

# UKRAINE'S DUAL STRUGGLE

Balancing democratic principles and  
national defence in a total war



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# INTRODUCTION

How can democracy survive when a country is fighting for its very survival as a state and as a nation? On the evening of 24 February 2022, martial law was introduced and general mobilisation was announced in Ukraine in response to Russia's full-scale invasion. Since then, **Ukraine has been locked in a dual struggle: maintaining a unified front and meeting the demands of full-scale national mobilisation against Russia's aggression without compromising its hard-won commitment to freedom and democracy.** For many Ukrainians, the pain of this war is deepened by the sense that they are fighting for more than just survival. They are defending democratic values against authoritarian rule. Significantly, framing Ukraine as a frontline defender of democratic ideals against Russia's imperialism was also a cornerstone of Ukraine's strategy to secure international backing, particularly during the early stages of the war. Now, with the full-scale war grinding into its fifth year, the centralisation of executive power, the curtailment of civic freedoms and the postponement of national elections have sparked a difficult and painful debate about the long-term health of Ukraine's democratic life and institutions. As international attention returns to the prospect of reaching a ceasefire and organising elections in Ukraine,<sup>1</sup> this report aims to **capture Ukrainians' views and lived experience on martial law restrictions to date and, ultimately, how the war has reshaped the country's democratic path and the ideal of freedom.**

Overall, respondents perceived freedom and democracy not as abstract ideals but through the lens of their wartime experience; as a result, their priorities differed across social groups. Military

personnel and veterans emphasised freedom of movement and the ability to make autonomous life decisions; conscription-age men who are not serving focused on the right not to serve if they do not wish to; internally displaced persons prioritised non-discrimination in access to services; young people highlighted self-realisation, self-expression, and the ability "to be oneself"; Ukrainians abroad stressed responsibility for their own lives and the ability to shape their personal trajectories; and older respondents emphasised the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

Our research focuses on six essential areas that define the current state and future trajectory of Ukrainian democracy in the eyes of its citizens. This report is structured into six parts, each dedicated to a particular area.

## **Ukrainians' understanding of democracy as a value.**

Ukraine's democratic identity has been forged through a long history of resistance, most notably during the post-independence era, with the Orange Revolution, the Euromaidan and Russia's full-scale invasion. Democracy is a hard-fought value, deeply rooted in the national experience, making it important to understand how citizens actually conceptualise it. We asked: **What does democracy mean to Ukrainians and what are some of its essential elements?**

## **What freedoms Ukrainians are (not) willing to concede in an existential war.**

Significantly, most often our respondents cited freedom of movement and freedom

<sup>1</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn5l1474yv7o](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn5l1474yv7o)

of expression as the most important values for them. Under martial law, certain civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and regular election cycles, have been limited. The government has centralised media through the ‘United News’ [Telemarathon], a 24-hour news broadcast created by merging the coverage of major TV channels. Military administrations have the power to ban all mass events. Until recently,<sup>2</sup> men aged 18 to 60 were strictly prohibited from leaving the country, with few exceptions (e.g., for fathers with three or more children, or people with disabilities). We asked: **How has citizens’ perception of Ukraine as a democratic country changed since 2022 and where do they draw the line between necessary security measures and unjustifiable overreach by government authorities?**

### **Ukrainian attitudes on how to handle sensitive wartime topics.**

The wartime taboo against criticising political and military leadership is increasingly being challenged, reflecting the struggle between the democratic right to truth and the existential demands of martial law. While the initial years of the full-scale invasion were characterised by a high degree of voluntary self-censorship to preserve national unity, domestic tensions have sharpened over time. Since 2022, a tacit collective understanding has existed among Ukrainians of when to exercise self-restraint or at least regulate debate around high-stakes topics. As the war enters its fifth year, disagreements have emerged over the justifiability of (not) reporting on sensitive topics (e.g., casualty

rates, problems at the front, challenges with mobilisation and draft evasion) which the government often treats as state secrets to maintain public morale. As for high-profile corruption cases, particularly in military procurement and the energy sector, while some view the disclosure of evidence by anti-corruption agencies and independent media as an essential duty to ensure accountability and fulfil EU accession requirements<sup>3</sup>, others fear that such criticism undermines the legitimacy of the leadership and provides fodder for Russian propaganda. We asked: **How have Ukrainians’ media consumption patterns changed since 2022, is it justifiable to exclude certain topics from public discourse during wartime, and are there specific subjects where citizens tend to practise self-censorship?**

### **Ukrainians’ views on how to reconcile the demand for democratic accountability and political renewal with the imperative for national unity.**

The Ukrainian Constitution explicitly forbids parliamentary elections during martial law.<sup>4</sup> While the Constitution is less explicit about presidential elections, the Law on the Legal Regime of Martial Law prohibits all national and local elections while the regime is active.<sup>5</sup> Allowing soldiers to vote or run for office while in active combat zones presents immense physical and procedural risks. Polling stations could become missile targets. Citizens in Russian-occupied territories would be entirely unable to participate, leading to a vote that is unrepresentative of the full national electorate. The mechanism

<sup>2</sup> In September 2025, a new regulation lifted travel restrictions for men aged 18 to 22, allowing them to leave the country freely. Proponents argue that this policy addresses the nation’s demographic crisis by discouraging parents from relocating their teenagers permanently and fostering stronger ties between young citizens and their homeland while abroad. However, critics contend that the move undermines national defence, as it reduces the pool of new recruits essential for resisting Russian aggression.

<sup>3</sup> In a December 2025 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 71% of respondents believed that the high-profile investigation of Ukraine’s National Anti-Corruption Bureau, which led to the uncovering of a 100 million USD kickback scheme within Ukraine’s energy sector allegedly masterminded by President Zelenskyy’s former business partner Timur Mindich, was justified: <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1570>

<sup>4</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-ukraine/168071f58b>

<sup>5</sup> <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/389-19#Text>

for extending voting rights to millions of Ukrainian refugees remains a significant and unresolved logistical challenge. Elections inherently involve political competition and criticism. In a wartime context, this could trigger internal infighting, which Russia could exploit to weaken Ukrainian resolve. Against this background, we analysed Ukrainians' views on their perceived influence over national and local authorities, the need to hold elections, and the collective pressure of demanding transparency without demanding a change of power. We asked: **How can Ukrainian authorities be held accountable under conditions of martial law, do citizens feel they have influence over local authorities, and how is the absence of elections impacting Ukrainian democracy? What does democracy look like in the absence of elections?**

### **Ukrainians' views on the role of domestic and diaspora civic engagement in shaping Ukraine's defence and democratic future.**

The synergy between domestic activism and diaspora networks has become a cornerstone of Ukraine's national resilience. Despite the pressures of martial law and self-censorship, domestic civil society has become increasingly vocal, with significant protests in mid-2025 successfully pushing back against legislation that threatened anti-corruption institutions. Meanwhile, the global Ukrainian community has shifted its focus from immediate humanitarian relief to long-term political advocacy. Public sentiment increasingly views civic engagement not merely as a temporary wartime necessity, but as a vital force for sustaining the defence effort, accelerating transparent post-war recovery, and protecting the country's democratic trajectory. However, exhaustion is a real problem. While the initial years of the war were marked by unified gratitude for the diaspora's support, the prolonged nature of the war

has created a 'divide of experience' that threatens social cohesion amid growing concerns of Ukraine's demographic crisis. Ukrainians abroad reported a greater sense of freedom and wider opportunities to influence their own lives and well-being. They noted that there are more opportunities for self-development abroad, while describing the situation in Ukraine as more constrained with less opportunities to influence events. We asked: **Who is responsible for preserving democracy in Ukraine, what would make citizens go out to protest and do Ukrainians abroad have the same responsibility as Ukrainians inside the country?**

### **Ukrainians' perception of the strength and resolve of other democratic countries.**

Ukrainians have looked to Western democracies for more than just military aid; they view them as a mirror for their own aspirations. Since 2022, Ukrainians' opinion of Western democracies has shifted from early idealism to sober realism. While a sense of profound gratitude still exists for the life-saving military and humanitarian aid provided by partners, there is a growing sense of resentment fuelled by the West's political timidity and incremental approach to support. This has been exacerbated by the perceived pro-Russian bias of the Trump administration and in increasing tensions in transatlantic relations. This tension leaves many Ukrainians to view their nation not merely as a recipient of aid, but as a vanguard defending a democratic world that is yet to grasp the nature of the threat posed by Russia and the scale of the response needed. We asked: **How have Ukrainians' perceptions of Western democracies evolved over time and what do they believe would happen if these same countries were forced to defend their own borders?**

# METHODOLOGY

This report has relied on **ten online interviews** and **five online focus groups**, conducted in August 2025 across Ukraine. The table below summarises key demographics of **all participants included (48 individuals in total)**. Our focus groups included three categories of interest: **respondents living in settlements near the frontline**, **respondents living further away from the frontline**, and **Ukrainian refugees**. The first two categories were further split into two age cohorts: younger participants (aged 18-40) and older participants (aged 41-65). All focus group participants were split evenly by gender. If they had children, it was mentioned explicitly alongside other key demographic information.

In total, we conducted three interviews with **active servicemen in the Ukrainian Armed Forces**, one interview with a **veteran**, two interviews with **military conscription officers**, two interviews with **Ukrainian male civilians**, and two interviews with **Ukrainian citizens currently residing abroad**.

Participants' original quotes are provided after each chapter to illustrate how their answers informed the findings presented in this report. This research did not include any respondents currently residing in the temporarily occupied territories.

10 X INTERVIEWS	DESCRIPTORS AS CITED IN THE REPORT
3 x interviews with servicemen	[Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children] [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single] [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]
2 x interviews with military conscription officers	[Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children] [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
2 x interviews with male civilians	[Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children] [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
1 x interview with veteran	[Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
2 x interviews with Ukrainians residing abroad	[Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children] [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]

5 X FOCUS GROUPS	DESCRIPTORS AS CITED IN THE REPORT
<p>Focus group 1: Participants aged 18 - 40 living in settlements near the frontline</p> <p>8 x participants</p>	<p>[FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]            [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]            [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]            [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]            [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]            [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]            [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]            [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]</p>
<p>Focus group 2: Participants aged 41 - 65 living in settlements near the frontline</p> <p>7 x participants</p>	<p>[FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]            [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]            [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]            [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]            [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]            [FG2, P6, F, 55, Chernihiv obl., single, with children]            [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]</p>
<p>Focus group 3: Participants aged 18 - 40 living further away from the frontline</p> <p>8 x participants</p>	<p>[FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]            [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]            [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi., single]            [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]            [FG3, P5, M, 26, Chernivtsi, single]            [FG3, P6, M, 38, Lviv, married, with children]            [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]            [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]</p>
<p>Focus group 4: Participants aged 41 - 69 living further away from the frontline</p> <p>8 x participants</p>	<p>[FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]            [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]            [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]            [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]            [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]            [FG4, P6, F, 53, Lviv, divorced]            [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]            [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]</p>
<p>Focus group 5: Ukrainian citizens residing abroad</p> <p>7 x participants</p>	<p>[FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]            [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]            [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]            [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]            [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]            [FG5, P6, F, 40, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]            [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]</p>



Protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lisbon, Portugal, February 27, 2022. Photo: Alice Kotlyarenko/Unsplash

# 1 Ukrainians' philosophy on democracy

When asked about 'democracy' in abstract terms, participants often associated this concept with freedom of choice and the absence of external coercion.<sup>1</sup> Some participants qualified this decisional autonomy in terms of self-development and self-growth, having access to different educational and business opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, often respondents rejected the idea of unfettered agency, emphasising that this type of freedom was not intended to be absolute, but to be exercised with responsibility<sup>3</sup> and within the remit of the law.<sup>4</sup> Respondents stressed that democracy is not just about rights but also obligations, especially during wartime.<sup>5</sup> In

the words of one young respondent, 'order in the country starts with each of us'.<sup>6</sup>

*We talk a lot about rights, but we forget about obligations. They go together as a pair.*

People who survived Russian occupation were particularly keen to define democracy as the 'freedom to be yourself' as occupation was associated with the denial of even belonging to oneself.<sup>7</sup> One respondent suggested that people who have not experienced occupation will not appreciate

the value of democracy as deeply because they have never lost it in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

## A democratic country is a country in which there is **freedom of choice**.

Some avoided philosophical definitions and grounded the idea of democracy in key principles such as the rule of law providing accountability mechanisms<sup>9</sup> and an even playing field for all its citizens,<sup>10</sup> protection of human rights and human dignity (including access to decent public services),<sup>11</sup> tolerance towards diverse groups and opinions<sup>12</sup> and free and fair elections.<sup>13</sup> Generational differences appear to influence

how Ukrainians perceive democracy and freedom. Older participants tended to define democracy through the lens of stability, justice, and the rule of law, implicitly measuring their current liberty against the constraints of the Soviet era. In contrast, for the younger generation freedom is mostly defined by the capacity for self-realization, the right to choose their own path, and the ability to work and study according to personal priorities. Respondents singled out freedom of speech and freedom of movement as the most important values for them in a democratic state.<sup>14</sup> This is a direct reflection of how Ukrainians' experience of restrictions on civil freedoms introduced as a result of martial law had profoundly shaped their own moral principles. This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

- 1 'Democracy is freedom. [...] It is the freedom of choice: where to live, how to live, who to live with, and who to be friends with [...] the opportunity to influence decisions on issues in the place where you live.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children] 'In a democratic country [...] every person should have their own choice, rather than one imposed on them.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]

'A democratic country is a country in which there is [...] freedom of choice.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced], [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]

'For me, freedom of choice is very important; the broader that freedom is, the better it is for me.' [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]

'For me, it is definitely about choice-about where I want to live and where I want to work. [...] It is certainly about the freedom to be myself.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- 2 'For me, freedom to engage in activities is also very important [...] freedom of movement as well-that is, being able to exchange experiences, both in terms of choosing what to do and through cooperation with partners abroad or within Ukraine. This is also very important for one's self-realization.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]

'Freedom of expression, freedom of movement, the choice of education [...] and the choice of one's life path.' [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]

'Personal freedom, both in terms of property and in terms of academic/scientific pursuits.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 3 'Freedom means that I can decide for myself, make decisions on my own behalf, and take responsibility for them.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married, no children]

'It is a country where you have the right to freedom of speech, religion, and beliefs. And in addition to freedom, you also bear responsibility for your [...] messages-for what you promote within this society.' [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]

'Right now, we do have a choice. But I would like that choice to be truly democratic-that is, one that people genuinely understand, make consciously, take responsibility for, and stand up for.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 4 'Freedom. The fact that I can do what I want, but within the limits of [...] legality.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]

- 'Freedom to walk, to travel, to do whatever you want, as long as it is not legally prohibited.' [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 'To listen to the people and follow the law, so that every member of society follows the law and there are no exceptions for anyone.' [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 5 'A democratic country is when [...] the laws always support you, and you adhere to legality.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single, no children]
- 'In addition to the fact that we all have rights, we also need to understand that we have certain obligations. [...] If we say that the state should give me something first, [...] then I must be law-abiding, I must pay taxes on time. And if I go to vote, then I should not vote for a bag of buckwheat.' [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]
- 'We talk a lot about rights, but we forget about obligations. They go together as a pair. And of course, freedom of speech and freedom of choice. [...] all of this now has to be somewhat different from how it was three years ago.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 6 'Order in the country begins with each individual. And it has to start with oneself personally-by truly being responsible and being a law-abiding citizen.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 7 'As someone who lived through the occupation, for me democracy is the freedom to be myself. [...] meaning that we did not belong to ourselves under occupation.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]
- 'We were also under occupation, and we wanted to be free-not dependent on anyone.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]
- 'As someone who, so to speak, lived through the occupation, I saw and felt firsthand what freedom of speech really means-when we were allowed to speak, and then [...] people were searched for in basements [...] [and what] freedom of private property means: when you go somewhere for a while, [...] you come back and realize that you are completely powerless.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 8 'If you have seen soldiers of the Russian Federation, then you know there is a very large gap between us. First of all, we saw what they do and how they do it. And that made us wait for the return of the Ukrainian flag. And after the liberation, we breathed free air. But if we talk about other regions of Ukraine, perhaps it is not felt in the same way. [...] they cannot fully understand what democracy is.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]
- 9 'The freedom to hold accountable the people we elect.' [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 'The importance of [...] citizens controlling the authorities and scrutinizing them, and checking every single penny-where they spend it.' [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]
- 'It is when laws work equally for both officials and ordinary people, and when officials are held responsible for their actions and can be removed from office if they do something wrong.' [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]
- 'It is property, transparency, equality at all levels, and the rule of law.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 'The main feature of democracy is the separation of powers: executive, judicial, and legislative. [...] For me, equality before the law and being able to defend one's rights in court are important.' [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]
- 'What is required from the people is that they follow the laws, and from the deputies that they do not change them when it benefits them.' [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 'So that all actions of our officials and the authorities are transparent, and I, as a citizen, can know what is going on there.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 10 'It is [...] the rule of law. It is the fair distribution of the country's resources. And it is caring for those members of the population who are not able to provide for themselves and who need assistance. It is a country that supports entrepreneurs, where there is diverse trade, fair competition, and where the law exists and applies equally to everyone.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
- 'Equality in rights is the very foundation without which democracy cannot exist.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]
- 'The freedom to run for office and to be elected on equal terms-not like when I want to be elected but I do not have access to [...] electoral resources, for example. Meanwhile, those who also want to run have already bought TV channels and promoted themselves there.' [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 'So that the [country] is not divided into those people who have a lot of money and for whom everything looks completely different. [...] we are, as they say, unequal.' [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]

- 'Democracy is [...] equal access to the judiciary and social services, and equal rights to start a business and earn an income.' [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 11 'A democratic country is a country in which human rights are upheld-rights to what a person needs. A person has the right to healthcare and to education.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
 'I would like us to have freedom in the sense that we truly have free healthcare. That is, the freedom to live a healthy life.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 'First of all, it is the right to life-especially during the war-the right to evacuation [...] and the ability to choose a doctor myself.' [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]  
 'Human rights must come first, and we must all be equal before the law as well.' [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]  
 'In a democracy, above all, there are human rights-where a person must have rights [...] and where the value of human life comes first.' [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]  
 'For me, democracy is definitely about [...] ensuring that my life is dignified.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]  
 'The most important thing in democracy is the preservation of [...] human [...] rights.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 12 'A democratic country is one where everyone's opinion is respected, as long as that opinion does not cause harm to others. [...] It is a space where people of different cultures can coexist and find common ground despite having different views.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]
- 13 'All undemocratic regimes-like we had under Yanukovych or similar ones we see, such as Russia, Belarus, and so on-are all based on election fraud. Essentially. That is, I think, the main point of democracy.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
 'It is people's participation in elections and the ability of the people to influence the authorities. [...] because democracy is the power of the people.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 'The sign of a democratic country is free elections.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 'Our most important right is the ability to elect the government in the country.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 'What is important is that candidates-who are, accordingly, representatives of the people-are elected. [...] and that all of this is upheld in accordance with the rule of law.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 14 [M: 'Which freedoms are critically important to you personally?'] 'Freedom of speech and freedom of movement.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced, no children]  
 'Democracy is freedom. Like my freedom of movement within Ukraine and beyond the country's borders. It is the freedom to express my thoughts, my attitudes toward everything. [...] Because if you don't express yourself, then what will you influence?' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
 'Freedom of speech. There should be some kind of journalistic institution that, ideally, does not rely on financial support from the state [...] if this is absent, then the country can hardly be called democratic. [...] Freedom of movement. Accordingly, if a person does not have the ability to move from one region to another or to leave the country, this also cannot be considered democracy. Because if free people are in a country, then they should be free to the fullest extent. You can't be a little bit pregnant.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 'For me, freedom of movement is very important. [...] freedom of speech, freedom of assembly [...] All of this is essential in a democratic country.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children][M: 'For you, what is the most important thing in a democratic country?']  
 'Freedom of speech. Because the authorities are not always right. And they do not hear a lot of things from people.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]  
 'One of the most critical things today is freedom of movement, most likely. Because there is no possibility to leave the country, or to travel abroad.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single] [M: 'Which freedoms are most critically important to you?']  
 'It is the freedom to express one's thoughts. Because there are many examples, like Russia, where you cannot express your opinion.' [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]  
 'Freedom of speech, freedom of movement.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]

'I will start with the very first thing that is important to me: freedom of speech and thought. [...] This also relates in some way to the right to freedom of movement, and the right to personal inviolability-that no one can simply be arrested without cause.' [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]

'First, it is probably freedom of movement. So that no one has the right to restrict it.' [FG3, P5, M, 22, Chernivtsi, single]

'It is freedom of speech, the freedom to express your opinion without looking over your shoulder, and to know that for what you say you will not face [...] any kind of punishment.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]

'For me, it is when you can move around the streets calmly and not fear for your life.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]

'For me, it is definitely about choice, [...] what language I want to communicate in [...]. And also about freedom of movement.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]

'First and foremost, freedom of speech-so that you can express your opinion and not be afraid that it will somehow lead to sad consequences for you. [...] Freedom of movement-so that you have the opportunity to go wherever you feel like.' [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]



Shelling partially destroyed a block of flats in the Obolon district of Kyiv on March 14, 2022. Photo: Oleksandr Ratushniak/UNDP Ukraine

# How the experience of war has shaped public perception of democracy in Ukraine

We asked participants to discuss whether their perception of democracy in Ukraine had changed after 2022. In particular, participants were asked to consider if it is justifiable to restrict certain civil freedoms during war and, if so, to what degree. Respondents' answers tended to concentrate primarily on two areas. The first area concerned restrictions around freedom of movement (i.e. curfew and the ban on men of mobilisation age to leave the country). The second area focused on freedom of speech and media activity. A number of respondents stated that

although the temporary suspension of civil liberties undermines the health of democracy in Ukraine, they are justifiable as necessary measures to increase the country's resilience and war-fighting capacity against Russian aggression.<sup>1</sup> In the words of one older participant, indeed, 'democracy has diminished a little in Ukraine. But during the war [...] we must unite.'<sup>2</sup> For most participants, this argument holds particularly true in the case of limitations on freedom of movement<sup>3</sup> and freedom of speech<sup>4</sup> - the most commonly cited ones across all groups interviewed.

## *In times of war [...] democracy has changed its form.*

With regard to the former, a commonly held view is that maintaining open borders would (have) result(ed) in a significant population outflow, thereby depleting the available pool for the war effort and accelerating the country's demographic crisis.<sup>5</sup> One respondent hoped that restrictions could be even tougher to prevent a third invasion.<sup>6</sup>

One participant highlighted that although these are necessary conditions, they are not applied universally and equally, thus causing social tensions.<sup>7</sup> A few participants insisted that while curfews should stay in place near active combat operations, they could be lifted in areas further away from the frontline.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, one participant complained about the double standards on curfew enforcement, being stricter in areas under heavier bombardment than in relatively safer areas of western Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to freedom of speech, one participant plainly argued that limitations linked to the Telethon were purely the consequence of martial law.<sup>10</sup> Some emphasised that people could freely look for alternative sources of information away from the Telemarathon.<sup>11</sup>

A second group shared a more pessimistic, disillusioned and openly critical view of the country's current trajectory, pointing to authoritarian trends.<sup>12</sup> Many pointed out the growing restrictions on media through the activity of the Telethon and encroachment on the work of journalists during war.<sup>13</sup>

One young participant described restrictions on freedom of movement as 'another and rather big nail in the coffin of Ukrainian democracy'.<sup>14</sup> Another young respondent stated that all constitutional rights have been suspended, with the government abusing the idea

that any controversial issues shall be postponed until after the war is over.<sup>15</sup> One civilian man decried Ukraine having an 'anti-democratic' system, where 'the state is always trying to deceive you, catch you, trap you, force you', mentioning that fear of Ukrainian police and recruitment officers resorting to unlawful means has driven many eligible men into hiding who, in turn, accumulate resentment towards the state.<sup>16</sup> Other participants also highlighted a pervasive fear of recruitment officers among military-aged civilians, which has led many to voluntary confinement to avoid detection.<sup>17</sup> A few participants highlighted the negative impact of travel restrictions on Ukrainian businesses.<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, another participant insisted that there should be no travel bans at all, and citizens should be able to move freely.<sup>19</sup>

*My acquaintances are hiding at home, afraid that they will be grabbed by the TCR guys.*

Notably, some respondents compared Ukraine to Russia<sup>20</sup> and even North Korea<sup>21</sup>, emphasising the ongoing centralisation of power in the hands of the executive. As one participant residing further from the frontline put it, 'Ukraine has completely lost its democracy. It has become like North Korea'.<sup>22</sup> In the words of one soldier, 'There is no such thing now as a free person where we are. Everything is being controlled. Everything depends on the government.'<sup>23</sup> One civilian observed that despite being in direct opposition to Russia, Ukraine had paradoxically begun to mirror the very system it is fighting against.<sup>24</sup> In the eyes of another civilian interviewee, people feel that the country has become a 'prison'.<sup>25</sup> One soldier argued that his choice of going to fight for his country was the very embodiment of Ukraine as a democracy, while the lack of rotations

is felt as a form of ‘slavery’ by soldiers without clear military service terms.<sup>26</sup>

## Most people believe that we are in a cage.

It is worth noting that a third group of answers shared a positive view which saw in 2022 the emergence of a more united society and national effort to defend the country’s survival.<sup>27</sup> With regards to freedom of speech, one group claimed

that this right has remained strong in Ukraine even in a total war,<sup>28</sup> often citing the example of the protests in the summer of 2025 against the government crackdown on anti-corruption bodies.<sup>29</sup> In the words of one woman serving in the army since 2014, ‘already back in the days of Maidan, I had realised that we are now standing on a very important path, when we as a nation are not just formed, but have such superpowers. [...] during the large-scale invasion, this was only reinforced. That is, when there was such an existential threat to absolutely everyone, everyone rallied.’<sup>30</sup>

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

- 1 ‘These necessary things, [...] where they tightened the screws, so to speak, with regard to certain rights and freedoms. [...] This is how any state should act in an extreme situation.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
‘Attitudes toward democracy in Ukraine have worsened somewhat, but overall this is connected to the restrictions under martial law.’ [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]  
‘Over the past three years, so to speak, it has changed. Also not for the better. But all of this is connected to the war.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
‘All these freedoms are violated only because of forced measures.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
‘If we compare it to the pre-war period, then [...] some democratic institutions have suffered. But [...] democratic mechanisms continue to exist. [...] In times of war [...] democracy has changed its form. But that is also understandable. When some danger arises, we respond to it. [...] changes in democratic, so to speak, institutions are also a response to challenges.’ [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- 2 ‘Democracy has decreased somewhat in Ukraine. But during the war [...] we must unite.’ [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]
- 3 ‘It’s needed to catch people and almost force them to fight. [...] On the one hand, this is a tightening of rights and freedoms, but in my view it is also a forced situation, because a huge number of men are not joining the army. [...] This is a necessary and correct step. [...] free departure abroad for people who must or may be mobilised should be restricted.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
‘The borders will have to be opened anyway at some point. [...] but it cannot be done now.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
‘I believe a curfew is necessary [...] in some communities in Chernihiv oblast, local communities have adopted decisions that restrictions on motorcycle movement are mandatory, and that they should be fined if they ride without mufflers, because this really matters-when Shaheds are flying, in Chernihiv we also react to this, because it is a border area.’ [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
‘As for the curfew, I believe it is necessary.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
‘Regarding the curfew, I think it can be quite justified.’ [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]  
‘I support the idea that movement should still be restricted, even for safety reasons.’ [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]  
‘The curfew-overall, introducing it is appropriate.’ [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
‘I definitely do not support the ban on leaving, but still, you can understand what times we are living in.’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]  
‘Restrictions on freedom of movement, the curfew-this is indeed a violation of constitutional rights, but these are forced measures in the conditions in which we are living now.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]

- 'During the war, it is a forced measure, and it is clear that someone has to be there, someone has to stand up and defend. [...] the curfew is also a forced measure. [...] For me, all of this is about protecting the country.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 'Yes, that's right. All of this is temporary under our martial law.' [FG4, P6, F, 53, Lviv, divorced]
- 'It is an unfortunate necessity, [...] freedom of movement-I would like it to be preserved to some extent.' [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- 4 'Right now it is war. It is logical that there needs to be a centralized [...] information policy [...] rights related to freedom of speech and freedom to express opinions are being curtailed [...] this is the impact of martial law.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 'Of course, information needs to be restricted, but I believe some restrictions should exist under wartime conditions.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 5 'If, right now, at this moment, the borders were opened, then I think a large percentage of people-men-would leave.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- 'If everyone left, then you don't know what it would be like. [...] Everyone would leave-and who would defend Ukraine?' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single, no children]
- 'If there were no restrictions on freedom of movement, then half of Ukraine would leave, and there would be no one either to keep the economy going or to fight.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]
- 'All men-yes, as soon as they open the borders, men will leave.' [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]
- '[I perceive restrictions on movement] as necessary, because I agree [...] that most men would leave, and the economy needs to be sustained.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]
- 'If men had the opportunity to leave, then many families would go with them-very many. That would really undermine both the economy and the combat capability of our state. [...] Even if you are not serving here, you should be working here for the economy. So restrictions on traveling abroad are absolutely necessary.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]
- 'Restrictions on leaving the country-if the borders were opened, many people would run away.' [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]
- 'As for men going abroad... [...] if there were no ban, it seems to me that two-thirds of the country would leave together with the men, and there would be just a small group of people left, which Russia would capture.' [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 'I think it is the right thing to do. [...] Many people would have left, and there would have been no one to defend [the country].' [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 'I view it positively. If leaving the country were unrestricted, then there really would be no one to defend the country.' [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]
- 'I consider both the curfew and the ban on leaving the country to be necessary, so to speak, for those who can serve. Not necessarily only men. I think this helps, of course, to win the war.' [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- 6 'There are restrictions on movement, even on freedom of speech. [...] Still, in wartime conditions, under martial law, I would like some things to be stricter. [...] So that this doesn't happen again.' [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 7 'Many things during the war can be restricted, roughly speaking. That is, the freedom for men liable for military service to leave the country. And many other things. But it should apply to all citizens. And when in our case it applies only to those at the bottom, while those a bit above the middle are not affected anymore and can do whatever they want, everyone else understands that this is inadequate and wrong.' [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 8 'It is necessary, but not across the entire country-rather within, for example, those areas where there are hostilities or nearby areas, such as Sumy oblast, Kharkiv oblast, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Dnipropetrovsk.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- 'Freedom of movement [...] It has to exist, except for frontline zones-within 20-30 kilometers. [...] There, it's clear-there is a danger to life. Everywhere else, people should simply be given basic freedom.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- 'My opinion about the curfew is that it is, in a way, a violation of a person's freedom of movement, but I believe that during the war, during the war, it can be [...] in regions that are not in the combat zone, the schedule could be reduced a little.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]

- 9 'As for the curfew-well, in Kherson, after five o'clock there is basically no public transport at all, only taxis until seven or eight, and after that, basically, it's dusk and that's it-there's no one around. Of course, when you go to Odesa and see that life is only just beginning, people are having fun, and it feels like there is no war at all. Personally, that is unpleasant for me, because there is still a war.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 10 'They created the "united news marathon", removed most of the different entertainment programs, and left a single, so to speak, information system and policy. But this is connected to martial law. If there were no martial law, we would still have the same diversity of opinions in the media.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 11 'On the united news marathon, they talk about how powerfully we are winning [...] There is no freedom there [...] We can find it elsewhere. Everything is said there as it is. We have already chosen for ourselves the sources from which we get information-truthful, verified ones.' [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- 12 'The system has gained such levers of influence over absolutely every aspect of a person's life that even the smallest amount of democracy you had before the war has either been destroyed or is now in the hands of those people who interpret things differently [...] thieves on the inside, taking advantage of this opportunity, have instead discredited democracy as a whole.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 'Our situation can no longer be called democracy-well, in fact, it is pure authoritarianism.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 'The boundaries of democracy in Ukraine have narrowed during the war [...] We have effectively become an authoritarian regime-one person is commanding everything.' [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]  
 'It has become much worse in every way. You can't move around calmly. You can't see your relatives. There is a constant feeling of danger.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]  
 'I don't see any democracy here. I see that people have been divided-some were given power over others. And others were told: you are not like us, you are bad, you don't speak the right language, you don't go to the right church, you didn't go to the military office, you didn't register. Divide and rule.' [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'We are, generally speaking, a parliamentary-presidential republic. There should be the basic fact that parliament is supposed to be higher than the president. Accordingly, it should not be the case that even under martial law, the procedure for changing the composition of the Verkhovna Rada is pushed through so easily. [...] Also, there have been encroachments on bodies that have always been independent.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'Of course, I also view it negatively, because before those restrictions were introduced, I had certain plans. [...] I am hostile toward any restriction of freedom by the state.' [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'I saw how our authorities can change certain laws, bend them to suit themselves, and do things in a way that is more convenient for them, [...] and it makes me very sad. [...] For me, everything has changed, and not for the better.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single] –'Before the war, I considered our country democratic. When the full-scale invasion began, of course, the value of life and the unity of the country were strongly felt. After some time, my opinion changed, because I do not feel safe [...] and I cannot freely express my opinion.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- 13 '[Journalists] are being controlled, they are not allowed to express the full picture [...] at the beginning of the war it was not filtered like that. Now, essentially, we do not know what is happening. I mean, I see what is going on at the front, and what is presented in the news-these are really different things.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 'We have the united news marathon, there are restrictions [...] There is no freedom of speech in Ukraine.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]  
 'Now we have the united news marathon. Over four years, even grandmothers have probably stopped watching it. Not to mention how much money is being poured into all of this. [...] There are absolutely no free media outlets.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 'Mass media [...] it also [...] does not always match reality.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
 'The media [...] do not show us everything. [...] I hear from acquaintances who are on the front line-they report not what is actually happening. [...] You cannot fully trust the media. They show only the surface, which the authorities dictate to them.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]

- ‘There are many channels that, in my opinion, work for the authorities, and there is some false information. Sometimes there is one version of information, but in reality everything is completely different.’ [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]
- ‘Everything has changed. Even the media outlets that operate outside the Marathon still look over their shoulder, [...] because the Security Service (SBU) can come and knock on anyone’s door. [...] I have a friend who works for one of these news websites, [...] and she says that literally once a week [...] they get a list from management: write positively about this person, don’t write about that person, mention this one, don’t mention that one. So, it’s censorship.’ [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- ‘Freedom of speech has also narrowed significantly. Right now, on TV there is only one united news marathon. [...] there is no other opinion. [...] that is wrong.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]
- ‘The united news marathon is an example. In theory, we should have pluralism of opinions. I believe that even in wartime, this pluralism could remain, because it is useful.’ [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- 14 ‘Restrictions on freedom of movement are, as they say, another-and quite a large-nail in the coffin of Ukrainian democracy.’ [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 15 ‘Attitudes toward the Constitution of Ukraine have changed; it is no longer fully upheld in terms of human rights-basically everything has been put on pause with the words: “for later”.’ [FG3, P5, M, 22, Chernivtsi, single]
- 16 ‘The police now have the right to do this and that. [...] Later the TCR arrive-they basically have the right to do anything. [...] and you also can’t defend your interests in court. Because the court [...] in 100% of cases sides with the police and the TCR. The system is simply anti-democratic. [...] it’s a terrible stress right now. [...] The state is constantly trying to deceive you, catch you, trap you, force you [...] I communicate only with men of conscription age [...] For some, this leads to depression, you know-to the desire to hide, to make yourself smaller, to anger, to an accumulation of hatred.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- 17 ‘It is impossible to move around freely [...] Many of my acquaintances are hiding at home, afraid that they will be grabbed by the TCR guys.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- ‘People can’t go out on the street because they will be taken away. That’s horrific as well. Instead of developing a business, you simply understand that you can be taken and led in an unknown direction. And it’s still good if you come out of there alive, because people die there, in TCR facilities. This affects everything very negatively-business, people’s lives, and their mental state.’ [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
- 18 ‘I have acquaintances who, even having a deferment or something else, are still afraid to move around the city-they are afraid of unexpected, illegal actions by the TCR. [...] this has increased the fear of movement so much that many businesses have started to freeze.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘The authorities have taken away the possibility to move where a person wants. [...] small businesses are basically losing the right to exist.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- ‘Most of my clients are outside the city. But because [...] the company doesn’t provide us with a mobilization exemption, we have limited ourselves to the city only. I am forced to refuse my services to all the suburbs, which, of course, affects both people and my financial situation.’ [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]
- ‘It simply affects the quality of business-its operations and the ability to make a profit.’ [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]
- 19 ‘Those who, I believe, wanted to stay here have stayed. Those who wanted to leave should have the right to do so. All of this should be voluntary.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 20 ‘In Russia [...] they also think they live in a democracy, they also have elections. Well, that’s what it seems to them. They were happily fed authoritarianism disguised as democracy. [...] We haven’t gone far from them.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘These kinds of materials should not be kept quiet [...] because then it becomes another point for comparing us with Russia. In Russia, if you say something wrong about the military, or film something, or whatever-that’s it, “discrediting the military”, and you go to prison. Well then we have the same thing, 100%.’ [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]

- 21 'We are already sliding toward North Korea as it is.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 22 'Ukraine has completely lost its democratic character. It has become like North Korea. That is, there is no freedom of choice-none at all. All power belongs to the authorities. In other words, the people have no influence over anything.' [FG3, P5, M, 22, Chernivtsi, single]
- 23 'There is no such thing as a free person here right now. [...] Everything is controlled. Everything depends on the authorities.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]
- 24 'We took the Russian system as our antagonist, but for some reason we are starting to copy it completely.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- 25 'Most people believe that we are in a cage. We are not being let out anywhere, and our freedom of speech is being affected. [...] The authorities have taken away the ability to move where a person wants to go. [...] So I don't see any development of democracy in the country.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- 26 'I went as a volunteer, and it was my own choice. And when you end up in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, you end up in slavery, basically [...] I saw how people are treated-they are not allowed to go home [...] when a person is forced to do something against their will, then that is no longer democracy. [...] For me, democracy would be when I myself chose to go and fight. [...] But then, when I say, "That's it, enough, I don't want to," and I'm forced to, then [...] that is no longer democracy.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- 27 'At first, everything changed a lot for me. And there was unity. [...] Men stood up to defend, and women stood up to defend as well.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
 'I saw the people who came back from abroad and stood shoulder to shoulder with me. [...] I saw everyone who rose up from the first days and went.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]  
 'It changed for the better, because society became more active and more aware.' [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]
- 28 'We really do have freedom of speech.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
 'Nothing has changed in terms of control. That is, no one comes and tells you, "Don't write this."' [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]  
 'As for freedom of speech-well, people express themselves now, everyone speaks.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 'I believe that today Ukraine has freedom of speech, and anyone who wanted to speak out and could do so-still wants to and still can.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 29 'The united news marathon is a plus, since all information is being provided. [...] We say that under martial law they banned rallies and similar things. But [...] people gathered, and no one dispersed them with water cannons. Even though, in wartime, that was supposed to happen-so democracy and freedom of speech are at a normal level.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
 'Nothing has changed regarding freedom of speech. We can still speak freely. You saw it-people went out to protest. So I don't see that anything has been fundamentally violated during the war.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 'Nothing has changed in terms of control. That is, no one comes and tells you, "Don't write this."' [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]  
 'Even when the authorities made mistakes in some ways, there were protests, and people freely expressed their opinions during those protests. And the authorities drew certain conclusions.' [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]
- 30 'I have been serving since the time of the Maidan. [...] Back then, during the Maidan, I realized that we were standing at a very important point, when we as a nation are not only formed, but have these extraordinary capabilities [...] I saw my wonderful fellow citizens-people who were truly inspired by the revolution and its ideas [...] and during the full-scale invasion, this was only reinforced. That is, when there was such an existential threat absolutely for everyone, everyone united.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married, no children]



Young soldier affected by PTSD. Designed by Freepik

# How Ukrainians navigate sensitive topics during wartime

Already early in the war, the traditional dominance of television (specifically, the state-aligned ‘United News’ telethon) had been largely eclipsed by Telegram (particularly real-time news on local channels) and YouTube (especially channels led by favourite bloggers).<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning, however, that some participants shared a generalised sense of distrust and disillusionment with all information sources.<sup>2</sup> This shift towards Telegram and YouTube is not just a change in platforms, but

a fundamental change in how Ukrainians navigate the war’s most sensitive issues.

In the early phases of the war, public discussion of sensitive issues—including military setbacks, manpower challenges, the fairness of mobilisation, internal political fractures, and government corruption—was widely constrained by an unwritten social contract designed to maintain national unity and limit the impact of Russian disinformation. However, this self-censorship has visible

limits; for instance, the July 2025 protests against the perceived weakening of anti-corruption bodies (NABU and SAPO) demonstrated that Ukrainians will break the silence when they feel democratic red lines are being crossed. More broadly, restrictions over democratic freedoms are accepted as long as these are perceived as temporary and reversible. As the war has entered a prolonged phase of attrition, these taboos are increasingly being broken, and the public's tolerance of government encroachment on basic freedoms is wearing thin. This shift is driven by a growing conviction that democratic accountability and public debate of once-taboo issues are central to national defence, not a distraction from it. There are some exceptions, as shown below.

*If there is no criticism, they will think that [...] everything is fine for them. It's the same kind of informational warm bath.*

We asked participants to consider whether it was justifiable or not to publicly discuss certain topics despite martial law. An overwhelming majority of participants agreed that it was fair to filter or ban altogether any information about casualties and movement of military equipment or army units<sup>3</sup> to prevent aiding Russia and minimise the risk of demoralising the Ukrainian population.<sup>4</sup> Not everyone agreed though. For example, one interviewee suggested avoiding the disclosure of casualty rates to communities close to active combat operations in order to protect morale, while noting that such information could be released retrospectively - for instance, in relation to Ukrainian losses during the battle of Bakhmut.<sup>5</sup> A few participants shared an even more radical view of absolute

transparency.<sup>6</sup> One young respondent criticised the government's censorship, arguing that such an approach treats the public like children and deprives them of an accurate understanding of the reality on the ground.<sup>7</sup>

*For a normal person, this is basically [...] betrayal during the war – because how can you even think about robbing your own state during a war?*

Interestingly, many participants were more outspoken about the need to report on problems at the front (including any issues with unprofessional commanders) in order to deter future misconduct and hold wrong-doers accountable.<sup>8</sup>

As for cases of corruption, a large number of participants agreed that it was necessary to report on them to create a culture of accountability<sup>9</sup> and demonstrate a firm commitment to European integration standards.<sup>10</sup> One participant equated corruption to betrayal: 'how can you even think of robbing your country during war'.<sup>11</sup> Respondents also highlighted that corruption cases especially in the military should be reported as failure to do so undermines the war effort.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, one respondent residing abroad stated that public discussion of corruption cases can serve as an outlet for public discontent, mitigating the risk of a revolution that could otherwise compromise wartime cohesion.<sup>13</sup> However, some cautioned that coverage of corruption cases should still be restricted as it could erode public morale<sup>14</sup> and jeopardise Western financial assistance.<sup>15</sup>

Probably the most divisive issue that has emerged in this study was participants' views on whether it was acceptable to

criticise failures of the political and military leadership. Roughly half insisted that this was indeed necessary to uphold democratic principles and stimulate positive change.<sup>16</sup> The other half insisted that any criticism of the leadership risked undermining national unity and international support for the war effort, and should therefore be postponed until after the war is over.<sup>17</sup>

Virtually all respondents favoured banning pro-Russian content spreading disinformation.<sup>18</sup> Respondents also overwhelmingly favoured banning the Russian Orthodox Church, pointing to its subversive activities<sup>19</sup> and open calls for violence against Ukrainians.<sup>20</sup> There were only a few exceptions, with respondents emphasising that the state must avoid infringing upon religious freedoms while maintaining the ability to isolate and neutralise Russian hybrid influence within media and religious institutions.<sup>21</sup> One interviewee argued that any prohibitions can be exploited by Russia, so it would be better to ensure stronger state control instead.<sup>22</sup> Others argued that banning the Russian Orthodox Church is a violation

of constitutional freedoms in theory, but it's a necessary measure during war.<sup>23</sup>

Respondents were also asked if there were instances where they chose to self-censor when addressing any of these sensitive topics. Active or former servicemen admitted that soldiers engage in self-censorship withholding reports of leadership failures, even when such failures result in avoidable casualties, out of fear of professional retaliation.<sup>24</sup> However, one female respondent currently serving in the army indicated that her main reason for holding back criticism is to avoid discrediting the institution she represents during a full-scale war.<sup>25</sup>

Participants described a notable degree of self-censorship in general,<sup>26</sup> and especially concerning the following sensitive subjects: the fairness of mobilisation and draft evasion,<sup>27</sup> abuse of power by recruitment officers being the exception rather than the rule,<sup>28</sup> the use of the Russian language or attendance to the Russian Orthodox Church,<sup>29</sup> and criticism of Zelenskyy's presidency.<sup>30</sup>

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

- 1 'Of course, [my sources of information] have changed. During the war, I have already chosen for myself the journalists or channels that I follow. [...] I watch YouTube and Telegram.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]  
'I watch only YouTube channels.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
'I watch YouTube, of course-what is happening on the front line.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]  
'Every day I read Telegram. That is my main [source]. On YouTube, I watch those-journalists, for example.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
'With the start of the full-scale invasion-well, about Sumy, about my own city-I of course learn simply from local journalism and Telegram channels, [...] and as for the news, I mostly consume it through Telegram channels and on Serhii Sternenko's YouTube.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
'Since 2022, I stopped watching the united news marathon and I still don't watch it. Mostly, I get information from Facebook or Telegram channels.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]  
'After the full-scale invasion, when there was no television, I used the Telegram channel "Suspilne Chernihiv". [...] I don't watch the united news marathon.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
'I get almost all my information mainly from Telegram channels-there is one called "Merefa Life", that's the city where I am now, "Kharkiv News", "Real Ukraine", "Insider"-mostly air raid alerts.' [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]  
'We watched the united news marathon because there was nothing else-there weren't even channels, because the antennas were being disrupted [...] and when the internet appeared, I switched from the

- united news marathon [...] I installed Telegram, the “Real War” channel. I don’t read anything else. [...] my husband and [...] my mother, they use YouTube.’ [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]
- ‘When de-occupation had already happened, [...] in my family [...] they watch Telegram channels, because some timely information appears there [...] the same “insider”, that’s a local Telegram channel, “Suspilne”, for example, and also something like “Chernihivshchyna News”, [...] and speaking for myself, I can say that we stopped watching TV.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- ‘We watch Sternenko all the time, and we read news Telegram channels. [...] the local ones, so that we understand where there have been strikes.’ [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]
- ‘Before, I used to watch TV channels, but now I mostly follow Telegram. And I mostly follow regional channels.’ [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]
- ‘Before the war, I didn’t trust Telegram channels at all and didn’t read them [...] but under the conditions we have now, it’s the only option where you can get information instantly, [...] although there is a lot of different junk. Still, I prefer my local ones, like “Kherson Without Fakes”, “Suspilne Kherson” [...] I didn’t really watch television.’ [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- ‘Since I am also a displaced person, [...] I switched to local community pages, [...] like “Chernivtsi City Council” [...] and I also added those [...] Telegram channels that relate to where the threats are right now [...] “Air Raid Alert”.’ [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]
- ‘Before the war, it was partly television, perhaps because I lived with my mother [...] but mostly, since the start of the war, I don’t watch television. Mostly, it’s Telegram channels-“Unews” and our “Vinnytsia Information Bureau”.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- ‘Before the war, I used Telegram very little; now I have started using Telegram more.’ [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]
- ‘During the war, people started using online news more. There are a lot of channels-Telegram and Viber. [...] I hardly watch TV.’ [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- ‘Since the beginning of the war, I haven’t been watching TV and switched to Telegram channels-mainly regional ones. [...] As for bloggers, well, from time to time I listen to Sternenko.’ [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- ‘I don’t have time to watch TV, and there’s nowhere to watch it. I’m subscribed to Telegram channels-those that are closer to Lviv.’ [FG4, P6, F, 53, Lviv, divorced]
- ‘Telegram channels [...] Now I use them a bit less, but still, out of habit, I pay attention to them. Mostly, these are local Chernivtsi channels. [...] “ChernivtsiGram” [...] and “Trukha”.’ [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- ‘Before 2022, I watched more television, but since 2022 [...] I started using social media more. [...] As for Telegram, it’s simply Suspilne Vinnytsia and Suspilne Kharkiv.’ [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- ‘With the start of the full-scale invasion, of course, it’s Telegram channels. I’m subscribed to our Kherson journalists and groups.’ [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- ‘YouTube and Telegram. On YouTube there is Sternenko’s channel-every day he reports the news. And on Telegram-“TLK News”, it’s a Kharkiv blogger.’ [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 2 ‘There is no trust anymore, in certain bloggers [...] at this point, I don’t trust absolutely anyone.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- ‘The media cannot be fully trusted.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- 3 ‘[There is no need to report on] the movement [...] of military units.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- ‘Everything related to the army, I wouldn’t report on. I wouldn’t report on losses. [...] We need to limit topics like the amount of ammunition at the front, because that is military-specific.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘We don’t need so much information about the aid being provided to us-how many systems arrived, how many planes. That information is unnecessary.’ [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]
- ‘Some rights, freedom of speech are also being violated now, but I think that is actually right, because you shouldn’t, so to speak, write where a unit is located. [...] The aid that is being provided to us. We have already come to the conclusion after two years that not everything needs to be announced [...] because it is all being tracked.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]

- 'You shouldn't report strikes and immediately say where and how, where the military are.' [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- 'I think you shouldn't announce the locations where the military are deployed.' [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 4 'Regarding the number of people killed. The command headquarters keeps statistics, but the information is closed. [...] Why is this done? [...] so that there is no panic. [...] people's motivation has dropped. I mean, Ukraine's forces and Russia's forces are not comparable, you understand? [...] There isn't enough weapons, there aren't enough soldiers. That's why it is hard to fight such a huge state as Russia. [...] [M.: So these restrictions-are they justified?] "I think they are, yes."' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- 'About military losses, I think it is not really necessary to publicize this area too much, because those people for whom it is beneficial can take advantage of it. [...] Russia. It will twist it and present the losses in the media as if ours are enormous. [...] Although I know many people know that the losses are large.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- 'Military losses, problems at the front, [...] I think we shouldn't be talking about that right now. [...] it won't make it easier for anyone.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
- 'Of course not. Well, you know, military losses [...] that is called panic-mongering [...] it is already on the verge of betrayal.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]
- 'So that there is no destabilization among the population, it really is not necessary to talk about losses.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]
- 'I completely agree regarding the losses, because when in 2022 we were reading all those Telegram channels, it was very hard for me to read.' [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]
- 'The fact that they don't tell us our losses is right, because there are, I know such people, who would immediately panic, and they would already be gone from Ukraine.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 'Everything that is directly related to military actions, or everything related to military affairs, is better to keep quiet about.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 'If this information is made public, it will become even worse.' [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]
- 'Regarding losses, there is no need to disclose all information, because [...] there is no need to sow panic.' [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]
- 'As for losses at the front and problems at the front, silence is simply a tactical part of the plan. [...] disclosing information also gives understanding to the enemy as well-of all our vulnerabilities and problems.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 5 'I believe that people should know how many people have died. But, for example, there are places [...] like Bakhmut was, or now Pokrovsk, or here-Kharkiv, Vovchansk. [...] As long as fighting is going on there, I think it is better for people not to know. [...] They send someone to a brigade and say: "We're sending you to Pokrovsk." And yesterday he heard that in Pokrovsk every third person has died. [...] Time passes. Now you can talk about Bakhmut.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- 6 'I disagree about the losses, because they exist anyway, and against that background speculation still begins-people actually exaggerate them. And maybe it would be more correct to announce them.' [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 'Regarding those same losses and problems at the front, not everything is being covered. But my personal opinion is that [...] maybe the losses should be fully reported, but it seems to me that people would be even more frightened.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 'I believe we shouldn't restrict how many people have been killed. [...] Either way, the enemy, so to speak, knows what our losses are. Why this lying? Let people know the truth and let them understand how it really is-not live with rose-colored glasses, thinking that we are winning.' [FG3, P5, M, 22, Chernivtsi, single]
- 'Everything should be reported, and people should know the truth.' [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]

- ‘Everything should be stated fully. Corruption is absolutely the top issue, and so on. Losses, accordingly, too. [...] someone might make some decision for themselves [...] But most people here just close their eyes and don’t want to listen.’ [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- ‘Our people should know everything. It seems to me that these restrictions are a concealment of information.’ [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- 7 ‘No topics should be restricted [...] our authorities treat people like some kind of children [...] you don’t need to know that, because you’ll get scared.’ [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 8 [M.: ‘We shouldn’t talk about losses. What about problems at the front?’] ‘Problems at the front, of course, should be talked about. [...] Shortages-equipment, everything else, weapons, so to speak, yes. And also people.’ [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
- ‘The needs at the front [...] Of course, this should be said out loud, because first of all it will be addressed to society, but also to other officials. For them, it will be, how to put it, a lesson.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]
- ‘In Kherson, in one brigade, there were problems with a certain colonel, and until it reached a certain level, no one paid attention to it. There were heavy losses and serious problems there, [...] not everything should be kept quiet.’ [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- 9 ‘Corruption here is mostly carried out by civilians. Because the Ministry of Defence is still headed by a civilian in our country. This can and should be reported on.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘We need to talk about it. Because if you don’t talk about it, corruption will keep growing.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- ‘In any case, it needs to be made public [...] [cases of] corruption.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- ‘It is precisely when there is publicity, when society keeps it under control, constantly pushes for it, and constantly brings it to the surface in the news, that it moves judicial mechanisms and investigations forward. [...] corruption is enemy number one.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]
- ‘Of course, this should be talked about. [...] what is happening in Ukraine right now is very frightening. It’s simply the looting of humanitarian aid. I think there’s something going on with weapons too.’ [Interview 10, M, 30–40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
- ‘Corruption, yes, and everything related to unlawful actions-I believe it should be voiced, it needs to be changed, because it destroys us from within.’ [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]
- ‘Yes, it is necessary to criticize them if they are doing something wrong-if they are stealing even in military tenders [...] then why should it be kept quiet?’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]
- 10 ‘By talking about corruption, we show that we are fighting it, because the war will end someday, and we all aspire to join the European Union, NATO, and so on. Corruption, as the main problem, is the first thing we will have to fight, and the fact that we are already doing something about it now, covering it, and how people react to it-including through protests-I believe this is, on the contrary, beneficial. Precisely because it is being covered.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]
- 11 ‘For a normal person, this is basically [...] betrayal during the war-because how can you even think about robbing your own state during a war?’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]
- 12 ‘Corruption among the military should be reported on, and those responsible should be punished. Those people who give away our positions [...] right now a lot of young people are being bought through Telegram channels for some imaginary 3–5 thousand, and they cause harm.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- ‘Yes, we need to talk about corruption. Because there is a lot of corruption among the military, among the command. A lot of injustice. And that is why mobilisation has been disrupted.’ [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- 13 ‘If [corruption] keeps flourishing, and no one reacts to it, no one talks about it, then a revolution could happen later-and we definitely don’t need that.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]
- 14 ‘As for corruption, in my view it’s better to let law enforcement agencies work and do something. [...] Because if it’s shown on television, it only creates disgust among people.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]

- 'It hinders the fight against corruption, but in wartime there should be certain restrictions, [...] first and foremost to maintain the population's morale.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 15 'On corruption, my view is that it shouldn't be talked about. Why? Because other sponsor countries-donor countries-provide us with a lot of funding.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]
- 16 [M: 'How do you feel about public criticism of the country's leadership [...] and of the military leadership?']  
 'Criticism? Positive.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
 'If the President is bad and people say so, it should be covered, and he should be replaced. If the authorities cannot perform-because, as I see it, the authorities are the executor of the Ukrainian people's will.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]  
 'It is probably necessary. Because if the command is doing something wrong and there are problems because of the command-more losses-then we definitely need to deal with it and change that command.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]  
 'Public criticism is normal. This is exactly what democracy is: criticism. We don't have a cult of personality here.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
 'There should be healthy, reasonable criticism of those who truly deserve it. [...] If this doesn't happen, we are simply returning to dictatorship.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]  
 'Politically, I think it is necessary [to criticize], because if they sit there, watch, and the people don't react, then it means they like everything.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]  
 'I think it is necessary. [...] If people hadn't come out, NABU would have been banned.' [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]  
 'I think it is necessary, but [...] not blah-blah-blah [...] not throwing mud. Something concrete.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 'The only thing is that during the war, maybe you need to take certain things into account and all that. But well-argued criticism should exist.' [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]  
 'There should be public criticism of both the military leadership and the country's leadership, because otherwise, if there is no criticism, they will think that [...] everything is fine for them. It's the same kind of informational warm bath.' [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'We should criticize, of course.' [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]-[M: 'How do you personally feel about public criticism of the country's leadership and the military leadership?'] 'It should exist and be there.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]  
 'There should be criticism of the authorities. [...] it is one of the first signs of democracy.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 'Criticism, of course, should exist.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]'It is necessary, because when you bring it into the public sphere, [...] it still influences the authorities in some way.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]  
 'There should be criticism.' [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 17 [M: 'How do you feel about public criticism of our authorities, of the state-well, the President, the government?']  
 'I feel negatively about it. Why? Because a country that is at war [...] this is not the time.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]-[M: 'How do you feel about public criticism of the country's leadership and the military leadership?']  
 'Probably not the right time.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]'If you go around saying that the state is very bad, that the leaders of the state are bad, that the President is bad, that the Cabinet of Ministers is bad-then who will go and fight for this country?' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 'During wartime, there cannot be criticism of the President as the head of state, because it would undermine us in the eyes of our allies who are helping us.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]  
 'Criticism should be measured, because how is the government supposed to understand that we don't like something [...] But it also must not undermine morale. So it should be objective and measured.' [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]  
 'To criticize publicly during this wartime period means undermining authority at the international level. And I believe it is inappropriate to do that.' [FG2, P6, F, 55, Chernihiv obl., single, with children]

'There is destabilization going on [...] during war, freedom of speech-you understand, you can criticize actions, [...] like how commanders allowed something like that. But [...] you cannot criticize the institution itself. [...] that is betrayal [...] when you criticize the President or [...] the Verkhovna Rada [...] it is playing into Russian propaganda.' [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]

- 18 [M: 'Should Russian-language content be restricted?'] 'Of course.' [M: 'And publications with pro-Russian views?'] 'All the more so.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
'As for Russian [content], of course it should be restricted. [...] so that there is less of it. [...] [as for publications with pro-Russian views] I would shut them down completely.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
'If this content is being broadcast from our neighboring, hostile state-the one that attacked us-then I believe it absolutely should be restricted. Why? Because the information is distorted, the information is untrue. [...] Because people [...] who don't know how to analyze it take everything at face value.' [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
'It is very, very important to reduce everything Russian, so that it does not reach into Ukraine in any way. So, for example, they banned Russian content on television, and likewise even listening to Russian music in cafés and restaurants. [...] You can immediately assume that the owner or whoever is in charge supports the Russians-and they are, in effect, destroying the Ukrainian people.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]-[M: 'Should Russian-language content be restricted?']  
'Yes, yes.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single, no children]  
'Demoralization is one of the key tools of IPSO [...] restrictions should exist, because they have a very negative impact on the moral and psychological state of society and the military. [...] I would ban any Russian-language content altogether. [...] our language is our weapon.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
'Right now, control over the spread of hostile propaganda has been significantly strengthened. And I think it is right that all our media have fully switched to the Ukrainian language.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
'They shut down hostile rhetoric as much as they could, and I'm only glad about that.' [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]-[M: 'Should Russian-language content be restricted?']  
'In the media-yes.' [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]  
'I agree.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 19 'Starting from 1917, the church in the Soviet Union was exclusively under the patronage of the KGB. [...] when the Union collapsed, basically nothing changed, [...] and now they simply transmit this viewpoint [...] to their flock. [...] I want to ban not the ability to pray in some church, but I want to ban the ability to destroy this country from within. [...] it is simply a law enforcement structure that operates under the cover of the church.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
'This is not a religious organization-it is simply KGB stooges. We all understand perfectly well that it is a wolf in sheep's clothing. [...] manipulation, a sham, and an attempt to hide their agents behind it.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
'If you are talking about the Moscow Patriarchate, then everyone there should simply be put in prison. [...] they receive both funds and materials-everything comes straight from the Kremlin.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
'There should be no Russian church, because it is one of the ways, precisely, to bring in sabotage and reconnaissance groups (DRGs) and promote an anti-Ukrainian position that undermines national interests.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]  
'All the workers in that church were pro-Russian [...] I have a positive attitude toward the fact that it was banned.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]  
'The Russian Orthodox Church is, at this moment, an opium for those who go there. And we absolutely do not need that here.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
'I strongly support the ban on the Moscow Patriarchate [...] there is active [...] propaganda, and I know people who fall for this propaganda because it is being spread in the church.' [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]  
'They spread pro-Russian narratives. And that should not exist under the conditions we are in right now.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]

- ‘We are facing a full-scale invasion by this country into our country. I believe one of the first things that should be banned is the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate.’ [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- ‘Since 2014, we have been fighting against titushky and the Russian Orthodox Church. This trend should be maintained-it is the right thing to do.’ [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- ‘Definitely ban it. Ideally, ban as much Russian stuff as possible.’ [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- ‘Positively. [...] so that they don’t run our country through religion.’ [FG5, P6, F, 40, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- ‘Positively. Religion is also politics.’ [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 20 ‘If there are Russian churches in the country that help Russian soldiers destroy Ukraine, then I believe they should not be in Ukraine.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]-[M: ‘How do you feel about banning religious organizations that are connected to the aggressor state?’]
- ‘They should all be completely abolished.’ [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]
- ‘That’s right, [...] if their priests are saying that people should go and kill in Ukraine, then why should that church even be here?’ [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
- ‘Positively. I generally believe that everything Russian should be banned, because they attacked us.’ [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 21 ‘For the state-the top officials of the state-to publicly interfere in that sphere and impose things on people, telling them [...] which church to go to and which not to go to-that’s not right either. [...] It’s wrong, because people are not to blame [...] for being surrounded by Russian-language content, for watching those cartoons, [...]. And now we say: no, don’t watch this, don’t listen to that, don’t read that. [...] People are being treated like little children who need to be guided [...] That’s not how it should be.’ [FG3, P6, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- ‘If it’s simply Russian, then there’s no need to ban it at all, because, again, that’s already an infringement on freedom of speech. [...] But if they are telling you straight to your face that Russia is great, that everything will be wonderful with them, and Ukraine-well, why do you even need it? That, I probably would shut down.’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]
- ‘If it’s actually true, then restricting freedom of speech would already be wrong, and in that case it’s better to bring it to light. But if it’s blatant IPSO, then it needs to be filtered.’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]
- 22 ‘As soon as you ban it, you give them a kind of carte blanche. [...] Then they start singing about how they are being “destroyed” here [...] they shouldn’t be banned. [...] You should make life harder for them. [...] They can be inspected through the tax authorities, through the prosecutor’s office. That is, check who is doing what, where they are doing it, how they make money, where their funds come from. [...] More oversight from the authorities.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]
- 23 ‘According to the law, it really isn’t democratic to ban people’s views or religious beliefs, but again, these are forced measures. [...] I have personally heard and seen Russian actions being justified precisely in a Moscow Patriarchate church.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- ‘It is a forced measure under wartime conditions. It is quite a powerful tool for propaganda among those who attend it.’ [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 24 ‘I wrote posts-I wanted to publish them, and I didn’t, because sometimes I was afraid for myself, and sometimes for my brothers-in-arms. [...] Inadequate, unlawful orders that led to the deaths of more than one person-orders from unprofessional commanders.’ [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- ‘You can’t express what you think is necessary everywhere. For example, in the service, you can’t really [...] if you disagree with certain methods or certain orders.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- ‘In the army, over a year and a half, I learned to be, so to speak, very restrained. [...] The commander is always right.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- 25 ‘As a member of the armed forces, not all of my thoughts can be made public or expressed, because I am part of the system. And I do not have the right to discredit it.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married, no children]

- 26 'Before, in terms of freedom of speech, everything was freer. But now I'm kind of wary. It seems to me that the police have gained more powers-that they can just twist you up.' [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 'Freedom of speech has changed. You can't say what you think. You always have to analyze who you're talking to and what you're saying.' [FG5, P6, F, 40, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- 27 'Regarding mobilisation, [...] when you talk with someone who is emotionally close to the situation-someone whose relative or close person is at the front-it is usually very hard to steer the conversation in a calm way and not turn it into an argument. So you end up having to avoid this topic as well.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'I constantly hold back when it comes to [...] the question of mobilisation as well, probably, because it's the kind of issue that hits a nerve. I mean, it's a living person-they still want to preserve their life, and preserve their freedom of movement.' [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]  
 'As for draft evasion, I have acquaintances who say that a man has been sitting at home for the third year already, not leaving the house [...] There's no point in expressing your opinion, because it won't change anything-it will only lead to conflict.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 'Maybe I will stay silent about mobilisation in some situations, [...] because it is a very painful topic for some men and their families.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 'Mobilisation in Ukraine-it's such a painful topic. A lot of acquaintances, a lot of friends stayed there who now, so to speak, run to the store in short dashes.' [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 28 'Among acquaintances, because their opinion is quite different, and I thought they might not accept it. [...] about the TCR and all of that. [...] For example, he says that these actions are unlawful, illegal, that they, on the contrary, violate human rights and all that. And I say that these are isolated cases-it's not something widespread.' [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]
- 29 'I constantly hold back on the language issue, because I simply know that it hurts.' [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]  
 'There are people who are, well, really great people, but they go to a Moscow Patriarchate church. Well, what can you say to them? It's their choice. So I stay silent-I accept them, but we don't talk about that topic.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 30 'I very often stayed silent-yes, mostly with close people, acquaintances, friends-I also avoided the topic of politics, especially when they start saying things like: "Zelenskyy is like this, he's bad, he's this or that." Well, we chose him, so what can you do? And what will it change right now? Anyway, we can't hold elections right now. But in order not to lead to conflicts, you really do sometimes have to stay silent about these topics.' [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]



Anti-corruption protests in Ukraine, Kyiv, July 23, 2025. Inscriptions on the banners: “Independent Ukraine – independent institutions” and “Ukraine – for democracy.”  
Photo: Anna Tsyhyma/Public Interest Journalism Lab

# 4 Ukrainians’ views on democratic accountability and elections under martial law

Opinions were sharply divided on the feasibility of holding authorities accountable during wartime. Around half of participants expressed a degree of optimism, pointing to the media’s important oversight role,<sup>1</sup> and often citing the summer protests against the government crackdown on anti-corruption agencies as evidence.<sup>2</sup> One participant pointed out that the tools for holding power to account still exist, but they only work

if citizens actively choose to use them.<sup>3</sup> However, a second group of participants shared a more pessimistic outlook, arguing that the available channels for accountability are increasingly restricted and ineffective.<sup>4</sup> In light of Ukraine’s highly praised decentralisation reform started in 2014, we also asked participants whether the role of local leaders had changed since 2022 and whether they feel they have the power to influence

local decision-making. This question also proved to be a highly contentious issue. A large number of participants still recognised their own agency in influencing local authorities<sup>5</sup> and saw their continued effective role despite the war.<sup>6</sup> A few participants explicitly praised the positive impact of the decentralisation reform introduced in 2014.<sup>7</sup> However, there were also a number of participants who felt they had no influence at all over local authorities,<sup>8</sup> sometimes seen as being corrupt<sup>9</sup> or having no real powers, especially in the face of the centrally appointed military administrations.<sup>10</sup> One participant highlighted confusion arising from overlapping responsibilities between military and local administrations.<sup>11</sup>

*Actually holding elections? I don't see that as realistic. With this number of refugees abroad, the military, the missing.*

The participants included in this study have expressed contradictory and also nuanced opinions on the issue of elections. Around half argued in favour of holding elections as soon as possible, expressing a demand for political renewal to promote accountability<sup>12</sup> or just to maintain the health of Ukrainian democracy:<sup>13</sup> 'if there are no more elections, then it's probably not a democracy anymore'.<sup>14</sup> A couple of respondents suggested that elections are needed due to the continued presence of political parties with pro-Russian orientations, which many Ukrainians view as increasingly problematic in the post-2022 context.<sup>15</sup> Another participant argued that the lack of elections breeds impunity and undermines public trust and cohesion: 'if they cannot remove me [from office], then I can do anything I want'.<sup>16</sup> Only one participant expressed a very radical view, claiming that the president had lost legitimacy, and that any document he signed could be called into question.<sup>17</sup>

*What happened recently with the law about our institutions : NABU, SAPO, and so on - shows that people are paying attention, demanding things. And that together we can do something.*

A large number of respondents were adamant in saying that elections cannot be held for as long as the war continues due to logistical reasons<sup>18</sup> or risk of internal destabilisation.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, a small group of young participants suggested still holding local elections while avoiding national elections to minimise the risk of destabilisation.<sup>20</sup> One respondent rejected the notion that the absence of elections is harming Ukrainian democracy, arguing that the current parliament and president should continue to be considered legitimate, as elections are not suspended, but merely postponed.<sup>21</sup> These answers reflect recent survey results from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology conducted in late November-early December 2025: 57% insist that elections are possible only after a final peace agreement and a complete end to the war.<sup>22</sup> A number of participants stated that the absence of elections was indeed undermining democracy, but their suspension was a necessary measure during martial law.<sup>23</sup> Some participants viewed the current opposition in Ukraine as ineffective<sup>24</sup> and even self-serving<sup>25</sup>. A number of responses suggested that it's possible to still hear opposition voices that remain effective, but they are struggling given the supermajority held in parliament by Zelenskyy's Servant of the People party.<sup>26</sup> One group of respondents insisted that national unity should remain the priority, criticising party competition.<sup>27</sup>

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

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- 1 'The public-through journalists. Journalists should monitor tenders, declarations, and the decisions of all branches of government and at all levels, cover them, and show exactly where these violations are.' [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]  
'Thank God there is media and that we at least know a little about what they are doing.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]  
'This reporting and oversight exists-the media plays its role. [...] This accountability of the authorities, even though it is in a modern form-these blogs, Instagram, Facebook pages, [...] it is the fourth branch of power, and it is working too.' [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- 2 'What happened recently with the law about our institutions-NABU, SAPO, and so on-shows that people are paying attention, demanding things. And that together we can do something.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]  
'Accountability is still there, just as it was. The only thing is that a person who really wants to find information can do so on "Prozorro" and other similar websites. You can always check and see. [...] Personal Telegram channels of different MPs or government representatives [...] they have resumed live broadcasts from parliament. So I think accountability has improved.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
'Sessions of village, settlement, and city councils [...] you can view these recordings and documents. [...] Those who are interested can follow it-so they do report.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single] -'There are many of them. There is the same Control and Audit Office (KRU), [...] there are bodies that refer cases to court. [...] The thing is that afterward we don't see the results. [...] We do have institutions, they are working, people are trying, and they are working.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
'The mechanisms exist, but the final stage is the court-and it doesn't happen.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]  
'In the case of people living in Ukraine, I think they still have the possibility to change something. We have seen examples in the form of protests.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 3 'There is access to official documents-sessions, for example, they are all recorded. So if a person cares, if a person feels they have a civic stance, they can familiarize themselves with all the documents and [...] somehow get involved in this process. [...] These mechanisms have remained-petitions, requests, appeals-it's all still there.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 4 'Right now, we have fewer opportunities to influence the authorities' decisions-significantly fewer than we used to. [...] We can correct the authorities' actions much less now.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]-[M: 'Does society control the authorities?']  
'Not at all.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]-[M: 'Has government accountability to society changed after 2022?']  
'Well, it has probably decreased.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
'People speak-and it's pointless.' [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]  
'There is no public oversight [of the authorities] at all.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]-[M: 'Is there effective public oversight over state bodies and officials in Ukraine?']  
'No, there isn't. [...] All those supervisory boards, all the committees-they exist, but they don't do anything.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
'Yes, it doesn't exist.' [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]  
'Nominally yes, but in reality-no.' [FG2, P3, M, 49, Kharkiv, married, with children]  
'There is no such accountability at all.' [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]  
'The mechanisms exist, but in reality they don't really work.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 5 [M: 'To somehow take part in this-participate in some way, maybe look through some materials, maybe take part in discussions, surveys?']  
'Yes, of course.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single, no children]  
'My homeland is actually [...] in Poltava region, a small village [...] I can come to that community, propose something-and I think I can really influence it.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]

- ‘There are ways. It’s Patreon, I think it’s called, when people collect petitions, and then it goes for consideration either to parliament or to the president. And it’s one way to somehow get through. You can also hold some authorized rallies.’ [Interview 10, M, 30–40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
- ‘There was the war, then de-occupation, and we were left to fend for ourselves. We also created an initiative group. And then, within this group of people who cared, we started to influence, so to speak, some decisions made by the authorities.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- ‘We really pushed the local authorities hard to replace the lightbulb in front of our building. And until we kept pressuring them, kept writing letters [...] they didn’t replace that lightbulb. That’s it-but once we pushed them enough, they came and replaced it. So even during the war, you can do it. You just have to put in a bit of effort.’ [FG2, P4, M, 55, Sumy, married, with children]
- ‘If you find some solid, well-argued evidence-or even better, a person that the top leadership listens to-then you can influence their opinion.’ [FG2, P6, F, 55, Chernihiv obl., single, with children]
- ‘In our community, there are even projects, for example, to improve the city, and we can vote on which projects we want to be implemented. So yes, there is some influence.’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]
- ‘I have high hopes that I will be able to influence something, because in the near future we plan to sign a petition to create a shelter for homeless cats in Vinnytsia.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]
- 6 ‘Since the beginning of the war, people have become much more united, so to speak. Transparent offices are working perfectly. [...] Better than before the war.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]
- 7 ‘A new generation of people has come-Ukrainians who want to change these small communities. They are passionate, in a good sense of the word, about the idea of decentralization, and they are developing their small towns. [...] And all of this really affects absolutely all residents.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]
- ‘After decentralization, some powers have expanded a bit. [...] There have been changes.’ [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
- 8 ‘There isn’t a single tool-there’s nothing at all-through which I could somehow influence decisions in the community.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘No. Why? Because I’m not part of any Vinnytsia organizations, so I can’t influence anything in any way.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]-[M: ‘Can you influence anything?’]
- ‘No, I can’t.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]‘I can’t influence anything, because, unfortunately, if you take the Kharkiv City Council together with the Regional Council, then unfortunately it’s basically a mafia.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]-[M: ‘Can you influence decision-making at the local level?’]
- ‘No.’ [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]
- ‘No.’ [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- ‘No, I can’t do anything.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 9 ‘The local authorities have become local feudal lords.’ [FG2, P6, F, 55, Chernihiv obl., single, with children]
- 10 ‘In Kherson, for example, it simply doesn’t exist. And many frontline cities have lost their powers. [...] Now the problem, I guess, is the institution of these military administrations: [...] they appoint a person who is directly managed by one person in Kyiv. [...] The local government-the one the people elected-loses its powers. [...] So now there’s this kind of power grab [...] in an undemocratic way, basically a loophole because there’s a war going on.’ [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- ‘We now have a temporary military administration. [...] They’ve gained more power, and accordingly there’s been more abuse. [The military administration] has taken over control of everything.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- ‘It has become less effective. [...] They don’t carry out the role [the will of the people] that they were supposed to carry out-they only create the appearance of it.’ [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
- ‘As for any real activity by the city authorities, personally I don’t notice it at all in the city.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]

- ‘Our school was bombed. It should have already been rebuilt. The people who stole the money were simply put under house arrest. And the authorities aren’t doing anything about it.’ [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]
- 11 ‘There is a local administration-a military one, yes, a local military administration-and then there’s some other, non-military administration as well. Who’s in charge? I don’t understand who is in charge in our region, for example.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- 12 ‘The people who were elected-well, five years have already passed, and we all understand that there should always be something new in government. [...] Elections are needed. [...] This needs to change.’ [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 ‘This has a negative impact on democracy and freedoms. Because those same MPs, the same president-none of them are afraid of the next elections. [...] They affect freedom and democracy negatively.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]  
 ‘The authorities see their unlimited powers and do whatever they want. So [the absence of elections] has a negative impact.’ [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 13 ‘The absence of elections spoils our officials. When you don’t have the fear that you’ll be kicked out now, or you don’t need to report to your voters, then any person-and that’s normal-relaxes.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 ‘There is even greater distrust toward the authorities. Because the President, when elections were supposed to happen, took away my freedom to vote for someone else. By doing that-by not wanting to voluntarily leave office-the President took away freedom of speech and choice.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]  
 ‘The absence of elections is not really democracy.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married, no children]  
 ‘[The absence of elections] has a negative impact, because democracy is, after all, when the people choose.’ [FG3, P2, M, 22, Kyiv obl., single]  
 ‘From how it feels [...] it affects democracy. [...] It’s like we’re being squeezed-like we don’t have certain rights.’ [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 14 ‘If there are no elections anymore, then that’s it. That’s probably no longer a democracy.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]
- 15 ‘To hold elections. Of course, it’s impossible right now during wartime, but it would be very useful, because we still have representatives of various parties in the Verkhovna Rada who, given the public mood in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion, would not have seats in power.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
 ‘If we take The Opposition Platform-For Life or Ms. Tymoshenko as the opposition, that’s not an opposition-it’s people who need to be rooted out.’ [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
- 16 ‘There’s this thing called a sense of impunity-because if they can’t remove me, that means I can do anything. And that undermines, sorry, the public’s attitude toward the authorities and their trust.’ [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]
- 17 ‘Negatively, because our authorities have already lost any legitimacy under the Constitution. So even if we sign some documents, those documents can still be challenged at any moment, because our government is no longer functioning. Our President is not legitimate-so it’s negative; it’s not democracy.’ [FG3, P5, M, 22, Chernivtsi, single]
- 18 ‘Elections during the war aren’t needed. There’s the law, there’s the Constitution, which regulates that under martial law, holding elections like this isn’t required. [...] A huge number of people aren’t in the country at all. A huge number of people are at war-you can’t hold elections then either. Who is going to vote for whom?’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]  
 ‘The whole world would be surprised if we held elections while half of the men of military age are sitting in the trenches.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 ‘It’s not appropriate to hold elections right now, because I don’t understand how people at the zero line can go and vote.’ [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]  
 ‘It’s impossible to hold elections right now.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 ‘It doesn’t affect anything, because holding elections right now is simply impossible. Because the guys who are fighting at the front can’t vote.’ [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]

- ‘Actually holding elections? I don’t see that as realistic. With this number of refugees abroad, the military, the missing.’ [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 19 ‘During the war, [...] elections aren’t held. [...] This isn’t the time.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
 ‘Right now, the absence of elections doesn’t have a negative impact. On the contrary, it could stir up even more unrest in society.’ [Interview 10, M, 30–40, Kyiv, residing abroad]  
 ‘It was the right decision. [...] Populist forces had popularity in society. [...] That would inevitably have harmed Ukraine, so the absence of any political campaigning is a plus.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
 ‘There shouldn’t be elections. [...] As soon as the war ends-then, please. But as long as it’s ongoing, we’re once again playing into the hands of the Russians and our enemy.’ [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]  
 ‘While the war is going on, I think it should stay the way it is. [...] As of today, I think it doesn’t affect anything. [...] And if they allow it, then [...] who are we even going to find?’ [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 20 ‘At the local level, you can find some ways to resolve this. At the national level, right now it’s not worth touching it-if only to avoid destabilizing the situation overall.’ [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]  
 ‘The war isn’t ending, but I’ve seen on TV a few times this talk like, “elections,” “elections in the fall,” “everything will be fine”-[...] that’s just stirring things up and undermining the authorities.’ [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
 ‘Negatively, because, for example, if we take our village-yes-we’ve wanted elections for a very, very long time. Our community, yes-so the authorities need to be changed, so they don’t sit in the same place forever.’ [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]  
 ‘At these local levels, there should be some possibility considered.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 ‘At the national level, nothing is needed, but at the community level people need to be replaced, because there are people who aren’t doing their jobs.’ [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]  
 ‘Right now there’s a war. Right now there’s a lot of influence from our enemies. And they’ll take advantage of it to push their candidate forward. You can’t hold elections right now.’ [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- 21 ‘The absence of elections doesn’t affect democracy in any way right now, because we all chose the people we chose-we all chose them democratically. And it’s not that elections are “absent”-they’re postponed [...] they can’t be held.’ [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 22 Only 9% of Ukrainians believe that elections should be held before a ceasefire. 25% support holding elections in the event of a ceasefire and security guarantees. See: <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1569>
- 23 [M: How does the absence of elections affect democracy in Ukraine—positively or negatively?] ‘It’s the absence of democracy. But in wartime, it’s a measure that is necessary.’ [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single] – ‘It’s a negative measure—a forced, negative measure.’ [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children] – ‘No elections, no democracy. But then again, this is democracy during wartime.’ [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- 24 [M: ‘Is there a real political opposition in the Ukrainian parliament?’]  
 ‘No, there isn’t. [...] When they voted for the law on NABU and SAPO, it became absolutely clear that there is no opposition. They need to go. The next people—different people—have to come in.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 ‘The absence of elections is already not really about democracy. [...] Right now, the political opposition is somehow getting smaller and smaller.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married, no children]  
 ‘Right now there isn’t a proper, full-fledged opposition.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
 ‘Right now there is no full-fledged opposition.’ [FG1, P7, M, 19, Kharkiv, single]  
 ‘I just don’t see this opposition, honestly. Where is it? If earlier I watched TV, I knew where the opposition was, who they were. Now, in the channels where I read the news, I just don’t see what the opposition is doing.’ [FG4, P8, F, 47, Vinnytsia, married, with children]

- 25 ‘They sort of do it in their own interests, but there are too few of them. [...] Honcharenko [...] no one really supports him as a person. But people do support what he says. So an opposition is needed, but there should be more of it.’ [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 ‘They need to make the right decisions—so that they concern people, and not just their own benefit. Because that’s what’s happening there.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]  
 ‘At the moment, the opposition is represented by some marginal figures who are trying to get the maximum benefit for themselves. And yes, they are already preparing for the next elections.’ [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]
- 26 ‘You can hear [the opposition]. But it’s hard for them to get anything through there, with such a large number of pro-government MPs. [...] As a tool, the opposition is very effective. It doesn’t let the pro-government structure relax.’ [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]  
 ‘The role of the opposition in the current conditions is very limited [...] with a mono-majority, and with The Opposition Platform – For Life, which supports [the government] in everything [...] it’s hard for the opposition [...] to have any influence. So yes, they [...] convey information—that’s all they can do.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]  
 ‘There are few of them, [...] people don’t really listen to them or hear them.’ [FG4, P6, F, 53, Lviv, divorced]  
 ‘You can’t see them, you can’t hear them, and this mono-majority, I think, simply doesn’t allow them to speak out.’ [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 27 ‘The opposition right now [...] should work together somehow, together with the center of power. [...] the statements that, say, Honcharenko, or other politicians allow themselves to make—toward the authorities and toward the President—I think [...] now is not the time for that.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
 ‘The political opposition [...] its role is to undermine the other side, to smear it, and to make themselves look, like, all clean and innocent. But really—there is no opposition. On the contrary, they should be together, I think.’ [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]  
 ‘Everyone needs to unite and keep moving forward somehow. Later, when there is some kind of peace or victory, then we can deal with political opponents.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]  
 ‘Everyone should unite and pursue one common goal, instead of tearing each other apart and pushing some kind of opposition agenda.’ [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]  
 ‘To prevent the authorities from abusing their powers, there has to be an opposition. It shouldn’t be like this at all. There should be some kind of unity during the war.’ [FG2, P5, F, 61, Sumy, divorced, with children]



Ukrainian refugees waiting for trains at Przemyśl railway station, March 2022. Photo: Philipp Spalek / Caritas International

# 5 Ukrainians' civic duty at home and abroad and the future of Ukrainian democracy

While Ukraine's societal resilience has garnered global admiration as a testament to democratic endurance, there are visible signs of exhaustion as the war enters its fifth year. Moreover, the country faces a severe demographic crisis, with millions of citizens displaced abroad, many of whom are unlikely to return. Recognising these challenges, we asked participants to discuss who was responsible for upholding democracy in Ukraine, think of their own sense of civic duty and consider the role of the Ukrainian diaspora to better understand the collective agency required to navigate the country's uncertain future.

A group of participants insisted that responsibility for upholding democracy lies primarily on the president and/or parliament as a constitutional duty<sup>1</sup> and as elected representatives of the Ukrainian people.<sup>2</sup> That said, most respondents insisted that protecting democracy was a matter of collective responsibility, with each citizen making their own small contribution.<sup>3</sup> As one respondent put it, 'whatever we allow the government to do, this will happen'.<sup>4</sup> Many participants stressed the importance of adopting a proactive stance to find their own 'front' in support of the war effort:<sup>5</sup> 'each person must do something;

if you're not serving in the military, then you're helping here'.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, one participant observed that we cannot expect everyone to have high motivation and it is the state's responsibility to motivate and empower people to find out how they can make a valuable contribution.<sup>7</sup>

*During the war, there can be no apolitical people. That is, even a kind of passivity is, in fact, support for aggression.*

The vast majority insisted that Ukrainians residing abroad had the same responsibility as Ukrainians inside the country and could positively contribute through fundraising and awareness activities among foreign audiences.<sup>8</sup> As one participant put it, they are Ukraine's 'voice' and 'face' internationally.<sup>9</sup> However, some participants had quite critical views, arguing that Ukrainians abroad had largely assimilated in their host countries.<sup>10</sup> Others adopted a more neutral position, suggesting that the level of civil engagement should be a voluntary matter<sup>11</sup> and there are examples of both Ukrainians abroad being very engaged and those living their own life.<sup>12</sup> Finally, when we asked participants what would make them go out to protest, a number of positions emerged. Some stressed that perceived injustice around a peace deal or the mismanagement of the consequences of war for civilians would be the trigger,<sup>13</sup> particularly if it directly affected close ones.<sup>14</sup> For some, this sense of injustice coincided with a worsening of economic and living conditions.<sup>15</sup> A number of respondents specified that they would go out to protest if the government agreed to make territorial concessions to Russia.<sup>16</sup> Others pointed to any perceived authoritarian overreach from the government.<sup>17</sup> One respondent did not specify any reason in particular but emphasised that

the situation was like a ticking bomb: if the government continued to apply more stringent measures, protesting would become a last resort to be heard.<sup>18</sup> One soldier complained that despite a few exceptions, the vast majority still expected someone to lead them.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, one soldier suggested that Ukraine continues to fight its war for survival, and that the fight for democracy was still ahead.<sup>20</sup> Exhaustion was mentioned as a real problem.<sup>21</sup> Despite this, some participants maintained a hopeful perspective regarding Ukraine's future, stressing that offering an aspirational vision for the country-rooted in justice-is vital to sustain the fight. Central to this outlook is the belief that investing in Ukraine's human capital is the most effective path forward.<sup>22</sup>

*There are those who live abroad, and I know many such people – they help raise funds, buy what we need there, send it – both for free, and they also chip in money themselves, they take part. There are a lot of such people.*

Nevertheless, responses varied significantly across different geographic and social groups, reflecting diverse views on the future of Ukraine's democracy. Internally displaced persons emphasised freedom from discrimination and injustice in access to state aid and medical services. Residents of frontline regions and those who had lived under occupation reported experiencing the value of democracy most acutely, defining it primarily as the absence of occupation and the ability to live on their land under the Ukrainian flag.

These groups were more inclined to justify wartime restrictions as a necessary price for security. For respondents who viewed freedom of movement as the most tangible indicator of democracy, lifting these restrictions-or creating conditions under which they would no longer be necessary-was seen as a democratic value in itself. Younger respondents, meanwhile, prioritised freedom of choice, including the ability to decide how to dress and how to express their views. Similar

concerns were also voiced by those who had lived under occupation, where even such basic personal freedoms had been denied. While these understandings of freedom and democracy differ, they are not contradictory. Across all groups, the issue of justice emerged as a unifying concern. Its absence was widely seen as a factor that constrains democracy and significantly undermines trust in the state and public authorities.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

- 1 [M: Who, overall, bears responsibility for preserving freedom and democracy in Ukraine?] ‘Parliament and the President.’ [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 ‘The President, as the guarantor of the Constitution.’ [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 ‘The first level of government that should be thinking about this is the President’s Office, and then it should set out how the state ought to function properly-and then, step by step, further down the chain, it should be implemented [...] by Parliament.’ [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]  
 ‘The President, because we elected him-he’s the guarantor.’ [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]  
 ‘It’s the President.’ [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]  
 ‘In our country, responsibility lies with the President. [...] He makes all the decisions. He controls Parliament and the courts. And responsibility lies personally with him.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]  
 ‘Responsibility lies with the President, and with the government as well.’ [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 2 ‘On the authorities. [...] The people elected this person.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
 ‘The Verkhovna Rada, first and foremost. [...] because they were elected by the people.’ [Interview 8, M, 55, Chernivtsi, recruitment officer after injury, 2022 volunteer, single]
- 3 ‘If the people don’t keep an eye on it and take care of it, then no one will-besides the people, no one needs it.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
 ‘I think people also have some responsibility, not only those in positions of power.’ [Interview 4, M, 41, Vinnytsia, veteran, married, with children]  
 ‘Responsibility for preserving [democracy] lies with the people of Ukraine, as they have demonstrated more than once.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]- ‘First and foremost, really, it’s on the community-on the people. Because even now, during the war, there were protests when people went out.’ [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]  
 ‘On all of us. [...] If we have the wrong kind of government, it’s our fault-it’s my fault, yours, everyone’s-be-cause either we chose them, or we didn’t go to the elections.’ [FG3, P7, F, 39, Lviv obl., married, with children]  
 ‘On each of us.’ [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]  
 ‘We are all responsible. [...] We are all part of this state, and we are all responsible for what is happen- ing-through our choice of President, through our choice of where we are, what we do.’ [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 ‘Everyone has to be responsible for it, to keep an eye on it.’ [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]  
 ‘All of us, as residents of our country-we can only influence all these issues, all this democracy, together.’ [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 ‘It depends on all citizens.’ [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
- 4 ‘Whatever we allow the authorities to do-that’s what will happen.’ [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]

- 5 'Each of us has our own front: someone can work in culture, someone can volunteer, someone can do something else. And each of us has our own choice-either we live in Ukraine, or in "Malorossiia".' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]  
 'During the war, there can be no apolitical people. That is, even a kind of passivity is, in fact, support for aggression.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
 'Everyone should invest themselves in the people-in helping, in helping the army, in volunteering.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]  
 'Everyone helps in their own way, because I believe that today we are very united and we are doing this work.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
 'Be active-go to local elections, speak your mind, don't be passive.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]  
 'In open sources-literally-if there is some kind of rally whose position is close to us, we need to show up, and not just stay silent, thinking that it will never change anything.' [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 'If you have an extra hryvnia-give it to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Everyone should do their part where they are.' [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]  
 'I have to follow the laws, uphold people's rights and freedoms, and help the people around me.' [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]  
 'The fact that I can vote-when there is some kind of vote happening-I can take part in it. [...] Support the military, support our country's unity-this is very important.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children].
- 6 'Everyone has to be doing something-everyone has to contribute. If you're not serving, then you're helping here.' [FG1, P4, F, 27, Kharkiv obl., married]
- 7 'Everything comes down to motivation. Either you build that motivation yourself, based on your own experience-like in my case. I'm someone who has suffered myself, and I help others who have suffered like me to do something. That's my front, so to speak. [...] Not everyone can be an entrepreneur, not everyone can be their own director. Someone has to either teach people all of this, or inspire them. And here the state has to take on that responsibility [...] so that people can see [...] their own capacity and their own value to society.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 8 'They should be doing work. [...] All they can really do right now is tell the truth-what people abroad see about our democracy, how not exactly patriotic guys show up when they come here from abroad. [...] And to donate.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]  
 'There are those who live abroad, and I know many such people-they help raise funds, buy what we need there, send it-both for free, and they also chip in money themselves, they take part. There are a lot of such people.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]  
 'We made a different choice-we left for certain reasons. But we have the same responsibility as those citizens who stayed.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 'We made a different choice-we left for certain reasons. But we have the same responsibility as those citizens who stayed.' [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 'We are also, so to speak, responsible for everything.' [FG5, P7, M, 46, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]  
 'All of us have the same responsibility for what will happen, what is happening in Ukraine-because we made one choice, someone made another choice, stayed there, or went abroad, but everyone's responsibility is absolutely the same.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]  
 'I carry my share of responsibility for democracy in my country.' [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]  
 'Yes-because the Constitution says that this is our duty.' [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- 9 'I believe they should. It's our voice abroad, so to speak-our face abroad.' [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]
- 10 'No, they have no responsibility at all, because it's a system they don't really need.' [Interview 3, M, 49, Kharkiv, civilian hiding from TCR, divorced, with children]  
 'They should be doing it, but in my opinion, most of them don't. [...] They left and that's it-"not my problem anymore." I'm not interested anymore. That's wrong.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single, no children]

- 'Most of them aren't planning to come back, so they don't have any influence.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]
- 'If they're not planning to return, then they're not responsible for anything either.' [FG2, P2, F, 47, Donetsk obl., married, with children]
- 'It seems to me that we can do very little to influence this whole situation, especially while living abroad. I can imagine how we might physically influence it while being in Ukraine, but I can't imagine how we can do it while being in other countries.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 11 'Maybe some people want to return, and others are already building their future in another country. And, for example, what's happening with the authorities-how they are trying as hard as possible to bring them back, and in doing so taking away their freedom of choice-that's bad.' [Interview 5, M, 36, Kyiv, civilian, divorced]
- 'There is, and there can be, some degree of responsibility and their own free will, but for me the most important issue here is free will-because, as we can see, you can do everything through coercion, or you can do it in a way that creates more initiative and more genuine involvement. If that's done, I think the result will be much higher-quality and more effective.' [FG3, P3, F, 36, Chernivtsi, single]
- 'You shouldn't demand anything from anyone-at the very least because it's not the most effective method, and at most because it's abusing your own citizens. So it should be purely voluntary.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 'People should be given a choice as to whether they take part in this war at all. [...] People can, in some way, ease this pressure right now. But demands should be made of the authorities, not of ordinary people.' [FG5, P5, M, 36, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]
- 12 'Take the guys I work with, for example-people from Kherson who left at the beginning of the war still worry about us and send humanitarian aid. And then there are those who left at the beginning of the war [...] they live their own lives, have completely switched over [...] to the country where they are at the moment. They don't even associate themselves with Ukraine anymore.' [FG1, P2, M, 40, Kherson, single]
- 'Some people left and kept helping, donating; others left, live their lives as they do, and just wait until everything here turns around and becomes normal again.' [FG2, P1, M, 51, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
- 'It's also a very ambiguous question. During World War I, a lot of Ukrainians from Bukovyna, from Chernivtsi and the region, left for Canada. [...] They preserved their Ukrainian identity there. And how much the descendants of those who left are doing now [...] There are different kinds of people who left: children with their mothers, elderly people. And men. [...] Those who left legally, and those who got out illegally. So there are a lot of different factors here that need to be taken into account.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 13 'If [...] a decision is made in peace negotiations, and if it absolutely doesn't work for me, I would be ready to go out to protest-or even do more than protest. And also, say, in our [...] city, on the issue of support for war participants.' [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., recruitment officer, married, with children]
- 'It has to be my desire, my strength, and my calling to do something for my country. [...] Probably some very serious injustice-something I strongly disagree with-that would make me go out and act.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
- 'If it feels like the authorities are making some kind of deal with the same enemy, or with corrupt officials, then it could happen. [...] The moment you feel you're being deceived, that they're making a fool of you-that's when it will happen, you understand.' [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]
- 'If there are some high-profile events [...] that I don't accept, and my values [...] are violated, then I will go out. [...] It would have to be something very unfair toward people-toward children, toward the elderly.' [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 'A trigger would be if the authorities make decisions that go against Ukraine's accession to the EU, or something that hinders the war effort.' [FG5, P4, M, 18, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 14 [M: Are there any conditions under which you would take part in a street protest?] 'Most likely, it would be if it affected my family-for example, my relatives or close people-especially in terms of justice or the safety of life.' [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 15 'In my case, it's a sense of injustice [...] that takes you out into the street. [...] It always starts with utility bills for us.' [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]

- 'A significant decline in living conditions-hunger in some form, the lack of basic necessities, electricity, water, all those things. If all of that gets worse, and there's a sense that the authorities are to blame, then maybe that would become the reason.' [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
- 16 'If there were a state-level decision to give up territories.' [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]  
 'I would go out to protest against any decisions that contradict the interests of Ukraine as a state.' [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]  
 'I would go out to a rally [...] if there were any division of territory.' [FG1, P5, F, 28, Kherson obl., with children]
- 17 'When the authorities take steps that are clearly toward totalitarianism-concentrating power in one set of hands, imposing certain bans... I understand that these are not democratic values. For me, these are also markers, because... the authorities are, first and foremost, the people.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
 'When I realize that nothing scares Zelenskyy or his friends anymore, [...] then I would go out-when there was complete chaos.' [FG5, P3, M, 21, residing abroad from Kharkiv, single]
- 18 'I'm sort of against protests at the moment. And at the same time, when all the other institutions for expressing yourself are shut down, then this is the only possible way to make yourself heard. [...] And since everywhere I go it's like: you're being squeezed here, squeezed there, squeezed there-you can't do this, you can't go there, you can't do that-then maybe that final breaking point can happen at any moment. And it won't matter what the decision is.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- 19 'There are a few, for example, active civic leaders or NGOs. [...] But ordinary people, unfortunately, don't really take an active part. They believe that someone else will do something for them. [...] that we need a "leader" to take charge. [...] We're always waiting for some person to come along and solve our problems for us.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- 20 'In my view, this is a fight for survival-for life itself. And the fight for democracy, it seems to me, is still ahead of us. [...] It will be an internal one. [...] If we endure as a nation, then afterwards we will be able to build democracy as we see fit.' [Interview 1, M, 37, Kherson, military, married, with children]
- 21 'People's resources have basically already run out. Everyone is already running on their last fumes. So what more can you ask for?' [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]  
 'In 2022-February, late February-there were lines. In March, so many people, as they say, wanted to go and fight. And now people are hiding in their homes, and there's this "busification" [...] we're already tired of the war.' [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]
- 22 'The uplift of our state in the first days of the war-consolidation and unity-was there. But today [...] people are tired. [...] Today there are many challenges. I think we will still be able to overcome them.' [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]  
 'People are very exhausted, and they're thinking about how to survive a night of Shahed drone strikes, [...] how to feed their child. [...] A lot of people feel hurt by the injustice that exists. [...] People need to be shown what they are fighting for. [...] What are people fighting for? For decent living conditions. For health, so they can live to 70-80 years old. So that children are safe [...] For a good city. [...] [People need to] sell the idea of a bright Ukraine, [...] where Europeans will come to Ukraine to earn money, [...] where Ukraine will be not only a symbol of resilience and courage, but also of development-of intellect. [...] And this needs to be backed up with facts, so that people can see it. [...] It really hurts me-for myself, for my parents, who worked their whole lives and only know what it means to survive. I really want the people of this country to know what it means to live. [...] I want the country to flourish-to have a team of people come in who can make it so that those who no longer live in the country would want to return. And for it to become one of the strongest economies in the world. I think Ukraine has everything it needs for that. We have very talented people.' [Interview 10, M, 30-40, Kyiv, residing abroad]



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of France Emmanuel Macron, and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Keir Starmer visit the Wall of Remembrance at St. Michael's Square, lay flowers and honor fallen Ukrainian soldiers in Kyiv, May 10, 2025. Photo: UNIAN

# How Ukrainians' views on Western democracies have evolved since 2022

Given the increasing discussion on Ukraine's key role for European security and Ukrainians' support for Euroatlantic integration, we asked participants how their views on Western democracies had evolved since the start of the full-scale invasion.

Some shared disappointment and disillusionment with Western democracies given their incremental approach to assistance to Ukraine<sup>1</sup> or growing support for populist forces.<sup>2</sup> One observed that the US was experiencing authoritarian tendencies, which came as a shock for

someone that used to idealise the media and political system in the US.<sup>3</sup> One respondent expressed disillusionment particularly with the US, though admitted having developed a more sober understanding of local complexities in Europe and how these impact assistance to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, another participant expressed admiration for the level of resolve and volume of assistance provided to Ukraine, insisting on the need to distinguish trends in Europe and the US.<sup>5</sup> However, another participant warned that Europe had not fully realised the

level of the security threat and response needed.<sup>6</sup> Others rejected the tendency to generalise across all Western countries, arguing that especially the Northern and some Eastern European nations would mobilise to fight back.<sup>7</sup> Another respondent acknowledged a shift away from their initial idealistic outlook, while stressing that preserving Ukrainian democracy should now be the priority.<sup>8</sup>

shared the view that Western governments would address the threat without imposing the same level of restrictions on civil freedoms because they have bigger resources than Ukraine ever had.<sup>11</sup>

*There have already been **so many events they should have reacted to**. Even that Shahed drone that fell on Polish territory. But it all gets brushed aside – there's **no reaction**.*

*I used to think they had more **real democracy** – that they had **real democracy**, something we were also trying to move closer to in a way. But **now I see it's populism** – both in Europe and in America.*

When asked to imagine how Western democracies would act in the event of an attack, some believed that we should expect similar restrictions to be imposed under martial law in other countries as well.<sup>9</sup> Some speculated that even harsher measures would be imposed in Western democracies: 'democracy would disappear for them during martial law'.<sup>10</sup> Another group

Interestingly, others argued that Western societies, particularly its youth, would be severely challenged in their ability to deploy the same level of resilience and resistance as Ukrainians have.<sup>12</sup> In particular, some criticised the excessively long deliberation process observed in Ukraine's partner countries so far, whereas the situation would dictate swift decisions.<sup>13</sup> However, some disagreed with this, arguing that people in Western societies are ready to fight for their country if it came to this.<sup>14</sup>

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS: Quotes from Participants

- 1 'I also have a negative attitude toward the authorities, because they promised one thing, and now it's completely different. [...] Like even saying the war would end in 24 hours.' [Interview 6, M, 25, Lviv, military, single]  
'European democracy is somehow too democratic. [...] There have already been so many events they should have reacted to. Even that Shahed drone that fell on Polish territory. But it all gets brushed aside-there's no reaction. [...] There were some outrageous things where we expected a swift, strong response, and it never came. And that's very, very depressing.' [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
'The disappointment isn't in the quality of democracy, but in its strength on the global level. I mean, what we're seeing with Trump or other figures... [...] Take our ally Germany. [...] Of course they help us, but still. We needed those Taurus missiles at the moment when we had to finish off the enemy. And they said no.' [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
'I'm disappointed that they talk a lot and do very little. And when it concerns Ukraine, it hurts especially deeply.' [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 2 'Over these years, my sense that democracy exists in Europe and America has significantly declined-or disappeared altogether. To me, it feels like an infantilized society that also wants to be "picked up and

- carried” by some big strong uncle who will sort everything out for them. It’s more about populism.’ [FG1, P8, F, 27, Sumy, married, with children]
- ‘I used to think they had more democracy-that they had real democracy, something we were also trying to move closer to in a way. But now I see it’s populism-both in Europe and in America.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]
- ‘My view of America has changed too-they’ve become populists as well.’ [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]
- 3 ‘When I was younger, back in my youth, I used to listen to Deutsche Welle and Voice of America [...] and it seemed to me like something incredible. But now I’ve stopped believing in the media at all-both American outlets and some European ones [...] They write a lot of untruths. [...] There’s hardly any Democratic Party left in America, and the Republicans have completely turned into something like a sect-they’re only serving Trump’s interests. And overall, it looks like things there are heading toward dictatorship.’ [FG4, P1, M, 67, Lviv obl., married, with children]
  - 4 ‘It’s a disappointment-especially in American democracy. [...] As for Europe, we really have become more aware of how it actually functions.’ [FG2, P7, M, 50, Kherson, married, with children]
  - 5 ‘I was skeptical of Europeans before the war, but when I saw how much they helped us [...] it was just unbelievable. [...] Has my view of European democracy changed? No. [...] As for American democracy-well, it has changed, of course, because Trump... he really doesn’t come across as much of a democrat.’ [FG4, P7, M, 46, Chernivtsi, single]
  - 6 ‘Europe, as they say, still hasn’t been shaken up and hasn’t realized what this could lead to-especially if Ukraine is actually conquered.’ [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]
  - 7 ‘As of today, our closest friends are the Baltic states and the Nordic countries. Probably those countries-Poland, Romania-those closest to the war feel it more acutely, and they’re more inclined to [...] My attitude toward them is one of enormous respect and gratitude. But toward those countries that are farther away [...] I feel less respect, because I think their approach is different.’ [Interview 2, M, 54, Kharkiv obl., military from TCR, married, with children]
 

‘It depends on the nation. The Finns? They’re firmly anti-Russian. [...] They would announce mobilisation immediately, not just declare martial law.’ [FG4, P3, M, 61, Vinnytsia, married]

‘We know this from the experience of World War II-how England, Great Britain responded and organized everything. There were restrictions on certain democratic freedoms. [...] I don’t know about France. But yes, it’s the Scandinavian countries that will actually fight. They, too, [...] will impose restrictions on democracy. In the U.S., [they would restrict] the same things as we do: freedom of movement. They would declare some kind of mobilisation. They would introduce censorship.’ [FG4, P2, M, 64, Kyiv obl., single]

‘I’ve heard that in Lithuania, there is also a threat that Russia could attack the country, and they’re saying they would also introduce restrictions for men.’ [FG5, P2, F, 35, residing abroad from Kherson, married, with children]
  - 8 ‘It opened my eyes a little to the fact that things aren’t perfect everywhere. Of course, we tend to think the grass is always greener elsewhere, but we still need to focus on our own democracy and preserving it.’ [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]
  - 9 ‘Most likely, it would be the same as in Ukraine. [...] It’s written into the laws of every country.’ [Interview 10, M, 30–40, Kyiv, residing abroad]
 

‘There would be a reduction in the freedoms guaranteed by their constitutions [...] similar to ours-freedom of movement, for instance. [...] There would also be restrictions related to the media and to freedom of religion-basically, something similar to what we have.’ [FG1, P1, M, 18, Sumy, single]

‘I’m sure freedom of speech would be limited too, and there would be the same kind of united news marathon and so on.’ [FG1, P6, F, 33, Chernihiv obl., married, with children]
  - 10 ‘I think it would be even stricter there. [...] They have a much more rigid form of democracy, so [...] freedom of movement would be restricted. [...] Media freedom too-of course, there would be a single channel like our united news marathon [...] Everyone would be working for the defence effort-so there would be full restrictions; democracy, during martial law, would essentially disappear there.’ [FG1, P3, M, 39, Chernihiv, single]

- 11 ‘There wouldn’t be restrictions like the ones we have, [...] because if we’re talking about some European countries and the United States, they really have a strong military, they have much more weaponry, and from the very beginning they wouldn’t have faced the kinds of problems we faced-like shortages of weapons and, first and foremost, people.’ [FG3, P4, F, 38, Vinnytsia, married, with children]  
 ‘Some countries are already ready-better prepared for war than we were. So maybe the scenario would have been different.’ [FG3, P8, F, 36, Kyiv obl., married, with children]
- 12 ‘I very much doubt that their people would be as resilient as ours. [...] because they have a very apathetic younger generation, and a very large elderly population. [...] They probably would have immediately banned any anti-war protests, [...] and any anti-government protests during wartime would have been banned as well.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
 ‘When you walk down the street, you can see that these people-they’re not going to fight. [...] They’re from a different world. I mean, this war is like something out of the 19th century, or at the very latest, World War II.’ [Interview 7, F, 41, Kharkiv, military, married]  
 ‘As for young people here [...] it’s hard to imagine you could instill in them some idea that someone would be willing to go and fight for. It would just cause mass panic. The only hope is really those who are closer to us-Poland, the Baltic states, and so on. But I don’t know... Western Europe here is different.’ [Interview 9, M, 48, Kharkiv, residing abroad, married, with children]  
 ‘If the same conditions existed in America, [...] it would be a very serious challenge for its democracy.’ [FG3, P1, M, 18, Vinnytsia obl., single]  
 ‘There would also be certain problems with democracy, because, for example, there were surveys in the Netherlands [...] and there are clear issues with citizens’ willingness to defend the country by sacrificing their lives and health. [...] For a democratic country, that’s a problem; for a totalitarian one, it isn’t.’ [FG5, P1, F, 47, residing abroad from Kharkiv, married, with children]
- 13 ‘Nothing would have changed. They wouldn’t have had time to [...] make any decisions, because those decisions need to be made very quickly, [...] and they, as practice has shown over these years, resolve issues very slowly.’ [FG4, P5, F, 41, Kyiv obl., married, with children]  
 ‘By the time they’ve talked it through among themselves, there’s no time left to put up any resistance.’ [FG4, P4, F, 69, Chernivtsi, married, with children]
- 14 ‘They’re ready to fight, to stand their ground-they love their country, they’re ready to defend it, and they have no intention of fleeing the country, at least the men I spoke to. They think differently-not the way we do; they grew up in a different culture.’ [FG5, P6, F, 40, residing abroad from Kyiv, single]

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are directed at Ukrainian policymakers, public institutions, media actors, and international partners, and aim to sustain public belief in Ukraine's democratic project under wartime conditions, while reinforcing accountability, civic engagement, and institutional legitimacy despite the constraints of martial law.

## **Ukrainians' ideas of democracy as a value.**

Ukraine's public diplomacy should promote a democratic model that balances personal freedom with the rule of law. Communication strategies should move beyond abstract notions of freedom, instead championing this tandem of 'freedom' [volya] and 'responsibility' [vidpovidalnist] as the core of the Ukrainian spirit both domestically and internationally. Ukraine should be positioned as a country that strategically empowers and leverages individuals' creativity as this will benefit Ukrainian society as a whole, but also Ukraine's international partners. At the same time, the current discourse on democracy must be broadened to include tangible outcomes such as improved living standards, positioning these as the essential rewards for resilience in the face of wartime hardships.

## **What freedoms Ukrainians are (not) willing to concede in an existential war.**

The Ukrainian government and media should expand domestic platforms to facilitate open debate on the limits of wartime restrictions on civil freedoms. Rather than viewing a diversity of opinions as a threat to stability, it should be championed as a hallmark of Ukraine's democratic health and a key requirement for European integration. There should be a phased move away from centralised media formats, such as the national telethon, which is increasingly viewed as having outlived its original purpose, in favour of a more pluralistic media environment that better reflects the maturity of Ukrainian society and its European aspirations. Both government and media actors should consistently explain why movement restrictions remain essential for civilian safety and demographic stability. Simultaneously, a comprehensive strategy should be developed to facilitate controlled international opportunities for youth. This model should encourage young people to gain global experience and skills, provided it is coupled with robust incentives and pathways for their eventual return to contribute to Ukraine's recovery.

## **Ukrainian attitudes on how to handle sensitive wartime topics.**

The experience of war has taught Ukrainians how to draw the line between ‘self-regulation’ and ‘self-censorship’ around thorny issues, between restrictions that are justifiable (because they enhance security) and those that are not (because they serve no defensive purpose). As Ukraine enters its fifth year of full-scale war, government communication strategies should continue to articulate the operational risks of disclosing sensitive military data to build public trust while simultaneously addressing high-friction issues (including mobilisation, draft evasion, and procurement corruption). Internal dissent should be framed not as a threat, but as evidence of a robust, pluralistic democracy that distinguishes Ukraine from its adversary. To safeguard this space, both government and independent media platforms should preemptively expose the mechanics of Russian disinformation ‘divide and conquer’ narratives through simple and engaging explainer content. Finally, both government and independent media must proactively communicate the prosecution of power abuses, particularly around mobilisation. This will allow the government to be seen as an ally of civil society in positioning accountability as a pillar of national defence.

## **Ukrainians’ views on how to reconcile the demand for democratic accountability and political renewal with the imperative for national unity.**

Again, current discussions on whether elections can and should be held as soon as possible must be framed as evidence of the country’s democratic vibrancy. Effective oversight of authorities for any violations of the rule of law, should likewise be understood as an indicator of the strength of Ukrainian society. In addressing renewed international attention to the issue, Ukrainian public diplomacy should consistently highlight that the current suspension of elections is a direct consequence of Russian aggression, which has created insurmountable security, logistical, and legitimacy constraints. At the same time, government and media communication efforts should showcase the ‘decentralisation success story’, using examples of the continued effectiveness of local authorities as tangible proof that the post-2014 reform agenda remains on track. Furthermore, the narrative should emphasise the indispensable role of Ukrainian civil society as a wartime watchdog, demonstrating that accountability and democratic standards are being upheld even in the absence of a formal ballot and despite martial law restrictions.

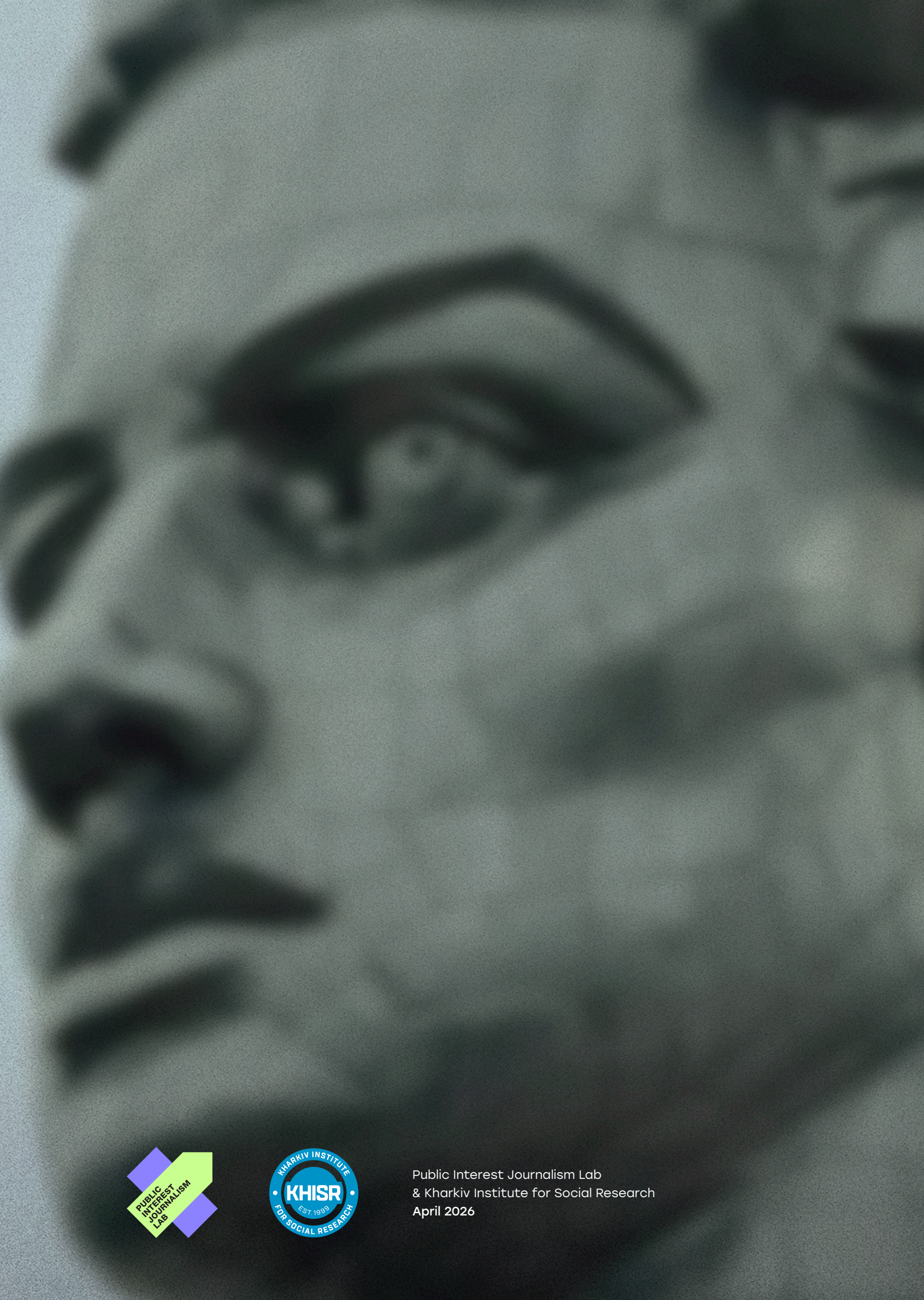
## **Ukrainians' views on the role of domestic and diaspora civic engagement in shaping Ukraine's defence and democratic future.**

The psychological toll of the war on Ukrainian military personnel and civilians should be openly acknowledged more often on domestic and international media platforms. Mental health programmes and online content should be expanded. Crucially, public messaging must continue to reinforce the narrative that civic engagement is not just crucial to sustain the war effort; it is also a tool for individual agency and national recovery. At the same time, the prolonged conflict risks creating social fissures between those who remained and those abroad. Public messaging should recognise the unique contributions of both groups in their shared commitment to Ukraine's national idea and democratic trajectory.

## **Ukrainians' perception of the strength and resolve of other democratic countries.**

Ukrainian public diplomacy must evolve to address the sober realism currently felt by the population. While acknowledging the political and domestic challenges Western governments face in sustaining support, Ukraine should position itself as the central pillar of European security. As Western Europe shifts from a peace-time mindset toward increased military readiness, Ukraine's narrative should emphasise its role as a vanguard that offers invaluable expertise in modern defence and societal resilience. Crucially, stakeholders must proactively mitigate anti-Western sentiment. Any domestic resentment regarding the pace of aid must be managed through transparent dialogue to prevent it from being weaponised by Russia. The messaging should reinforce the idea that Ukraine and its partners are locked in a shared struggle for collective deterrence.





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