: oh, you're from Russia. People thought Ukraine and Russia were the same place. Now we are properly separate states, and people around the world know about our country."
[East, small s.]

abroad.[121] The same feeling was registered among **younger participants,** where it was mentioned that when abroad, "we are trying to show our best side".[122] (The response from one participant in the "movers from one city to another" group also supported this finding.[123])

"When abroad, people would call everyone Russians, thinking of the Soviet Union as all being Russian. But now, people start to distinguish between Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians."
[West, small s.]

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121   "When abroad, people would call everyone Russians, thinking of the Soviet Union as all being Russian. But now, people start to distinguish between Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians." [West, small s.] || "I come up with my hand luggage, hand over my passport, he takes my passport and says: Wow, Ukraine! Glory to Ukraine! It took my breath away." [East, small s.]

122   I feel proud of being Ukrainian when I go abroad, and for example, I speak with Americans, Germans, and [...] they say 'we follow your news, we worry about you', [...] when [...] they know that Ukraine is that country where people are united. [...] I recently went to the Dominican Republic, where people had a more negative impression of Russians than Ukrainians. That is, it also means that [...] we are trying to show our best side. At such moments, I feel proud to be Ukrainian." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "Many Russians are quite aggressive people, Ukrainians are more loyal. If you say that you're from Ukraine, people won't say anything bad to you at all." [**young, East, small s.**]

123   "I was in Korea. A guy approached me in the subway, I asked for directions, and he said: Oh, Ukraine, Kyiv, I know your Antonov plant. [...] Antonov planes are very good [...] I was bursting with pride. An ordinary Korean knows about our Antonov plant, and that we make such good planes." [**mover, Kyiv**]

6 Conflicted belonging and a yearning for normality in the NGCAs

For most participants in the NGCAs, a sense of exhaustion about the conflict goes hand in hand with general **feelings of abandonment.** Their desire to return to some form of **normality**, in terms of restoring peace and clarifying their political status, means that **stability** is their biggest priority.

When asked about the **hardest period** that they had faced over the last 30 years, the **outbreak of war** in 2014 was consistently mentioned: people from the NGCAs had to "drop everything".[124] This is **a marked difference from focus groups involving participants from government-controlled**

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124   All [Commuter]: "2014 was the most difficult, because I had to leave everything, leave my home, it was very hard." || "We left our homes, all our property, and there was no question about how we'd make money or finding a job somewhere, we simply had to flee." || "We left in the summer for the sea, when it all began, and in the winter we were sent to live in another city, and it was very cold, and we had summer clothes in our bags [...] Just the things that we'd taken with us. [...] They kicked us out of the house, without even asking."

areas, whose worst hardships came mostly in the early 1990s.

For people in the NGCAs, the economic struggles of the early 1990s pale in comparison with the challenges they have faced and continue to face as a result of the war.[125]

Participants from the NGCAs fundamentally **long for a return** to some form of **normality and stability,**[126] in terms both of **restoring the everyday peace of the pre-2014 period**[127]

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125   "Yes, it was hard, but when I look at everything that's going on – it was nothing." [**Donetsk 1**] || "In 2008, I thought that the 90s were a real mess. But now I understand that it wasn't a mess at all, it was great, it was just life, and now is the real mess." [**Commuter**] || "If in the 90s there was hope that things would get better, then now, I don't know, it's very hard to hope for anything, very hard." [**Donetsk 2**]

126   "I would like peace, and some kind of stability." [**Commuter**]

127   (A) "I would like to live like we did before." – (B) "7 years ago." – (C) "Yes." [**Donetsk 2**]

"I would like peace, and some kind of stability."
[Commuter]

"I would like our territory to be defined, so that we would have some kind of status."
[Donetsk 2]

"We're not Ukraine or Russia, no one speaks for us."
[Donetsk 1]

and of acquiring a defined political status.[128] People's yearning for a return to normality generates **frustration:** people from the NGCAs are treated as "personae non gratae" and cannot be fully-fledged citizens of anywhere.[129] But this also provokes **indifference:** people "don't care" anymore and just want to finally "belong somewhere".[130] Because of this protracted **limbo**[131] where they feel like "hostages",[132] NGCA residents s**truggle to feel a sense of belonging** and instead **feel abandoned by everyone**.[133] The realisation that "no one needs us" was also mentioned by two young respondents in the NGCAs as they recalled stays in Russia and Crimea when their families were considering relocating due to the

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128   "I would like our territory to be defined, so that we would have some kind of status." [**Donetsk 2**]

129   "We're all striving towards something, we're all building something, but we're everywhere personae non gratae. You have a Ukrainian passport, but you're not a citizen here or there. Not in Europe, not in America, not in Russia, not in Ukraine, even though you're supposed to have citizenship." [**Commuter**]

130   "Of course [I wish] we were part of Ukraine, but in the current situation, look, with the way they treat us, I'll be honest with you – I don't care anymore which country I'm part of: Ukraine or Russia, it doesn't matter. I just want to belong somewhere." [**Donetsk 2**]

131   "We are in a state of limbo." [**Donetsk 2**]

132   "We are hostages, and that's it." [Donetsk 2]

133   "We're not Ukraine or Russia, no one speaks for us." [**Donetsk 1**] || "Nobody cares about us." [**Donetsk 2**] || "Everything has been destroyed, and so no one needs Donbas." [**Donetsk 1**]

outbreak of the conflict. [134]

Feelings of abandonment are exacerbated by a **perceived lack of agency:** whether about Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991 or the secessionist efforts of 2014, NGCA participants feel like **they did not have a say** in what took place – as one respondent put it, "no one asked us about any of this".[135] As a result, **"independence"** – whether in 1991 or 2014 – tends to be **associated with instability and failure**: locals want to be "left alone", free of harassment and no longer "kept on a leash" by external actors of any stripe.[136]

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134   **All [young, NGCAs]:** "There was a period when during the hostilities I had to live in Russia for a year. [...] we arrived, and it felt like no one needed us there. We decided to return." || "We thought about it and in 2015 we even decided to leave. We went to Crimea, stayed there for three months, we felt that no one needed us there, and came back here straightaway."

135   "No one asked us about any of this." [**Luhansk**] || "They destroyed everything but didn't create anything new. Then we were forced to become part of Ukraine, they attached us to Ukraine, and they didn't ask us about any of this then. Our passports were changed in 1992 and that was it." [**Luhansk**] || "They kicked us out of the house, without even asking." [Commuter] || "2014. Because there was no right to choose." [**Commuter**]

136   **All [Donetsk 2]:** "We want to live in our own country. [...] Without being in debt to anyone, without any obligations, without being bothered by anyone. But you see, it doesn't work that way. They keep us on a leash from all sides." || "Everyone wants to snatch something from us. We're like scapegoats here."

Some participants openly acknowledged a sense of existential uncertainty [неопреде-ленность] "about who we are and what we are",[137] a sense of being "neither Ukraine nor Russia".[138] These kinds of identity ambiguities emerged from responses to **questions on sports interests:** participants used the pronouns "we" and "our" inconsistently. Although there seemed to be a **larger portion of participants** who **referred to Ukraine**,[139]

"We're still Ukraine."
[Donetsk 2]

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137   "There's uncertainty about who we are and what we are.".." [**Commuter**]

138   "We're not Ukraine or Russia." [**Donetsk 1**]

139   "We're still Ukraine." [**Donetsk 2**] || "For the national team of Ukraine." [**Donetsk 2**] || "To this day, I still support the Ukrainian team." [**Luhansk**]

sometimes these pronouns were also associated with Donbas,[140] Russia,[141] or both Russia and Ukraine (echoing the Soviet "one people" narrative).[142] One respondent from Donetsk admitted that since war had forced the local club Shaktar to leave the city for Kyiv, he no longer followed their games. For them, this was an act of disloyalty: Shakhtar is "not ours anymore" – "they used to be 'donetskie', now they are 'kyivskie'".[143] It seems that in the eyes of people who feel "left behind",[144] abandoning Donbas geographically means renouncing one's local identity. However, for another participant the opposite was true: location would not affect the core "Donetsk" identity of the team, which remains a source of pride for locals – they remain "our team".[145] Yet, one "commuter" who regularly crosses the contact line emphasised how over time this sense of pride started being overshadowed by feelings of fear or, even embarrassment. During major sports events, people used to be "proud as a nation", but ongoing uncertainty about the Donbas' status now means that people have to think twice before mentioning

"Russia and Ukraine – they're all our guys."
[Donetsk 1]

that they are from Luhansk, which was not the case before.[146]

Compared to football, boxing references were weaker predictors of people's allegiances. However, two important exceptions stand out. One participant supported boxers Klitschko and Usyk because "these are our guys, our Ukrainians".[147] Even without being a big boxing fan, another participant stressed that Klitschko's victories used to evoke pride – "Hooray! Our guys won!"[148]

Here we are faced with a **paradox:** on the one hand, participants in the NGCAs are **depoliticised** and overwhelmingly display a **total distrust of all sides.**[149] On the other hand, they **long to be recognised and to belong to**

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140 "If someone asks which team I support, of course I still support the Shakhtar team." [**Donetsk 1**] || "Across the whole of Luhansk, it's still written everywhere 'Zorya - champions!' [..] despite everything they're our guys." [**Commuter**]

141 "If Ukraine loses – that's a pity. I support our guys, Russia, if Russia loses – that's a pity." [Donetsk 1]

142 "Russia and Ukraine – they're all our guys." [**Donetsk 1**] || "during the Soviet Union, people had a sense of pride internationally, a sense that they matter somehow in the world. Now, I don't know, probably only Russia can claim to have a standing internationally, but before we could, all together." [**Luhansk**]

143 (having stopped supported Shakthar…) "[…] because […] they left. […] they used to be 'donetskie', now they are 'kyivskie' […] When they were in Donetsk, they were our guys, but now that they've left, they're not ours anymore." [**Commuter**]

144 "In Donetsk we no longer have anything left where we can say 'this is ours'." [**Commuter**]

145 "There is pride in the Shakhtar team. It's still our team, it's not important where they're based. It's our Donetsk team." [**Donetsk 2**]

146 "They were still ours. Not Donbas, not Kyiv, just ours. Because we lived in this country, and I wasn't embarrassed to say that I was from Ukraine when I went somewhere. But now I think twice before I say that I'm from Luhansk, or I keep quiet." [**Commuter**]

147 "these are our guys. […] Our Ukrainians." [**Donetsk 2**]

148 "Even those who don't follow it, even those who don't like those particular boxers, or who never watch boxing, even still they shout 'Hooray! Our guys won!'" [**Commuter**]

149 "There's no trust towards anyone." [**Luhansk**] || "we don't trust anyone." [**Luhansk**] || "There's no one, they're all clowns." [**Donetsk 2**] || (There are many sources of information, are there any that inspire confidence?) "There are no such sources, because each pushes its own message." [**Commuter**]

a wider community (however interpreted). In line with Benedict Anderson's account of nations as socially constructed "imagined communities" geared towards giving people a sense of belonging,[150] one could argue that there is no real "imagined community" for people in the NGCAs. At the same time, contrary to our expectations, a **significant number of people continue to identify with Ukraine**, as revealed by sports discussions. In this respect, we should remain sceptical of overly pessimistic depictions of identity conflicts in Ukraine: the fact that people feel lost does not mean that they are lost for good. To put it differently, **feelings of resignation should not immediately be interpreted as indicators of irreversible separatist aspirations.** It seems warranted to conclude that ending the war takes priority in people's minds over obtaining regional autonomy or fully-fledged independence.

The realities of the region's economic isolation prompted **scepticism among NGCA residents about the myth that "Donbas feeds Ukraine".** More generally, their responses exhibited a weak sense of regional pride associated with the image of local people as hardworking and resilient.

With just a few exceptions,[151] the sense of "Donbas pride" in being hardworking and

self-sacrificing seems to be declining among NGCA residents. This was clear from the way that participants **expressed disillusionment with the myth that "Donbas feeds Ukraine".** Although the belief that Ukraine is heavily dependent on Donbas for certain goods persists,[152] the region's isolation has led local people to a doubly bitter realisation: they cannot sell their products anymore[153] due to weak demand, and there are other industries in the country that also contribute significantly to the national budget.[154] Donbas is perceived as an "important" region but without being "unique".[155]

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150   Benedict Anderson, Voobrazhayemyye soobshchestva. Razmyshleniya ob istokakh i rasprostranenii natsionalizma [Imagined communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism]. Moskva: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016[1991]. Available at: https://bit.ly/3xghNH3

151   "Miners – these are people who are capable of heroic deeds." [Commuter] || "Our people are great. We'll battle through anywhere." [Donetsk 2] || "Donetsk is the best city on earth. This is what we were proud of, you see, our hardworking people." [Donetsk 2]

152   "Ukraine cannot manage without coal from DNR." [Donetsk 1] || "Ukraine is no good without Donbas." [Donetsk 2] || "Donbas was feeding not just one region in Ukraine, of that I'm sure." [Donetsk 1]

153   All [Donetsk 1]: "We have mines. Metallurgy [...] works at 30 percent capacity. [...] Our farms work, we have our own eggs, milk, chickens, sausages. Tomatoes are also all our own, it's all coming from the DNR. That's another thing that we can't sell anywhere." || "Before we were able to sell things, but now we can't."

154   "Still, there are other industries in Ukraine that replenished the budget, it's not the case that one region feeds the whole of Ukraine." [Donetsk 1]

155   "Donbas, of course, is an industrial centre [...] but we focused more on coal and metallurgy. And other types of complex mechanical engineering, shipbuilding, aircraft, electronics – we don't have this in Donbas. Therefore, yes, of course, Donetsk, Donbas, it is important and needed, but I wouldn't say that it is so unique." [Donetsk 2]

"Of course, Donetsk, Donbas, it is important and needed, but I wouldn't say that it is so unique." [Donetsk 2]

As a result of the war in Donbas, Ukrainians across the country **realised that peace and independence cannot be taken for granted,** but they saw residents in the temporarily occupied territories as passive victims of Russian propaganda.

Participants across Ukraine are inclined to believe that **people in the temporarily occupied territories** are victims of Russian propaganda who easily internalise the narratives spread by Russian state channels.[156] Some participants also observed that people in the NGCAs probably **blame Ukrainians** in the rest of the country **for their tragedy**[157] and feel **"hated" by everyone** even if they don't participate in separatist activities.[158] Others, however, emphasised the need to acknowledge that **different people will have different attitudes.**[159]

When asked what Ukraine has lost as a result of the war, participants across the country pointed to a **general sense that peace and stability had been lost.**[160] This gave them a new appreciation of peace and independence as inherently valuable conditions that need to be defended rather than taken for granted.[161] Participants across regions consistently evoked a sense of pride in connection with the revival of the Ukrainian army and the presence of Ukrainian soldiers fighting in Donbas.[162]

"I began to realise that independence is something that needs to be protected, and it's something that we need to fight for."
[Centre, big s.]

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156   "They perceive us according to what Russian television tells them. We have relatives there, and whatever Russian television says – this is what they think of us. […] That we are cruel, that we don't allow people to speak Russian, that you would be beaten up for this." [**Centre, big s.**] || "People have a negative attitude towards us because Russian propaganda is against us." [**East, big s.**] || "It seems to me that people are mostly guided by what they see on TV." [**West, small s.**] || "People think negatively about others, based on what they hear on information sources, radio, television." [**Centre, small s.**]

157   "Many consider us to blame for what is happening in the east, that all this is because of us, that all these Maidans took place in Kyiv, and then the war broke out." [**Centre, big s.**]

158   "I have a lot of friends in Luhansk, Donetsk [...] they just think that we hate them [...] they don't understand what they have to do with it, they didn't go to the referendum, they didn't take up arms, they were just living their lives and didn't bother anyone, and yet they are often hated." [**East, big s.**]

159   "people have very different opinions. Some are like a bull to a red flag in their attitudes towards Ukraine, others regret that they stayed there and would like to be part of Ukraine again, so, people have very different opinions." [**East, big s.**] || "There are different people, [...] Some are waiting to be part of Ukraine again, some hate us and think that Ukraine is to blame for everything". [**Centre, big s.**]

160   "We quietly get on with our lives, but it has a negative impact on everything – on business, the economy, and everything else." [**West, big s.**]

161   "We value peace." [**Centre, small s.**] || "It has changed a lot, because I began to realise that independence is something that needs to be protected, and it's something that we need to fight for." [**Centre, big s.**] || "now the question of independence is more acute. Because back then it just kind of happened, we didn't really notice it." [**East, big s.**] || "patriotism became stronger." [**West, small s.**]

162   "There is pride in the guys at the front who defend our independence – well done!" [**South, big s.**]

7 Weak perceptions of interregional interdependence meet strong desires for local empowerment

Generous **praise for decentralisation coexists with a weak sense of regional interdependence among older generations,** whereas **younger generations and those who have travelled internally** tend to be more open-minded and strongly believe that the various **regions complement and depend on each other.**

Several respondents shared the **belief that Ukraine's regions are fundamentally autonomous and do not need each other.**[163] Only a few participants outside of our younger cohorts dismissed this idea, preferring to

emphasise interregional interdependence.[164] In this respect, it is important to underline that virtually all **young participants** agreed that **each region does actually have something unique to offer and that together they do complement each other.**[165] This premise was instrumental for understanding how various regions contribute to Ukraine as a whole in

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164   "We're dependent on each other [...] Some people need the sea, others need mountains, someone needs gas, someone else needs water." [**Centre, big s.**] || "We're still dependent on each other. Take education, different cities and regional centres have different universities that are really valued." [**West, small s.**]

165   "The different regions complement each other, with each region having something unique to offer. [...] each region has something special, its own history." [**young, Centre, small s.**] || "Every region needs the other regions for something or other." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "Even when there's cohesion between the regions, when people joined the same Maidan, people came from different regions, [...] and people were together, they also complemented each other with their cohesion." [**young, Centre, small s.**]

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163   "We do not depend on one another. I think every oblast, every region, they are practically self-sufficient. Bread, potatoes, carrots, and beetroot grow everywhere." [**West, small s.**] || "I don't think they depend on each other. [...] In the USSR they were more dependent on each other. They extracted something in one place, then took it somewhere else, [...] but now they try, I think, everyone manages on their own." [**Centre, small s.**] || "If you think about 15 years ago, when in eastern and central Ukraine there were still some factories, enterprises, then they produced soda, rubber, coal, while on the other side of Ukraine people were producing something else. Now this is no longer the case. Everyone cuts down their own forests." [**Centre, small s.**]

"We do not depend on one another. I think every oblast, every region, they are practically self-sufficient. Bread, potatoes, carrots, and beetroot grow everywhere."
[West, small s.]

"Every region needs the other regions for something or other."
[young, Centre, big s.]

"Each region has something special about it. And when you put all the regions together, you can say that yes, this is Ukraine."
[young, South, small s.]

political, economic, and cultural terms.[166]

That said, there is no denying that young participants mostly spoke in general terms and relied on **regional stereotypes**. Western Ukraine was repeatedly referred to as "the heart of Ukraine" and associated with warm people. According to one young participant, "strong nationalism" prevails in Western Ukraine, as evident from the exclusive use of Ukrainian language.[167] Eastern Ukraine tended to be associated with more industrial images.

166   "Every region has […] certain goals that they share, and they can't exist without each other, and so this is what makes up Ukraine." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "Each region has its own traditions, and something special to offer, while each region is also part of Ukraine's history and origins […] each region has something special about it. And when you put all the regions together, you can say that yes, this is Ukraine." [**young, South, small s.**]

167   "There is very strong nationalism in Western Ukraine, which is different to the other regions of Ukraine. […] everyone speaks Ukrainian, Russian isn't spoken much there. When I was there, in some shops they didn't even want to serve you if you spoke in Russian." [**young, South, big s.**]

Odesa, meanwhile, was often considered an artistic city with a peculiar sense of humour.[168] Other central, "in-between regions" like Sumy, Rivne, Kirovograd, and Vinnitsa have no place at all in people's minds.

A similar tendency to rely on stereotypes when describing "regional behaviours" could also be observed among people who had decided to change regions within Ukraine[169] (mostly out of desire for a better life[170] or to flee the war zone[171]). That said, some "movers" did refuse to

168   "It's the same for Crimea, Donbas, all regions work very well together and closely cooperate. For example, in Lviv there is an atmosphere that shows the Ukrainian heart, Odessa has strong artistry, that lively atmosphere that shows Ukrainian hospitality, in Luhansk or Donetsk, there are people who work hard and who show how much our nation, our regions, are hardworking." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "Odessa has quite an interesting history, and there were also many Ukrainian writers who became famous. […] For me, the southern and Transcarpathian regions are the most beloved regions of Ukraine, because although there are lots of tourists, I really feel that I'm in Ukraine." [**young, East, small s.**]

169   "In Ivano-Frankivsk, if you don't speak in Ukrainian, no one's going to talk to you." [**mover, Odessa**] || "I called my second cousins, there was this myth that people in Lviv were ruthless, that Russian speakers were hated there, burned. I called and asked: is this really the case? They said no, of course not. Then I said: get ready then – I'm coming to stay with you. And that's it – I came here." [**mover, Lviv**] || "So I was driving. […] I got stuck and couldn't move the car it was so icy, […] in Donetsk […] the mentality is that people will call you names. Here that's not the case – it's the opposite, people will help you get on your way. Here people are friendlier." [**mover, Odessa**] || "In Lviv … we have always traveled to Transcarpathia, yes, they speak Ukrainian, but they have this mentality, these are such cultured people, it cannot be compared with Donetsk – that's for sure." [**mover, Odessa**] || "Everyone here works at the factory, they get tired, they are simple men, they swear. Whereas in Dnipro, people were more or less cultured." [**mover, Kryvyi Rih**] || "In Lviv people think more about family, but in the East, my friends and acquaintances think more about work and money." [**mover, Lviv**]

170   "We were hoping to improve our lives. […] for us this city is much more promising, with more jobs and opportunities." [**mover, Kyiv**]

171   ""I didn't have any expectations. I was leaving out of despair, I was in such a situation that there was no other way out." [**mover, Chernihiv**]

lump together entire regions in terms of certain stereotypically negative behavioural patterns.[172]

Despite their use of stereotypical images, virtually all "movers" agreed that **every region in Ukraine has something valuable to offer**, which also aligns with responses from younger cohorts.[173] For at least one respondent, this **belief that each region has something to offer contributed to their understanding of interregional interdependence:** given that each region contributes in its own way, "how can they live without each other?"[174] This is a very important point: **the opportunity to travel to various regions tends to encourage open-minded attitudes.**
Participants **praised decentralisation**

reforms for driving significant **infrastructural development[175]** and **enabling Ukrainians to keep power and resources in local hands.[176]** Even prior to the decentralisation reform,

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172   "It all depends on the person, how you are towards people, how you treat them, how you communicate with them. If you are closed off, of course no one will open up to you, they're not going to speak with you." [**mover, Kryvyi Rih**] || "There are different people, both among locals and among people who move there. Some people are easier to get along with, and some people are more difficult." [**mover, Lviv**]

173   "I believe in our Ukraine, and I think that we can feel proud of every corner of the country, because each place has a unique history. So I can't say that I'm proud of one region in particular. Whenever I come to a new city, I find a whole bunch of positive, interesting stories there." [**mover, Kryvyi Rih**]

174   "All regions are important, of course agriculture is important in one place, industry somewhere else, culture, timber, gas, oil, ports all in different regions. How can they live without each other? Some make ships, others grow watermelons. Some melt metal, others make furniture." [**mover, Lviv**]

175   "The roads are being improved, beautiful sidewalks. Earlier, 15-20 years ago, we didn't have this." [**West, small s.**] || "they've started to build a park here, cycle paths." [**East, big s.**] || "It is clear in our city, it's clear all around that money is staying here, and not getting channeled to Kyiv." [**East, big s.**]

176   "The decentralisation reform [...] has allowed money to stay put, and to be used where it is needed." [**East, big s.**] || "Money stays in the city's budget and more development takes place. I can see the city has changed a lot." [**Centre, big s.**] || "money remains in local budgets, and frankly, it seems that less is stolen, and more goes towards the purposes that it's meant for." [West, small s.] || "Money stays put." [**West, big s.**] || "there are more funds left in the communities, i.e. taxes do not go to Kyiv, but remain in the regions and the communities themselves decide to invest it in roads, medicine, education. [...] people have started to live better." [Centre, small s.] || "On the territory of Ukraine we have everything we need to provide for ourselves. Agriculture, timber and metallurgy – everything, everything. It's all ours, we shouldn't distribute it to our other neighboring republics." [East, small s.]

"The decentralisation reform [...] has allowed money to stay put, and to be used where it is needed."
[East, big s.]

some respondents saw the clawing back from Moscow of control over economic resources and political accountability as a key benefit of independence. One participant from Southern Ukraine recalled that her local sausage factory used to send produce to Moscow, whereas after the demise of the USSR the sausages stayed in Ukraine: independence means that "we can now cover our needs".[177] Others talked about how officials used to be nominated by Moscow but are now based in Kyiv, making it easier to hold them to account.

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177   "The profit […] from sales did not stay in Ukraine, but went to Moscow. [...] there wasn't enough meat to cover, say, the south of Ukraine, [...] And when independence came […] the transportation of raw materials to Moscow was stopped, [...] the entire raw material base [...] from our raw materials went into production here in the south of Ukraine. [...] independence has led to the fact that in Ukraine we can cover our needs and consumption in meat." [**South, small s.**]

8 Ukrainians' weak sense of international interdependence

Older and younger generations of Ukrainians are equally inclined to associate "independence" primarily with **freedom from the interference of others,** at both interpersonal and international levels. Only a minority of Ukrainians acknowledge **"interdependence"** as an important – or even inescapable – aspect of relationships between individuals or between states.

Participants associated "independence" mostly with a "negative" understanding of freedom: that is, the idea of **not depending on anyone**[178] and the **freedom to do whatever you please.**[179] Visions of this dynamic at the interpersonal level also influence people's perceptions of Ukraine's interactions with other states: the idea that we are dependent on everyone, for example, seems to assume that we should not be, because true independence means taking unilateral decisions without having to consult our neighbours.[180] This premise also lies behind the argument that **Ukraine is independent only in name,** having to depend on energy supplies,[181] international

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178   "Not to depend on anyone." [**West, small s.**]

179   "I go where I want, I do what I want." [**East, small s.**] || "If I want to travel, I travel [...] If I want to say my opinion, I say it." [**East, big s.**]

180   "We make our own decisions, regardless of our neighbours." [**Centre, big s.**]

181   "We are dependent on gas supplies. Not only gas, but also petrol, oil, and much more." [**East, big s.**]

cooperation,[182] or military assistance from other countries[183]). Interestingly, this idea was mentioned mainly by participants in the East. This regional discrepancy does not apply to younger cohorts, however, as here only one young participant from Western Ukraine lamented the country's dependence on others for natural resources such as gas,[184] whereas there was no mention of the issue at all from youth in the Centre, South, or East. That said, two young participants from Eastern and Southern Ukraine did associate independence with a government's freedom to act independently from the opinion of foreign politicians.[185] This in mind, both participants scored **Ukraine** negatively and viewed it as **an independent country only "in name", citing its dependence on external opinion and assistance**, especially vis-a-vis the conflict in the East.[186]

"Ukraine now depends on the whole world, and if the rest of the world stops helping Ukraine, then it will no longer exist as a country."
[East, small s.]

More broadly, these opinions about international relations resonate with young people's insistence on the importance of having absolute freedom from other people's opinions.[187] But it is important to stress that individuals who prioritised "negative" definitions often expressed a more general feeling of disempowerment and a lack of control over their environment. This suggests that **if people lack a sense of empowerment in their personal lives, their commitment to the idea of a Ukrainian state relying on interdependent relationships with other states will remain weak.**

Only a few participants disputed this narrow definition of freedom by stressing that "freedom" cannot be exercised meaningfully without an appreciation of the role of "responsibility", **"interdependence",** and "interaction" with others ["взаимодействие"]. Just a single young respondent associated ideas of independence and freedom with

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182   "Take an organisation like the International Monetary Fund. It dictates to Ukraine the conditions for providing the tranche. We must raise the price of gas. The conditions are dictated to us by a completely non-Ukrainian organisation." [**East, big s.**] || "when a country decides which country to be friends with and which not to be friends with, this has its consequences. Everything is regulated there by international regulations." [**Centre, big s.**]

183   "Due to the fact that now there is a war, we are dependent on the European Union, on the United States, on Canada, [...] If Europe had not financially supported Ukraine, [...] If Canada and the United States hadn't sent us any military equipment, I don't know how our country would have survived it. [...] Ukraine now depends on the whole world, and if the rest of the world stops helping Ukraine, then it will no longer exist as a country." [**East, small s.**]

184   "We depend on gas, we depend on some others for food products." [**young, West, small s.**]

185   "an independent country is when the country's leadership does not depend on the opinion of foreign politicians." [young, South, small s.] || "a country that has its own opinion." [**young, East, big s.**]

186   "Our country is only independent on paper [...] in reality we really need the support from our neighbours, and with the war." [**young, East, big s.**] || "To some extent, the government of our country depends on the opinion of neighbouring countries." [**young, South, small s.**]

187   "To be independent means not depending on anyone for anything." [**young, West, small s.**] || "Independence is, in the first place, not to depend on anyone, not to depend on anyone else's opinion." [young, Centre, small s.] || "to do whatever you want, not to listen to what others think." [**young, West, big s.**] || "in any situation you can make your own decision, to go somewhere or not to go somewhere, to make your own priorities, regardless of what other people think." [**young, East, small s.**] || "It is very important to be independent from the opinions of others." [young, South, small s.] || "To be independent of other people's opinions [...] to do what you want." [**young, South, big s.**]

taking responsibility for one's actions.[188] As one participant put it, "we live in society in the end, not like a load of Robinson Crusoes".[189] The idea that we will always be dependent to some degree on other people, on other countries through trade and diplomatic relations, and on external circumstances generally was also mentioned by younger participants in the NGCAs.[190]

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188   "It's about being responsible for yourself, for your actions, for what you do." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

189   "We live in a society in the end, not like a load of Robinson Crusoes." [**East, small s.**]

190   All [**young, NGCAs**]: "we're always dependent on some condition or another." || "There are no independent countries really. All states are to some extent dependent on each other. With trade, diplomatic relations." || "It is impossible to be completely independent, we always depend on someone, on the circumstances, on the economy."

Ukrainians across generations are more likely to define "independence" in terms of **financial, economic independence** rather than abstract political ideals, at both interpersonal and international levels, but economic prosperity is understood differently in different regions. Ukrainians are less inclined to associate independence with more "positive" ideas like freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of thought or expression, and self-realisation.

One recurrent connotation of independence was economic or financial independence, including among younger cohorts both in

"An independent country is [...] one that is economically independent from other countries."
[young, South, big s.]

the NGCAs[191] and in the rest of the country.[192] **While youth from Western and Central Ukraine seemed to focus more on public services, young participants from Eastern and Southern Ukraine tended to emphasise notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency** such as "supporting itself"[193] and "managing on its own for at least 10 years".[194] From this perspective, young participants from Southern and Eastern Ukraine suggested that a country is only independent to the extent that **it can "dispose of its natural resources"[195]** and **become economically independent from**

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191   All [**young, NGCAs**]: "I have a certain independence – this is financial in the first place." || "independence – this means financial independence." || "not to depend on someone, in the economic sphere, or when it comes to housing." || "this means that I earn enough money to rent an apartment, to eat and to cover my basic needs. That I can live independently."

192   "first of all, [...] so that I am not financially or materially dependent on anyone." [**young, Centre, small s.**] || "you can earn money for your own food, pay for housing, utilities, etc., [...] this is independence." [young, **West, small s.**] || "I can support myself, earn money, make my decisions." [**young, Centre, big s.**] || "In the first place it means being financially independent." [**young, South, big s.**]

193   "It means the country can support itself." [**young, South, big s.**]

194   "A country [...] that can manage on its own for at least 10 years." [**young, East, small s.**]

195   "without the help of anyone else, it can dispose of its natural resources." [**young, East, big s.**]

other countries.[196] In this vein, one young participant lamented how Ukraine's natural resources were not being properly exploited while praising liberalisation of the land market as a good example of how Ukrainians could make more of the country's resources.[197] Young respondents from Western and Central Ukraine included a broader range of definitions: not just the presence of a **strong economy**,[198] but also a **strong professional army**, an **efficient health service**, and a decent **education system[199]** (all of which effectively imply economic prosperity).

Interestingly, most answers from young respondents in the NGCAs matched those of youth in the rest of Ukraine: **an independent country** is a country with a **"strong economy"**,[200]with the "ability to protect itself from other states" and "feed the population"[201] while also **guaranteeing basic living standards to its population[202]**

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196 "an independent country is […] one that is economically independent from other countries." [**young, South, big s.**]

197 "Our land is a fantastic resource. […] Ukraine is 30% independent and 70% dependent, because we have a lot of all sorts of resources that we don't make the most of. Now we are leasing land although […] we also have production, we have metallurgy, we have factories, we have very good resources that we can do more with." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

198 "To be an independent country, you need to have good finances, a developed market, exports, imports, normal taxes, normal pensions, etc." [**young, West, small s.**]

199 "This is a country that has its own political force, its own army, and makes its own choices on which political path to take." [**young, Centre, small s.**] || "This is a country where there's a decent army, decent medicine, decent education etc." [**young, West, small s.**]

200 "it's a country with a strong economy and strong defence." [**young, NGCAs**]

201 "The ability to protect itself from other states, to defend itself, the ability to feed the population." [young, NGCAs]

202 "An independent state is one that can provide a sufficient, average, let's call it, standard of living for its population." [**young, NGCAs**]

An independent country is [...] one that is economically independent from other countries.
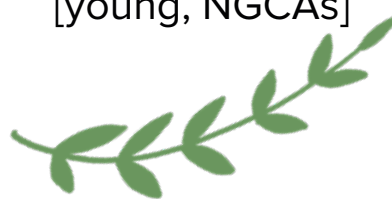[young, South, big s.]

"This is a country where there's a decent army, decent medicine, decent education etc."
young, West, small s.]

"An independent state is one that can provide a sufficient, average, let's call it, standard of living for its population."
[young, NGCAs]

Certain participants, including from younger cohorts, also expressed more "positive" meanings of freedom as the ability to do something: the most-cited concepts were **freedom of speech, self-realisation,**[203] and **freedom of thought or expression.**[204] The last of these was also present among young participants in the NGCAs.[205]

Participants viewed freedom of movement as one of the biggest benefits of independence,[206] with travel to other countries seen even as an opportunity to revaluate the quality of life back home.[207] This type of freedom was particularly salient for respondents in the NGCAs,[208] where checkpoints represent a painful reminder of freedoms lost.[209]

More generally, two young participants from Eastern Ukraine associated "independence" with the feeling of freedom.[210] In this respect, one young respondent from Central Ukraine insisted that **education** plays a key role: only a nation with "critical thinking" can truly "be free"; without it, meanwhile, people cannot freely express their opinion and are little better than "sheep".[211] Similarly, another respondent from the East stressed that having your "own culture" should also be factored into a definition of independence.[212] One younger participant from Eastern Ukraine associated independence with territorial integrity, which could be related to his being more exposed to the war in Donbas than youth in other regions had been. [213]

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203   "To decide its own future." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

204   "For me, being independent means free expression of my will, that is, I do not obey anyone else, I make my own decisions." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

205   **All** [**young, NGCAs**]: "When you can express your thoughts freely." || "I associate this with having my own opinion, being independent from the opinion of others, when I can consistently and accurately express my point of view." || "When I form my own views on the world, not relying on the opinion of the majority or on the opinion of the minority."

206   (I associate independence with) "the ability to travel abroad. I could freely travel to Shanghai; I was given tickets as a gift and I went. I can go abroad to work more freely, it used to be harder." [**South, big s.**] || "When there was the Maidan and then with visa-free travel, I felt that Ukraine was independent." [**West, big s.**] || "we felt freer, with it now being possible to go abroad, to see the world. What we never could have dreamed of during the Soviet Union – to go abroad. This is the main advantage." [**West, small s.**] || "when the European Union got rid of visas, that was a really brilliant moment." [**Centre, small s.**]

207   "The ability to travel abroad. It seems to me that this is such a great plus. If you stay only in one place, you can't see how you live in comparison to others, what your life could look like, what it should look like." [**East, small s.**]

208   "Previously, our world was limited to the borders of the Soviet Union – travel abroad was only for the elite. And then it became part of normal life, to go abroad on holiday – it's no longer only for the elites, it's part of ordinary life." [**Donetsk 2**]

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209   "now you need to get to the train and go through the checkpoints, with the queues." [Commuter]

210   "It means not being dependent on the people around you, and feeling free." [**young, East, small s.**] || "it means having some kind of inner feeling that you are free, that is, you have no restrictions." [**young, East, big s.**]

211   "another important factor is education, because if you have a population that's politically illiterate, […] then it's just a herd of sheep [...] people who have critical thinking, who know how to analyse the information they consume […] only then can a country be free, that is, when people are not afraid to freely assert their views." [**young, Centre, big s.**]

212   "A country that has its own culture." [**young, East, big s.**]

213   "A country that maintains its territorial borders." [young, East, small s.]

"we felt freer, with it now being possible to go abroad, to see the world. What we never could have dreamed of during the Soviet Union – to go abroad. This is the main advantage."

[West, small s.]

9 Positive and negative aspects of Ukraine's Soviet legacy

Ukrainians in all regions view **the achievement of a strong industrial base, free healthcare,** and **free education** as positive aspects of Ukraine's Soviet legacy.

Most participants see their inheritance of (i) free healthcare,[214] (ii) free, high-quality education,[215] and (iii) major industrial infrastructure like power plants and factories (even after being "looted" during independence)[216] as three positive aspects of the legacy left by the USSR.

Participants from the NGCAs see this somewhat differently, believing that **Ukrainian leaders have "squandered deliberately" the country's industrial potential,** which they believe was at its height during the Soviet

> **"There are a lot of advantages left from the Soviet Union – factories and everything else, in the 90s they were destroyed straight away."**
> [Centre, big s.]

> **"Thanks to the USSR, we were left with plants, steamers, factories, which are now all destroyed.**
> [Donetsk 1]

era.[217] Although participants across the country agreed, NGCA residents were particularly severe in their condemnation of plunder and corruption involving Ukrainian authorities and "local tsars" during the process of achieving independence. [218]

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214   "We inherited the healthcare and education systems – those are positive parts of the legacy." [Centre, small s.] || "doctors who are true professionals, doctors who were trained in the USSR. Among the young generation of doctors, hardly any of them know what they're doing." [South, big s.]

215   "We inherited the best education system in the world from the Soviet Union." [East, big s.] || "there was education. We got a lot from the Soviet Union. We were taught how to learn, we learned a lot." [West, big s.] || (what were the positives?) "free education." [South, big s.]

216   "There are a lot of advantages left from the Soviet Union – factories and everything else, in the 90s they were destroyed straight away." [Centre, big s.] || "In terms of positives: [...] all that was left of those factories, which were then looted and closed." [Centre, small s.] || "we inherited huge industries." [West, small s.] || "In terms of positives – the gas pipeline." [East, big s.]

217   "in Ukraine there was all kinds of production and extraction. And all this could have been developed, but it's all been sold off. It seems to me that this wasn't an accident, but it was all squandered deliberately." [Luhansk] || "Thanks to the USSR, we were left with plants, steamers, factories, which are now all destroyed. Because there was not a single owner in Ukraine who would try to develop it or even just to keep it going." [Donetsk 1] || "This infrastructure was tied only to the Donbas. Now the Donbas in Ukraine has been cut off, and, accordingly, many industries have closed." [Donetsk 1]

218   "Everything that was good in Ukraine, everything came from the USSR. The people, industries, and factories. Then little by little it began to collapse, because the local tsars of Ukraine began to seize all this, they began to destroy everything, corruption began to grow." [Donetsk 1] || "Power plants, power grids, communication lines, we're using what we have from the USSR." [Commuter] || "All enterprises that are still going, that contribute something to the economy, they all have their roots from the USSR. We are still using what was created by the USSR." [Luhansk]

Ukrainians across all regions view the preservation of the **"Sovok" mentality** alongside the **old nomenklatura system** as **negative** products of the Soviet legacy.

The **negative** legacy most cited was the enduring **Soviet mentality** [Sovok], which is considered to result in **paternalistic attitudes towards the state**.[219] Also noted was the effect of the **nomenklatura** system that kept old elites in power indefinitely,[220] their lack of innovative ideas putting the country's development "on ice".[221]

219   "The 'sovok' mentality, that people expect everything from the state, that the state owes something to the people." [**West, small s.**] || "The way of communicating when serving a person in a shop, as they say, the Soviet way. You come into the shop, and you're treated like they're doing you a favour." [**South, big s.**] || "Bigots, I'm sorry, but we've got a lot of them left." [**Centre, big s.**] || "It was drummed into us that we were just screws and nuts in the huge mechanism of the state, we always understood that the authorities would decide everything. [...] This fear of power remains, even genetically, it's there." [**Centre, big s.**] || "To this day, we're still 'sovoks'". [**East, small s.**] || "the mindset for how to live in an independent state hasn't yet formed [...] the tsar will come and do everything." [**Centre, big s.**] || "If we got rid of that Soviet mentality, we would go our own way, but so far we still have the Soviet Union in our heads [...] the state must do everything for me: give me a job, lower my taxes, pay for an apartment – all of this should be the state, not me." [**West, small s.**] || "In terms of the negatives – it's the human stupidity that has been in people's heads during the whole time of the Soviet Union." [**Centre, big s.**]

220   "bureaucracy. Just as it was back then, it's still the same." [**East, big s.**] || "The same authorities remained, they were just painted a different colour… communists under a different guise." [**South, small s.**] || "terrible bureaucracy." [**West, big s.**]

221   "That president Kuchma – [...] He came from the party nomenklatura. [...] he couldn't do anything else, nor could the people he brought to power. They didn't know how to think in a new way, to come up with new ideas, and this slowed down the development of the country." [**Centre, small s.**]

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A small number of participants also expressed disappointment with the **loss of nuclear weapons**, seeing it as a **loss of status** for Ukraine.[222]

222   "The surrender of nuclear weapons has made us a weak country." [**East, small s.**] || (Question to participants – do you agree or disagree with the fact that nuclear weapons were surrendered by Kravchuk at time of independence) Everyone said that they were against this. [**Centre, small s.**]

Younger generations see Ukrainian independence as a **fait accompli** and an undisputed, almost "timeless" reality. But **older generations** share the experience – somewhat less in Western Ukraine – of having to **"reinvent themselves" as Ukrainians** who no longer belonged to a larger Soviet state.

When asked **what it meant to be Ukrainian in Soviet times**, participants from both Western and Eastern **Ukraine remembered how Ukrainians used to be belittled in the Soviet Union**, with Ukrainian speakers considered "peasants" of little social standing.[223] Two participants used the image of Ukrainians feeling like "black sheep" to describe how Ukrainian speakers were perceived as "second-class people", especially in the schooling system.[224]

One participant from Eastern Ukraine admitted that Soviet ideology had managed to instil an allegiance to the USSR, meaning that it later took time to fully adopt a Ukrainian **identity.**[225] In line with our expectations, participants from Western Ukraine were less ambiguous in their understanding of Ukrainian identity during Soviet times. Proximity to the border with Poland and easier access to Western sources of information played a big role in countering Soviet propaganda. One **participant noted that Ukraine used to be equated with Russia in Soviet times**,[226] lamenting that it took years for Ukraine to assert itself as a separate state. Proximity to the border with Poland and easier access to Western sources of information played a big role in countering Soviet propaganda.[227] One participant noted that Ukraine used to be equated with Russia in Soviet times, lamenting that it took years for

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223   "Ukrainians were treated badly. [...] They were slighted, I would say [...] we were called 'Banderites' and 'dimwits', [...] plus the fact that Ukrainians had a different language, there was also a kind of negative attitude towards this, people saw Ukrainians as peasants." [**East, big s.**] || "there was a negative attitude towards Ukrainians." [**West, small s.**]

224   **All** [**Centre, big s.**]: "For decades, the Ukrainian nation, the Ukrainian language, and Ukrainian history were destroyed by the Soviet regime. [...] Ukrainians felt like black sheep and then all of this was being instilled [in people's minds], and in fact, even in my youth, when I was still in school, we considered those who spoke Ukrainian to be second-class people." || "like black sheep, it was hard. [...] I graduated from a Ukrainian school and went to study at a university and everything was in Russian. And they looked at me like I was completely backward."

225   (My country is…) "… The USSR, of course, because then we were driven by ideology, and it took quite a long time to make an [identity] choice. Now I have a different opinion." [**East, big s.**]

226   "Even in Soviet times, I always felt Ukrainian." [**West, big s.**]

227   "For a long time, the population of Lviv were not citizens of the USSR […] for some time since the 1980s. […] We were just saved by the fact that we were near […] with Poland […] We had the opportunity to watch German television, we received information from other sources, you could watch CNN." [**West, small s.**]

"During the USSR, Ukraine was often confused with Russia. We were being conflated into one, that is, no one really knew that the country of Ukraine existed. And after gaining independence, it took around 20 more years for the world to begin to learn that the state of Ukraine exists."
[West, small s.]

Ukraine to assert itself as a separate state.[228]

Others were nostalgic for the lack of national divisions during Soviet times since there was only "one people". In these cases, independence appears to be associated with division along linguistic and ethnic lines.[229] Another interpretation related to the feeling of being Ukrainian "part of a big state" of

brotherly nations.[230] **Soviet nostalgia** was also sometimes linked to decreasing living standards: "In the USSR I was a happy Ukrainian, but now in independent Ukraine I am a poor Ukrainian".[231]

When asked which post-independence revelations about the USSR they found most shocking, the most common responses were Soviet crimes around Holodomor, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Soviet repression, Katyn, and Chornobyl, including among NGCA residents.

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229   "Each country, so many countries we had in the USSR, everyone respected each other, not like now, where people think this is black, this is white, Russian vs Ukrainian [...] in the USSR it was much better than it is now being independent." [Centre, big s.] || "There was one people. Yes, there were Ukrainians and Russians, but we were all together, there was no such idea that you were somehow different. [...] Language, place of residence – none of this was important. The main thing is that you should be a decent person and know how to work." [**South, big s.**]

230   "I was a Ukrainian as a Ukrainian, with Ukrainian citizenship, but in the USSR, everyone was brothers and sisters." [**Centre, small s.**] || "A Ukrainian but part of a big state." [**Centre, small s.**] || "I felt, as they said at the time, a citizen of the Union, a Ukrainian by nationality, but I didn't feel any connection to this nationality." [**West, small s.**]

231   "In the USSR I was a happy Ukrainian, but now in independent Ukraine I am a poor Ukrainian." [**Centre, small s.**]

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Independence as a process, not an event: Ukraine is becoming a success story

Emphasising that **Ukraine is becoming a success story** can offer Ukrainians a message of hope. This narrative can also become an important **instrument of soft power to counter the Russian state narrative of Ukraine as a "failed state".** Media, government, and business representatives should promote the idea that despite all its problems, Ukraine is on the way to becoming a country where young people can self-realise and will thus want to stay in the country. For example, Ukraine still succeeds in many areas, with many businesses and initiatives competing internationally – particularly in the IT sector – despite the fact that the country is at war.

Independence should be framed as an emerging phenomenon, not one purely grounded in feelings about 1991. Ukrainian is becoming more independent, mature, and resilient over time. To this end, it is important to **emphasise all of those elements that make Ukraine special, especially its human capital.** Ukrainians are talented, hardworking, inventive, resilient freedom lovers, ready to express their will as a nation against all the odds. When referring to the struggles of the 1990s, the emphasis should not be on how hard those times were but rather on how tough Ukrainians as a nation are – a source of pride for many.

In order to counter the negative image of independence associated with economic deprivation, representatives from the political, business, and media sectors should remind Ukrainians of how they have gained access to more products over time. Given the importance of freedom of movement and self-realisation for young people, it is critical to highlight the opportunity to travel visa-free and the resulting professional and educational opportunities that Ukrainians have gained as a result.

2 Resilience and tolerance as behavioural patterns constituting national character

Ukrainians' tendency to unite in times of trouble should be seen as an indicator of their resilience and national self-awareness. In other words, Ukrainians feel the imperative to protect their nation at all costs when its existence is fundamentally threatened. In this context, it is also important to show how **past traumas have contributed to national resilience and translated into valuable "lessons learnt"** that are now being applied in various areas of Ukrainians' public and private lives.

Building on this observation of Ukrainians' tolerant instincts, Ukrainian media and policymakers should stress that citizens can engage in a civilised debate when addressing issues like the "Ukrainian language law" or "de-communisation laws". Furthermore, it should be emphasised that these policies have been implemented through legal procedures and can just as easily be changed through legal procedures; many perceive these as top-down impositions of the larger group, but a more inclusive approach at an earlier stage might have been able to smooth over these controversies. Relevant international comparisons should illustrate how **disagreements over issues of historical memory are to be expected as part of countries' state- and nation-building processes.** That said, existing challenges for the consolidation of Ukrainian statehood should not be ignored. Russia has exploited diversity to drive a wedge between certain parts of Ukrainian society and undermine its viability as a state, hence talks from pro-Russian forces about "federalising" Ukraine as a solution for "stitching" Ukraine's various regions together.

It is important to **promote Ukraine's international image as a place of tolerance whose ethno-linguistic diversity and multicultural heritage are sources of strength and pride** rather than a source of "inevitable" divisions (as the Russian state narrative would have us believe). Accordingly, Ukrainian media and political leaders should **avoid polarising language around partisan political identity** (e.g. pro-European Western Ukraine vs pro-Russian Eastern Ukraine) and capitalise on Ukrainians' tolerant instincts bearing in mind both domestic and international audiences. TV shows can be very powerful in illustrating Ukrainians' everyday tolerance and moving away from often intangible and polarising myths. For example, **speaking a particular language in one's personal life while having Ukrainian as a lingua franca of the modern Ukrainian state need not be mutually exclusive as practices or identities.** On this point, Canada and Switzerland could be used as important reference points: though these countries have a more "institutionalised tolerance", in practice Ukraine's linguistic situation is not especially dissimilar, providing an excellent example of "tolerance in all but institutions". As a matter of fact, there are no "linguistic ghettoes" on a map of Ukraine: different languages are not geographically concentrated in specific regions and can often be part of the same conversation. This **uniqueness of Ukrainians' everyday linguistic practices** should be stressed in positive terms, thereby **reinforcing the image of Ukraine as a tolerant society and an ethnolinguistic melting pot.**

In order to mitigate the negative image of older politicians as "agents of polarisation", **a broader platform should be given to "citizens turned politicians"**. At the local level in particular, these kinds of individuals can help to **reinforce the narrative of politics as a force for positive social change** rather than corruption and divisions.

3 Ukrainians' willingness to fight for their rights as a driver of national pride and social cohesion

Ukrainians' perpetual "disappointment" with political leaders is a sign that Ukraine is a democracy, and **people's ability to hold leaders to account should be recognised and reiterated.**

Public references to Ukrainian mass protests such as the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity should **avoid overly politicised narratives** and instead **emphasise Ukrainians' creativity, bravery, and determination in fighting for universal values**. Concepts like the right to vote and freedom of expression should be seen as **"constitutive" Ukrainian behavioural characteristics** that have been evident throughout different chapters of the history of Ukrainian independence. Reminding people that the Euromaidan was supported by people from all corners of the country, including Ukrainian and Russian speakers alike, could help to dispel the idea of deep regional divisions during those events, a myth that has been peddled largely for political ends. The fact that the protests were supported even by individuals of various ethnicities, such as ethnic Armenian Serhiy Nihoyan and Belarussian Mikhail Zhyzneuski), can contribute to the image of **Ukraine as a place of "civic patriotism" and an inspiring model of democratisation in the post-Soviet region.**

4 Popular culture as social glue

Media representatives should invest in **entertainment programming as a powerful tool for stimulating social cohesion.** In addition, **introducing international soft news** on topics like personal growth, computer games, travel, and lifestyles **into the Ukrainian media environment** could **help to portray Ukraine as progressive and modern**, thereby mitigating the common tendency to turn to Russian media for "escapism".

5 International recognition as a source of national pride

It is important to **emphasise other countries' recognition of Ukrainian successes** when covering Ukrainian victories in international sporting, musical, or academic competitions.

Visa liberalisation should be framed as an **opportunity for Ukrainians to rediscover themselves and to be rediscovered by other European cultures.** The media and policy-makers should strive to portray visa liberalisation not only as a political achievement but also as the result of Ukrainians' hard work – a moment of recognition that brings down barriers between Ukrainians and the rest of Europe. Ukrainians' overwhelming support for visa liberalisation fits neatly into a narrative of **independence as the driver of open borders and freedom of movement,** which are **the polar opposite of the acute sense of isolation felt during Soviet times).**

Ukrainians set great store by foreigners' opinions of their country. Representatives from the media, business, and politics in Ukraine should consider giving more of a platform to foreign journalists and entrepreneurs who have come to work in Ukraine, as they could present an **interesting "outsider" perspective on how Ukraine has changed over the years.**

It is important to recognise and report other countries' appreciation of Ukrainian skills by **showcasing instances of local businesses or capabilities being sought out by foreign countries**, as has happened with cyber-security expertise, for example.

6 Conflicted belonging and a yearning for normality in the temporarily occupied territories

In the NGCAs specifically, the media, policymakers, and businesses should promote the message that **Ukraine can be a "normal country",** with **people in the temporarily occupied territories are welcome to form part of that "normality"**. With financial independence a clear priority across our focus groups, there is great potential in **promoting Ukraine's new international image as a place of tolerance, where everyone can achieve self-realisation and earn a decent income**. Ukraine can also be portrayed as a strong nation; despite the serious struggles that the country endures, it continues to stand its ground against one of the world's most aggressive powers.

The 30th anniversary of independence should become an **opportunity to help people on both sides of the frontline**

"rediscover" each other from a human point of view. This approach can weaken the distorted narratives derived from Russian state propaganda of "neo-Nazi Bandera supporters" on one side, and those derived from ultra-patriotic circles on "separs" from Donbas on the other.

.**It is important not to conflate the Euromaidan and the war, as people have different attitudes to them.** Rather than relying on abstract concepts, political and media leaders should emphasise how **the war was an attack on the country's integrity** [tsilisnist/tselostnost] and how the war threatens Ukrainians' personal sense of property, territory and ownership.

7 The tension between Ukrainians' weak perception of interregional interdependence and strong praise of local empowerment

Political, business and cultural discourse in Ukraine should reinforce the idea that **each Ukrainian region has something valuable to offer** and taken together, **they complement and depend on each other,** each contributing to Ukraine as a whole in political, economic and cultural terms. Political, media and business representatives should **contest the image of "two Ukraines"** and feature examples showing how the supposed "East/West" divide of Russian and Ukrainian speakers is not so clear-cut. Media representatives should avoid a "Kyiv-centric" bias when explaining major political processes.

Positive promotion of the decentralisation reform should be nested into the narrative whereby independence contributed to bringing power and resources closer to people. At the same time, this narrative should be **balanced with one of national unity:** in the presence of weak central state institutions, empowerment at the local level carries the risk of encouraging separatist sentiment.

8 Ukrainians' weak sense of international interdependence

It is essential to combat the **idea of Ukraine as a kind of "Robinson Crusoe" of international relations:** isolated, misunderstood, and left to fend for itself. The media, policymakers, and businesses should continue to push the message that **Ukraine's integration into the international community helps to strengthen security and democratic freedoms at home.** Public efforts to debunk the myth that international interdependence is detrimental to freedom and financial security should avoid abstract ideological statements and focus on **concrete examples of how Ukrainian citizens can benefit** (e.g. visa liberalisation, educational opportunities abroad, or foreign investments reviving local communities). It is also vital to promote the idea that even if **"independence"** does mean **Ukraine has the right to choose which international agreements it enters into**, it also implies a need to **co-exist with other countries by respecting international obligations**. Without this cognitive shift, many Ukrainians will continue to confuse voluntary "external governance" for illegitimate "influence" or "interference", which provides fertile ground for anti-Western narratives (such as the idea of "Western curators" [zapadnye kuratory]). A good complement to this approach would be better diffusion of the idea that mutually beneficial interconnection means that Ukraine has much to offer to other countries as well.

Another element of social and political life that needs to be better understood is the vital **link between economic stability and democratic procedures.** Here business leaders must take the initiative in explaining how reforms around rules and transparency have positively impacted the daily work of Ukrainian businesses, even if this kind of rule-based environment is more demanding.

The principles of **engagement journalism** can offer helpful guidance for Ukrainian media when dealing with thorny issues like interconnectedness with Western countries and international organisations or the dangers of interdependence with Russia through reliance on industries inherited from Soviet times (in areas like energy). These principles prioritise citizens' trust and participation through involving them directly in the editorial and agenda-setting process. Ukrainian media could consider replicating successful initiatives like "Hearken"[1] in an effort to engage with communities and genuinely take on board their needs. The resulting sense of "being heard" would make citizens more receptive, even to ideas that could challenge their existing convictions.

1	See our recent report Why conspiratorial propaganda works and what we can do about it: Audience vulnerability and resistance to anti-Western, pro-Kremlin disinformation in Ukraine, pp. 9, 41. Available at: https://bit.ly/3wmsHKG

9 Positive and negative aspects of Ukraine's Soviet legacy

It is critical to show how the **Soviet legacy fed into the economic crises of the 1990s** as it would **help to break the common mental link between the hardships of the 1990s and the achievement of independence.** It could be explained, for example, that if Ukraine had remained with Russia, it could have meant an even more severe economic crisis coupled with a drawn-out conflict like the one found in Chechnya.

Negative aspects of the Soviet legacy should be framed as challenges that Ukrainians can face together rather than as insurmountable problems. The message should be that **independence is a "work in progress".** This approach can help to address disillusionment with independence's failure to live up to the false promise of instant prosperity. It also debunks the idea that the challenges associated with independence clearly indicate that we were "better off" in Soviet times.

It is also crucial to counteract the myth that "we only destroyed in independent Ukraine what was built in Soviet times". An effective way to do this would be to **show examples of how local people have created new businesses and new industries since independence,** including in Donbas. **Infrastructure was not lost, it was changed**, as an outdated economic model gave way to one more **geared towards catering for people's interests** (e.g. tourism, restaurants, cafés). The de-industrialisation of Donbas does not mean that the region is doomed because economies can and often do reorient themselves towards different sectors. In this regard, it is important to stress the emergence of new and technologically advanced industries.

People produced nuanced and consistent responses about the positive and negative aspects of Ukraine's Soviet legacy. While we should engage more proactively with public discussions on the negative long-term consequences of the Soviet system, these discussions should revisit the past in a way that commits to a clear vision of what a brighter future would look like. Do people want, for example, Ukraine to replicate the USSR's terrible human rights record in the future? And what sort of social security do they want for their children? The mixed relationship that many Ukrainians have with the USSR should be explored constructively, with the focus firmly fixed on the future Ukrainians want for their country and for their families.

Ukraine at 30:

From independence to interdependence

July 2021