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The Great War

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Russia's war against Ukraine is entering its fifth year of full-scale military operations. In fact, this conflict, initiated by Russia, has been ongoing since March 2014, when Russian forces occupied Crimea. The Ukrainians are effectively resisting the aggressor, preventing Russia from achieving its strategic goals. But do they have their own strategy and are they capable of implementing it?

Russian policy objectives were set out by Vladimir Putin in an ultimatum addressed to NATO in December 2021. In February 2022, on the eve of the invasion, the Russian dictator presented his objectives in Ukraine. Putin's essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" dated 12 July 2021 should be considered an essential introduction to his "Ukrainian policy". The documents and statements referenced within it suggest that the Ukrainian nation does not in fact exist, but is part of the Russian nation, and that the Ukrainian state is an impossible fantasy created as a result of Vladimir Lenin's historical mistake.

These above-mentioned objectives have remained largely unchanged to this day: Russia is demanding Ukraine's de facto capitulation and the curtailment of its sovereignty, as well as recognition by NATO countries that it belongs to Russia's sphere of influence. A return to the pre-1997 world order, i.e. before NATO expansion into the former Eastern Bloc countries, is not currently under discussion, but does this mean that the Kremlin has abandoned the plan it presented in 2021?

The United States question

This is not a rhetorical question because it relates directly to the war in Ukraine and what is at stake. And the stakes include not only the security and sovereignty of Ukraine, but also the security architecture of Europe. The issue has become even more pertinent in the wake of Donald Trump's return to the US presidency. As with Vladimir Putin's policy, the US president's goals for Europe have not been

clearly defined. However, a re-evaluation of transatlantic relations initiated by the United States is definitely underway.

The fundamental question is the scope of this policy shift and its connection with a permanent restructuring of US strategy in the field of security policy and international relations. To put it simply, are Donald Trump's initiatives, such as his desire to annex Greenland, his own ideas, or are they part of a lasting pivot that will not be significantly altered by a new occupant in the White House? Can the weakening of Euro-Atlantic relations, or a more aggressive approach to the European Union and its Member States (even taking into account exceptions such as the Trump administration's affection for Viktor Orbán's Hungary or its declared love for Poland), be countered from a position of strength? Or is Europe doomed to vassalage?

The Russia question

We must pose a similar question with respect to Russia. To what extent is the Kremlin's policy Vladimir Putin's pet project, and to what extent does it express a strategic direction that will also be pursued by his successors? Does Putin's regime operate like a rational political entity with which it is possible to "reach an agreement" that will last longer than the ink used to sign it takes to dry? Or is Russian policy determined by an unchanging ethos expressed in the logic of imperial conquest and a security policy based on maintaining a zone of states that are at least neutral towards Moscow?

Additional strategic dilemmas arise from the conjunction of both sets of issues concerning the United States and Russia. Do they include the potential for functional or even overt cooperation between the United States and Russia against the interests of Europe and Ukraine? The questions are endless, and each new issue only amplifies the strategic uncertainty that European leaders must face and their inability to predict how things will turn out.

Strategic dilemmas

Will Russia attack an EU Member State belonging to NATO? Is raising such concerns an expression of Russophobia intended to legitimise the costly involvement in helping Ukraine? Even in Poland, this argument is raised by representatives of certain right-wing circles, who have found an unexpected ally in Leszek Miller, the former prime minister of the SLD government. They add that we have to get along and live with Russia, and that rhetoric equating modern Russia with the Evil Empire that was the USSR is senseless and an expression of Russophobia.

Those who claim to "understand Putin" go even further, asserting that the West is to blame for the war in Ukraine because of its expansionist policy of extending NATO and the European Union eastwards. From this perspective, the war declared on Ukraine appears to be an act of self-defence against Western imperialism, rather than an attack with no legal or moral justification.

All these deliberations about the true nature of Russia, if it has one, boil down to a very specific question: Should we help Ukraine and if so, how? Should we maintain solidarity with the strategic goal set by the Ukrainians? Is this goal consistent with the strategic goals of the European Union, its individual Member States, NATO doctrine and strategy, and the interests of the countries that make up the Alliance?

Tactics or strategy?

Unfortunately, after four years of war, there are still no clear answers to these questions. The policy of the allied states towards Ukraine is based more on tactics than a long-term strategy. The core of this strategy should be defining the nature of Russia and relevant policy recommendations. Of course, the European Union has made many important strategic adjustments, such as shifting its energy policy to eliminate Russian sources. However, subsequent decisions continue to be characterised by slow escalation rather than actions designed to achieve a strategic breakthrough and ensure some kind of victory for Ukraine. In other words, Ukraine still has not received unequivocally effective assistance in achieving its strategic goals.

Volodymyr Zelensky criticised this policy of small steps in his speech at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos. The Ukrainian president was not supposed to be in Switzerland, but Donald Trump invited him, so the Ukrainian leader rushed to make an appearance and avoid squandering the opportunity to raise the Ukrainian issue. Was he right to admonish Europe when the entire burden of financing Ukraine currently rests on the Old Continent? Perhaps the more important question is why he did it.

The great transformation

To pinpoint the answer, it is worth examining the Ukrainian strategic mindset and transformation of social consciousness that was shaped over three decades of independence and only accelerated after 24 February 2022. The strategic uncertainty described above boils down to the conclusion that nothing is certain and that none of Ukraine's partners, even those labelled "strategic partners", can be trusted. Since 1991, Ukraine has stood alone, an outsider of international alliances. Ukraine's distrust is justified by the fate of the Budapest Memorandum, which was supposed to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for relinquishing its nuclear arsenal, as well as the experience of the Minsk agreements imposed by Western countries after 2014. These guarantees proved to be worth no more than the paper they were written on when Ukraine was attacked by Russia, one of the signatories of the Memorandum.

Ukraine is alone, but its leaders and society realise that they cannot cope on their own against a much stronger Russian enemy. However, it is worth recalling the key process that Ukrainian society underwent after 2014, which was completed and cemented after 2022. Understanding this process means abandoning the presentism suggesting that Ukraine's staunch pro-Western stance and unequivocal anti-Russian attitudes are deeply rooted in the past. The matter is far more interesting and complex than it seems.

It is true that the slogan guiding modern Ukrainian thinking about the state and independence was the phrase "Away from Moscow!", coined at the beginning of the 20th century. It was proclaimed by the ideologue of Ukrainian nationalism, Dmytro Dontsov, and the Kharkiv writer Mykola Khvylovy, a communist, an expression that highlighted awareness of the cultural distinctiveness of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation, as well as a sense of belonging to the European cultural and civilisational space. It seems appropriate, then, to draw a straight line from this slogan to Ukraine's contemporary aspirations for membership in the European Union and NATO.

However, nothing in history is simple. This sense of distinctiveness was emphatically expressed during the independence era by President Leonid Kuchma, who stated that Ukraine is not Russia. However, this statement did not imply hostility on the part of Ukrainians towards Russia and Russians. Anton

Hrushetsky and Volodymyr Paniotto, sociologists from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, in a book published in December 2025 titled *War and Transformation of Ukrainian Society (2022–March 2025)*,¹ refer to research conducted systematically since independence and remind us that the anti-Russian and accompanying unambiguously pro-Western turn in Ukraine is a recent development and largely attributable to Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine and Russia

In 2009, after Russia's war with Georgia and the NATO summit in Bucharest, when Russia's claims regarding the further expansion of the Alliance were discussed, Vladimir Putin enjoyed a 60 % approval rating among respondents in Ukraine. The most popular Ukrainian politicians, on the eve of the presidential elections that brought Viktor Yanukovich to power in 2010, enjoyed a mere 30 % approval. Favourable attitudes towards Russia and Russians hovered around 90 %.

The feeling was not mutual: Russian attitudes towards Ukrainians have never been particularly friendly. In 2009, only 16 % of Ukrainians had a positive opinion of NATO. The topic was a political non-starter. Sociologists emphasise that even among supporters of NATO and the European Union (also a minority at the time), the vast majority had a positive attitude towards Russia and wanted to maintain good neighbourly relations. At the same time, however, even the most pro-Russian Ukrainians saw no alternative to their country's independence.

The current image of Ukraine in the minds of Westerners has been shaped by the myth of the Revolution of Dignity, which began in November 2013 as Euromaidan when protesters took to Independence Square in Kiev to protest Viktor Yanukovich's decision to refuse to sign an association agreement with the European Union. Waving Ukrainian and European Union flags, the crowd sang Ode to Joy. Linked to the bloody end of the protests in February 2014, a message was sent out to the world: Ukrainians were the first to demonstrate that Europe is worth dying for.

However, little remained of that "initial" Euromaidan ethos by February 2014. Residents of other regions of Ukraine had arrived in Kyiv, the Ukrainian language had mixed with Russian, and pro-European slogans were dominated by political demands expressed through the chant "Bandu het!" ("Away with the Band!"). Euromaidan transformed into the Revolution of Dignity. In this context, it is worth recalling Russian accusations that the Ukrainian revolution was a coup d'état inspired and assisted by the CIA.

Vladimir Putin was probably more afraid of the democratising potential of the Revolution than of the threat of Ukraine being "pulled" towards the West. However, by occupying Crimea in March 2014 and then starting a war in Donbas, he accelerated the process by which he wanted to "protect" Ukraine and its younger brother, the supposedly non-existent Ukrainian nation.

It was only after Russia's invasion that pro-European attitudes consolidated. As far as NATO is concerned, support for accession rose to 48 % in 2014. This is the average for the entire sample, but regional differences were clearly visible. Residents of eastern and southern Ukraine were much more sceptical of the EU and NATO. Hruszecki and Paniotto comment that even the inclusion of accession to both structures as Ukrainian political aims in the Ukrainian constitution in 2019 did not mean that

¹ А. Грушецький, В. Паніотто, *Війна і трансформація українського суспільства (2022–березень 2025)* (*War and the Transformation of Ukrainian Society: Empirical Evidence*), Дух і Літера, Київ 2025.

integration with the West was already an irreversible process based on the results of a November 2021 survey.

The irreversible effects of war

It turns out that three months before the full-scale invasion, 40 % of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards Russia and 75 % towards Russians living in Russia. Even in the western regions of Ukraine, 71 % of respondents declared favourable attitudes towards Russians, declarations that are confirmed by other information. It was not until 2022, many months after the start of the invasion, that the process of decolonisation accelerated, accompanied by the removal of Russian, i.e. imperial cultural symbols from public spaces. In Kyiv, despite eight years of war, the Lesya Ukrainka Russian Drama Theatre was still operating in 2022; a similar situation existed in Kharkiv.

Sociologists indicate that even the first days of the war did not trigger a radical change in polling; only in May 2022 did poll results show that even those who were previously favourable towards Russians had shifted to an anti-Russian position. Aversion to Russia and Russians became a common denominator uniting Ukrainians across regional, class and even linguistic divisions. As a reminder, the May results already took into account the effect of Bucha and reports of Russian soldiers' brutality towards civilians.

Not only has there been a consolidation of attitudes towards Russia and Russians, as reflected in the belief of most respondents that rebuilding relations between the two nations will take decades, if it is possible at all. This is also accompanied by a consolidation of geostrategic choices and the support of the vast majority of respondents, again regardless of region, for European integration and NATO accession. Finally, the breakthrough in awareness triggered historical imagination, leading to the concretisation and embodiment of previously abstract historical events, such as the massacre of Baturyn carried out by the Russians in 1708, the massacre of Kyiv in 1918, and the Great Famine and extermination of the intellectual elite in the 1930s.

Ukrainians understood that Putin, by arguing that the Ukrainian nation does not exist as a separate entity, was not just raving but resurrecting the age-old Russian goal of eliminating Ukrainian distinctiveness. For 28 % (KMIS survey from January 2026²), it is clear that the Russians want to physically exterminate Ukrainians, and 41 % have no doubt that the goal is to eliminate Ukrainian statehood and Ukrainian national distinctiveness. Understanding this transformation is key to understanding Ukrainian perceptions of the war, as well as its goals and possible outcome. However, even in this seemingly unambiguous transformation, there is an important and dangerous nuance – despite widespread anti-Russian sentiment, there are still pro-Russian residents in Ukraine who are not reflected in the polls. Sociologists estimate that this group may account for about 10 % of the population. Some are so-called 'žduny', people who look forward to the arrival of the Russians and are ready to cooperate with the Russian army by providing, for example, intelligence data.

² *Війна і мир: думки і погляди українців (результати опитування, проведеного 9–14 січня 2026 року)* [War and peace: Ukrainian opinions and attitudes (results of a survey conducted on 9–14 January 2026)], Київський міжнародний інститут соціології, <https://kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1579&lang=ukr> [accessed via footnotes here and below: 18 February 2025].

To the bitter end

Most Ukrainians consider the most essential aspect of the war to be its existential nature. It is a struggle for survival that must be fought to the end, i.e. until the goal that will protect them from annihilation is achieved. That goal is to preserve the sovereignty of the state and maintain its ability to defend that sovereignty and ensure the security of its people in future. Since Ukrainians have no doubts about Russia's goal, they do not believe in any compromises that assume any goodwill on the part of the enemy in exchange for concessions, such as renouncing the Donbas territories currently under Ukrainian control. And they would like their Western partners, as well as the rest of the world, to understand their reasoning, first and foremost when it comes to comprehending the true nature of Russia.

The same January survey showed that 69 % of respondents do not believe that ongoing negotiations will lead to peace, because Russia does not want peace or intend to cease hostilities. Only 26 % of respondents do not share this opinion. In the last week of January, KMIS conducted a supplementary survey³ to gauge public mood after a period of severe freezing temperatures and constant Russian bombing of critical infrastructure aimed at cutting off energy and heat supplies. It turns out that the energy crisis pushing the inhabitants of many Ukrainian cities, especially Kyiv, to the brink of a humanitarian disaster, has not changed their determination. An agreement that would involve giving up Donbas in exchange for security guarantees is unacceptable to 52 % of respondents, while 40 % would accept such a scenario in exchange for security guarantees. However, only 20 % believe that the war will end in the first half of 2026. Most predict that the war will continue, and 65 % declare their willingness to make sacrifices for as long as it takes. This is an increase of three points compared to the December survey. Optimism, measured by the percentage of responses to the question about Ukraine's future, has also increased, with 66 % saying that in ten years Ukraine will be a thriving European Union Member State. As for the situation on the front line, 77 % are convinced that Ukraine can continue to effectively resist the enemy (12 % say the situation is hopeless).

Strategic initiative

Such are public sentiments in Ukraine after four years of full-scale war. Sociologists argue that social facts are no less real or concrete than material reality. However, is the social fact of Ukrainian determination and readiness to fight the war to the end really a sufficient resource to ensure that Ukraine achieves its strategic goal of defending its sovereignty?

Determination alone is not enough to ensure success if it is not combined with the ability to mobilise other resources needed to wage war, a war which, after initial months full of tactical manoeuvres and operational reversals, has become a war of attrition. Russia, despite failing to achieve its strategic goal, continues to fight, convinced that it is capable of exhausting Ukraine's resources and forcing it to capitulate.

This is not about a decisive victory on the battlefield – military action on the front line is only one of the theatres of Russian activity, which is mainly political in nature and subordinates other forms of influence on Ukraine, the states and societies that support it, and the rest of the world to political

3 *Громадська думка в умовах спроб Росії занурити Україну в темряву і холод: результати опитування, проведеного 23–29 січня 2026 року (Public opinion in response to Russia's attempts to plunge Ukraine into darkness and cold: results of a survey conducted between 23–29 January 2026)*, Київський міжнародний інститут соціології, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1583&page=1>.

objectives: diplomacy, economics, hybrid operations, information operations, sabotage, corruption, and soft power.

Ukrainian experts admit that although Russia has lost the opportunity to achieve an operational, not to mention strategic breakthrough on the front, it maintains the strategic initiative due to numerical superiority. This translates into slow territorial gains, achieved at the cost of heavy losses. Undeterred, the Russians continue their military operations while intensifying efforts to weaken or eliminate other resources working in Ukraine's favour.

These actions are both an attempt to break the morale of Ukrainian society and influence public opinion in the countries supporting Ukraine. One of the greatest successes in this regard is a shift of attitudes in Poland and significant weakening of pro-Ukrainian attitudes, even the emergence of pro-Russian arguments, not only on the margins of political debate. Of course, the emergence of Donald Trump is of greater strategic importance to the Russians: by rolling out the red carpet for Putin in Alaska, he restored Putin's position as an honourable actor in mainstream international politics, turning a war criminal into a respectable politician.

The Ukrainian game

Ukrainians are aware of the changing context and the need to play a complex game on many levels. The pragmatic goal is to ensure the continuity of support necessary to maintain the Ukrainian state and its ability to organise armed resistance, as well as to maintain the social system and economy at a level that ensures the stable functioning of the state and society. The path to this goal lies in convincing partners of the need to help in the common interest of those who offer and those who need help.

The optimal situation would be to bring about a similar shift in consciousness in the conventional West as has occurred in Ukraine – to redefine Russia as a permanent threat to security in Europe and the stability of the world order instead of a “normal” player in international politics. Considering how long this transformation took in Ukraine and the fact that it was only completed thanks to the influence and experience of war crimes, the hope that a similar process will take place in European countries as a result of persuasion is rather futile.

Pragmatic arguments seem more compelling, based on convincing Western partners that Ukraine is not only a beneficiary of aid. On the contrary, it is providing security services at a bargain price. After all, aid from European countries averages 0.1–0.2 % of GDP. In return, Ukrainians tie up the Russian army, preventing it from being used for other purposes.

The problem is that even this pragmatic perspective, which is so obvious for Ukrainians, has only recently begun to gain traction among the military and political elites of partner countries, not to mention seep into public awareness. An important catalyst was the attack by Russian drones on Poland on the night of 9–10 September 2025 and the subsequent escalation of hostile actions against European NATO countries. This escalation certainly raised awareness of the seriousness of the Russian threat while raising serious questions about whether NATO's defence paradigm is adapted to the realities of modern warfare.

General Valery Zaluzhny wrote about changing this paradigm in his widely publicised essays as early as 2023, when he was Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. At the time, however, his Western colleagues accused him of trying to justify the failed counteroffensive, which did not succeed

because he did not act in accordance with NATO recommendations. It seems that the Ukrainian message has finally begun to be received not only as an anomaly from a distant front, but as information relevant to European security.

The Russian goal is obviously not to encourage Western countries to modernise their armies and the way they operate, but to undermine the legitimacy of the political systems that control those armies. The escalation of diversionary tactics, combined with disinformation, is intended to demonstrate the inability of democratically elected governments to ensure security, which in turn is threatened by unnecessary involvement in helping Ukraine, help that could lead to escalation and direct involvement in the war. As a result, everyone is supposed to say, as Orbán does, that this is not our war and that helping Ukraine is a mistake.

Complexity

Are Ukrainians effectively countering Russian operations? How effective was Volodymyr Zelensky's speech in Davos in this context? Did it increase European awareness or irritation? To what extent did it raise awareness through irritation? The answer depends not only on the speech itself, but on the broader context, in which the attitude of Ukrainian society legitimising the position of its leader, the country's president, is important, if not crucial.

Ukrainian attitudes cannot be fully captured by the handful of public opinion polls presented above. During the war, four volumes of analyses prepared by the Institute of Sociology of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences titled *Ukrainian society in wartime*⁴ were published. Reports were drafted on the development and resilience of civil society, as well as multi-factor analyses of the state of the economy, assessing its resilience and ability to adapt under the severest conditions. They reveal pieces in a larger puzzle of interacting elements. However, the complexity of these interactions means that nothing is obvious.

The least obvious of these was the Ukrainian public's response to the attack on 24 February 2022. Given generally pro-Russian sentiments towards Russians (in terms of favourable attitudes towards its people, not the state), the full-scale invasion came as a shock that few believed possible, even despite intelligence reports and Putin's threats. Ukraine's military response and the effectiveness of Kyiv's defence, as well as the subsequent recapture of Kherson and the Kharkiv region, have been well documented. The phenomenon of social resistance and resilience, particularly during the initial days of the invasion, before the consolidation of anti-Russian attitudes described above and the realisation of the existential dimension of the war, still needs to be explained.

Once again, it is worth looking at the results of sociological research covering the days before the invasion and the weeks that followed that were compiled by Lubow Bewzenko in the latest edition of the yearbook "Ukrainian society in wartime".⁵ Firstly, it reminds us that in December 2021, most Ukrainian state institutions did not enjoy public trust. Net trust (the sum of trust and distrust) in public institutions was underwater with -23 % trust in the president, -56 % in the Verkhovna Rada, -46 % in the government, -17 % in the Security Service of Ukraine, and -14 % in the police. Only the army (+60 %) and volunteers (+77 %) enjoyed a positive rating.

4 Є. Головаха, С. Дембіцький, *Українське суспільство в умовах війни. Рік 2024 (Ukrainian society in wartime. Year 2024)*, Інститут соціології НАН України, Київ 2024.

5 Ibid.

Consolidation

Putin and the leaders of other countries had reason to believe that Ukraine would not be able to endure such a high level of social and institutional disintegration. Indeed, Ukrainians themselves did not believe very strongly in the possibility of defence. A survey conducted on 16–17 February 2022 shows that only 28 % of respondents were confident that Ukraine was capable of resistance. A month later, this percentage reached 72 %, with almost no negative responses. Within a few weeks, there was not so much a change in awareness as a spectacular process of social self-organisation accompanied by consolidation with state institutions.

Bewzenko has no doubt that it was precisely this combination of self-organisation based on a high level of trust in volunteers, civil society activists and the military, and the restoration of trust in political leadership, that enabled Ukraine to defend itself as a complex system of interacting sectors that retained their distinctiveness and autonomy. But what was the moment of bifurcation, the turning point that triggered this cooperation? The researcher points unequivocally to the famous decision of President Zelensky to stay in Kyiv, even though he realised that the possible fall of the capital and subsequent Russian capture would mean death. A group of his closest associates remained with him, including the head of the Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak. A bond based on absolute trust was formed at that moment, and it had a significant impact on many of Zelensky's subsequent political and personal decisions.

It was this moment that also accelerated the process of social consolidation, as described by sociologists. It had various dimensions. The social dimension consisted, among others, of the already described transformation of attitudes towards Russia and Russians, and further consolidation of national and civic citizenship. Today, the vast majority of Ukrainians (80 %), when asked "Who are you?" respond "a citizen of Ukraine". Civic, rather than ethnic affiliation is key. At the beginning of independence, only 40 % of respondents expressed a similar identification as their first choice, compared to 60 % just before the invasion.

During the war, Ukrainian convictions about the best system of government for their republic were also reinforced. Just before the war, 76 % of respondents wanted Ukraine to be a fully functional democracy; in 2023, this percentage jumped to 95 %. The year 2025 showed that these declarations were more than empty words. In July, thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets of Ukrainian cities to protest against attempts to change the laws governing the work of anti-corruption institutions. The public was unwilling to tolerate an attempt to undermine these entities, sending Volodymyr Zelensky a signal that the social contract formed at the beginning of the war was not tantamount to consent to the introduction of authoritarian rule.

Reclaiming politics

The relationship between Ukrainian society and President Zelensky perfectly illustrates the complexity of Ukraine's socio-political reality. On the one hand, Zelensky can count on the support of his compatriots: 61 % of respondents trust the president (KMIS, end of January 2026⁶). At the same time, however, Ukrainians are not afraid to criticise their leader. 31.8 % of respondents identify him as the main culprit behind the country's insufficient preparation for the energy crisis caused by Russian attacks

⁶ Громадська думка в умовах спроб Росії занурити Україну в темряву і холод (Public opinion amid Russia's attempts to plunge Ukraine into darkness and cold), op. cit.

on energy and heating infrastructure (survey conducted at the turn of January and February by New Image Marketing Group for the Diłowa Stolica website⁷).

Ukrainians are also unsentimental when it comes to assessing corruption. Even now, when hundreds of thousands of people are freezing, it is not the lack of heating but corruption that matters more to them. Again, 29.3 % point to the president as the actor responsible for corruption, and 38.9 % not only highlight his responsibility, but also accuse him of direct involvement. Clearly, trust in the president is not an expression of love, but rather rational support for a leader who needs strong legitimacy while confronting the difficult task of maintaining the support of foreign partners, among other challenges. However, the time will come when it will be possible to hold him accountable for other aspects of his activities.

Such complexity and ambiguity is currently evident in many important areas of life. Ukrainians declare their readiness to fight to the end, but they are not flocking to recruitment committees, and “desertion”, i.e. leaving a military unit without permission, has become a plague. The new Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Fedorov, until recently the Minister of Digitalisation, has reported 200,000 such cases. Experts explain that the issue is extremely complex, involving both the fundamental issue of waging a war of attrition and resulting mass death and injury, and the values of liberal democracy, which Ukraine continues to uphold despite the war.

The foundations of resilience

This is not only a question of negotiating values. The issue of mobilisation also reflects the dysfunction within the Ukrainian political system. Volodymyr Zelensky came to power in 2019 with an openly populist programme and has remained a populist politician who avoids difficult decisions. One such issue is mobilisation. Instead of proposing a coherent mobilisation policy, the president continues to avoid decisions that parliamentarians are also reluctant to make. They, too, fear the political costs. As a result, the military continues to struggle, with some units better able to cope than others.

One aspect of the lack of a mobilisation policy is the absence of a sound policy towards Ukraine’s veterans, which currently number 1.5 million. On the one hand, they are national heroes, and all the polls indicate that the public hopes former military personnel will change the political scene. On the other hand, problems with their reintegration are already emerging. Veterans have difficulty finding work, and when they do, they are often “pushed out” by civilians. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is the guilt felt by those who were not on the front line towards those who survived this hell. Rationalisation of this feeling manifests as accusations and the belief that veterans, precisely because they survived hell, are unsuitable, aggressive and socially maladjusted. Experts do not confirm these allegations, but the problem remains. The weaker the state response, the greater the problem becomes. Fortunately, in such situations, civil society and its organisations, often created by veterans, step in and make an effort to provide care and implement systemic solutions.

Ukrainian society is constantly changing under the influence of the ongoing war. This is far from ideal, and there is no shortage of social tensions or new justifications for their existence. One significant experience of the war is the material deprivation that results from a weakened economy. On the other

⁷ Звіт за результатами онлайн опитування: „Соціально-політичні настрої українців” (Report from an online survey: “Social and political attitudes of Ukrainians”), January 2025, New Image Marketing Group, https://newimage.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Звіт_Онлайн_опитування_Соціально_політичні_настрої.pdf.

hand, however, the economy remains macro- and microeconomically resilient. New businesses are emerging, inflation is falling, and foreign exchange reserves have reached a record level of \$57.4 billion. Andriy Pyshnyy, Head of the National Bank of Ukraine, stated that the destruction of energy infrastructure will translate into an average annual energy deficit of 6 %, which in turn will cause a 0.2 % decrease in GDP. This is not a prediction of disaster and consumers confirm that they have confidence in the future. In 2025, the number of cars purchased and housing investments increased by more than 10 %.

Experts from the National Institute for Strategic Studies also do not predict catastrophe.⁸ Every year, they prepare a multi-factor analysis of the risk of economic crisis. They point out that the Ukrainian economy is not at risk of collapse due to any single impulse. It is a complex system with high resilience and the ability to adapt and balance crisis impulses. However, the imposition of minor negative stimuli cannot be ruled out – if they are not addressed in time, they may lead to the system becoming unbalanced.

Every year, the Institute's experts prepare a similar analysis for the socio-political system, assessing its vulnerability to crisis.⁹ As in the case of the economy, there is no risk of disaster on the horizon. However, once again, the imposition of unfavourable and interrelated minor phenomena may throw the system off balance. Awareness of this possibility, as well as systematic sociological research, enables the system to be monitored.

The challenges posed by freezing temperatures and a lack of heat have confirmed that the resilience of Ukrainian society is based not only on determination and strength of spirit, but also on systemic mechanisms. Yes, Ukrainians complain that their cities were not sufficiently prepared for the crisis. At the same time, however, they praise energy workers for their ability to restore the system to functionality within a few to several hours of a failure, often in life-threatening conditions due to air strikes. Perhaps it was possible to be better prepared. However, if Ukrainians themselves had not been prepared, they would not have survived, and the macroeconomic consequences (if the head of the NBU is not mistaken) would not have been so negligible.

A year of change?

Will 2026 witness another year of war, or will it be a turning point? No one wants peace more than the Ukrainians, but certainly not at any price. That is why they are ready to fight, and experts suggest that they still have two years' worth of the most important wartime resource: military manpower. The situation will be determined by opposing processes. On the one hand, there is a slow, natural degradation of military, political and institutional structures as a result of war fatigue.

A corruption scandal at the highest levels of power has revealed the extent of political dysfunction. The imposition of martial law allowed Volodymyr Zelensky to virtually eliminate the opposition and concentrate power in a manner unprecedented in Ukraine's history since 1991. At the same time,

⁸ *Економічна безпека України в умовах високих воєнних ризиків та глобальної нестабільності (Economic Security of Ukraine Amid High War Risks and Global Instability)*, Національний інститут стратегічних досліджень, https://www.niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2025-04/ad_ekonombezpeka-2025.pdf (English version: <https://niss.gov.ua/en/publikacii/analitichni-dopovidi/economic-security-ukraine-amid-high-war-risks-and-global>).

⁹ *Стан розвитку громадянського суспільства в Україні у 2024 – на початку 2025 рр. (The State of Civil Society Development in Ukraine in 2024 – at the Beginning of 2025)*, Національний інститут стратегічних досліджень, https://www.niss.gov.ua/sites/default/files/2025-12/ad_grom_susp_2024-2025_221225.pdf (English version: <https://niss.gov.ua/en/publikacii/analitichni-dopovidi/state-civil-society-development-ukraine-2024-beginning-2025>).

however, civil society has consolidated, taking over the role of the opposition. Fortunately, the pathologies of the political system do not translate into an unequivocally negative impact on state efficiency. This is also because state institutions readily cooperate with social organisations, which often have expertise and resources that are not available to public authorities.

The state functions efficiently, providing social services, security and macroeconomic stability. This is partly because the government has been effectively stripped of its political prerogatives, which have been taken over by the Office of the President. The government, free from politics, administers and, in many areas, does so very competently, in a technocratic manner, as exemplified by Mykhailo Fedorov, who has effectively made Ukraine a leader in the use of digital technologies.

Today, Fedorov is tasked with reforming the Ministry of Defence, and his appointment has been received with great hope. The army not only needs to sort out the issue of mobilisation, but also formulate an effective strategy for victory. Ukraine knows that in a war of attrition with a stronger opponent, it cannot use the same methods as its enemy. However, it cannot limit itself to defence alone, because this will definitely prevent a strategic breakthrough. This is to be achieved through the doctrine of strategic neutralisation, which consists of targeted attacks on the enemy's vulnerabilities using asymmetric advantages.

Strategic independence

Expulsion of the Russian fleet from the Black Sea is a prime example of strategic neutralisation, achieved in the autumn of 2023 through the use of maritime drones. This success led to a strategic breakthrough – the Black Sea shipping channel was reopened, enabling the export of agricultural and industrial products. Another manifestation of strategic neutralisation is the systematic attacks on Russian energy infrastructure.

Fedorov's plan to increase the lethality of the Ukrainian army to 50,000 Russian soldiers killed and wounded per month is the next stage. This number exceeds Russia's mobilisation capabilities based on its current way of waging war. The response would have to be mass mobilisation, which could entail very high political costs. Would these be high enough for Russia to change its strategic objectives? Ukrainian experts say that the stakes must convince the Russians that they cannot win this war, which will lead to erosion of the system. Perhaps it will be exacerbated by an economic crisis.

Will the war end, and if so, how and when? Ukrainian experts usually respond that they do not engage in forecasting, but simply do their job in adapting to current conditions. That is why they adjusted so quickly to the change of occupants in the White House and the resulting consequences. This is also because, during Joe Biden's presidency, they already recognised American capriciousness. Yes, the US is an essential piece of the puzzle in the war of attrition. At the same time, however, Ukrainians are convinced that they must develop the capacity to implement their strategy autonomously.

That is why Ukrainians are participating in so-called peace negotiations without believing that they will bring the results expected by their initiator, Donald Trump. However, they see their involvement as an opportunity to persuade the Americans to support Ukraine by providing the necessary resources. At the same time, they are taking advantage of every opportunity to resolve practical matters, such as the exchange of prisoners. According to information presented by Volodymyr Zelensky at the Munich Security Conference, 7,000 soldiers remain in Russian captivity.

When the blockade of the aid bill for Ukraine in 2023 caused a halt in the supply of war materials, including artillery ammunition, the response was to develop drone technology. The crisis created the impetus for a technological leap that enabled Ukraine to achieve partial symmetry in an asymmetrical war.

Opposing processes

Ukrainian experts openly admit that the effects of innovation and adaptation could have been better if they had not been negated or dissipated by systemic inefficiencies, such as errors in the management of the armed forces, both at operational and political levels.

As a result, important innovations have failed to reach the scaling and mass production phase quickly enough, and similar problems arise when implementing new solutions in combat practice. An endemic problem in the military is a hierarchical system based on loyalty and misguided discipline, which leads to the avoidance of bad news. Mistakes are not communicated for fear of punishment, although that lack of awareness renders the process of institutional learning and adaptation impossible. At the same time, the lack of complete information prevents commanders from making optimal decisions.

Information about the shortcomings of the Ukrainian military system, however painful, is openly discussed in the media and by experts. As a result, the aforementioned process of deterioration is counterbalanced by modernisation processes based on innovative forms of organisation implemented within new types of units, such as the 2nd Khartia Corps and the 3rd Army Corps. Unusual forms of cooperation between military units, the Ministry of Defence and social organisations are also being developed.

The Come Back Alive Foundation has become a permanent feature of the Ukrainian defence ecosystem. In 2025, it raised over a billion dollars, which went to units in the form of equipment and training. In the case of such initiatives, it is not so much the quantity as the quality of the action that is important – the Foundation specialises in quickly providing solutions needed by specific units in specific situations. As a social organisation, it can operate flexibly and unconventionally. Due to its autonomy, it reaches recipients outside hierarchical supply channels, avoiding all the pitfalls of such a system.

Since the beginning of the war, positive trends have consistently outweighed negative factors, giving Ukrainians reasons to believe in the possibility of victory, understood as the preservation of sovereignty and the ability to defend themselves in the future, even in the face of the necessity to recognise the de facto occupation of part of their territory by Russia (without agreeing to recognise their de jure annexation). Another issue is that it is still difficult to imagine whether, how and when the war will end and whether it will culminate in peace (which would imply the decomposition of Russia) or some form of frozen conflict. However, Ukrainian sociologists point to one aspect that is underestimated in the West. For Ukrainians, the issue of justice is crucial; they refuse to acknowledge that the aggressor, Russia, might be allowed to emerge from the conflict unpunished.

After the war

It is even more difficult to imagine the future after the war, because every scenario, even the most optimistic one, involves an enormous challenge. The most optimistic scenario is, of course, Ukraine's integration with Western structures, the European Union and, eventually, NATO. NATO is already losing its appeal due to the increasingly dubious military value of the Alliance from the Ukrainian point

of view. European integration would create the material basis for maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty and post-war reconstruction.

The war losses are overwhelming. Almost everyone has been touched by the most tragic consequences of the conflict: the death or injury of loved ones. Volodymyr Zelensky announced in early February in an interview with France 2 that 55,000 soldiers had been killed. To this number must be added tens of thousands of missing persons and 7,000 prisoners of war. We cannot forget about the civilians killed in Russian attacks. According to UN data, in 2025 alone, 2,514 people were killed and 12,142 were wounded.

There are also material losses. The latest comprehensive summary prepared by the Ukrainian government in cooperation with the World Bank, the European Commission and the UN calculates direct losses until the end of 2024 amounting to \$176 billion, and the estimated cost of reconstruction was estimated at as much as \$524 billion. Ukraine's GDP is approximately \$200 billion. These losses have affected hard infrastructure, including energy, whose system capacities have been almost completely destroyed, with the exception of nuclear power plants.

Culture has also become a victim of Russian aggression. Since the beginning of the war, 1,640 cultural heritage sites and 2,446 cultural infrastructure facilities have been destroyed or damaged. A total of 289 people associated with literature (writers, translators, critics) have also been killed.

The scale of need far exceeds even a creative accountant's imagination. In fact, it is not about absolute amounts, but the dynamics of public and private investment allocation and Ukraine's integration with the Western economy, so that it gains as much momentum for development as possible. This will determine the ability to create jobs that enable the reintegration of veterans and generate the funds needed to maintain a standing army and wartime reserves.

Any slowdown in this process that leaves Ukraine on the sidelines and, as a consequence, leads to destabilisation or even economic stagnation, could create political and social upheaval. There will be no shortage of reasons for this kind of instability, even in good economic times, because the political conflict frozen during the war will erupt with full force as soon as elections become possible. They are an essential element of the renewal and re-legitimisation of the political arena, but will simultaneously trigger a political struggle that could lead to conflict, as well as political and social polarisation.

All of this is being discussed in Ukraine, with expert groups outlining various scenarios and visions for the future. At the beginning of the year, the Ukrainian Institute for the Future published a report summarising a two-year project to develop scenarios for Ukraine titled "Ukraine's Vision 2035".¹⁰ Dozens of experts participated in the project, and the report itself focuses on a positive, even optimistic scenario. This is a response to a problem for which there is still no good answer. How can such a developed country with a sophisticated society, capable of producing advanced technologies from nuclear energy to space technologies (not to mention the military advances developed during the war), also be one of the poorest countries in Europe?

It does not have to be this way. So how can resources be mobilised in a similar way to what was achieved in order to effectively oppose a nominally much stronger Russia and win the battle for a better future? The success of digitalisation, which advanced Ukraine from 102nd place in 2018 in the

10 А. Амелін, Є. Астахов, С. Гайдайчук, *Візія України 2035 (Ukraine's Vision 2035)*, Yakaboo Publishing, Київ 2025.

category of online public services to 5th place in 2024, shows what is possible. Ukrainians argue that their success will pay off for everyone, particularly because, in turn, no one can afford their failure.

“The Great War” is the first in a series of analyses devoted to various aspects of the functioning of Ukraine and Ukrainian society during the war and the consequences of this war for the future of Ukraine, Poland, Europe and the world. The next report will be devoted to an analysis of Ukrainian visions and scenarios for the future.

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