

Three things people think they know about Ukraine in wartime

Everyday life in wartime - how to organise a mass army, signing up, deserting, training....

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We thought we would never again have to read an article about daily life during war in Europe. We had, moreover, neglected to take an interest in this reality. And today we are learning what it really means to organise a people's army, to enlist, to desert, to train, to glimpse or not glimpse the end of the war. We are also learning that there is consensus among Ukrainians in saying that Russian hostility will not stop with Putin. This is how their attachment to EU membership should be understood.

"Ukrainians are tired", "Ukraine can no longer recruit fighters", "Ukrainians want to negotiate". These comments, which we have been hearing more and more often over the past year in our media and on our social networks, have all the appearance of simple statements of fact based on observation.

Having become commonplace, these clichés circulate from television studios to think tanks, now in the form of unshakeable certainties, just as the heroic representation of Ukraine was an unshakeable certainty just two years ago. The social depth of the war is lost in these quick diagnoses that flatten complex situations, erase the plurality of actors and neglect the difficult choices these actors must make. However, these statements are not politically neutral, as they construct a certain representation of Ukraine that can be used to justify political choices that our leaders are led to make in the war. Deconstructing common-sense diagnoses also means giving ourselves finer tools for understanding and acting.

"Ukrainians are tired"

In 2024, 70% of Ukrainians have a relative who is fighting or has fought against Russia in the ranks of the Ukrainian army. Nearly 80% reported in 2023 having at least one relative wounded or killed in the war. These indicators alone are enough to show the considerable price that society as a whole is paying in this armed conflict. After three years of high-intensity warfare, the fatigue of fighters on the front, of institutions functioning in a permanent state of emergency, and of civilians having to adjust to daily risk throughout the country's territory, is undeniable. Armed resistance, like civilian resilience, comes at a cost, and we have not yet measured their lasting impact on individuals and society as a whole.

The fatigue is indeed there, and it could not be otherwise. However, behind the observation of Ukrainian fatigue, another statement is implicitly posed, a doubt about their willingness to continue the fight. The exhausted society would be literally that: emptied of its resources, about to stop for lack of fuel. My Ukrainian colleague, intellectual Tatyana Ogarkova, said it one day in an exchange with students: "When I am asked the question 'are you tired?', I hear behind it 'When are you finally going to stop?'"

It is essential to move away from the all-too-easy analogy between fatigue and the end of consent to continue the war.

Public opinion surveys have been measuring Ukrainian society's willingness to continue the fight against the Russian aggressor since the beginning of the war. Obviously, the responses given do not so much reflect the choices made by each Ukrainian when war comes knocking at their door, as the way society perceives and tells itself at a given moment. However, even read in this way, the answers, and especially their dynamics, are rich in lessons. Thus, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology regularly asks Ukrainians: "How much longer are you prepared to endure the war?" For two years, between March 2022 and February 2024, the answer "as long as it takes" topped the list with scores of 71%-73% of responses. A decline is indeed observed in the third year of the war, with 63% in October and 57% in December 2024. What has especially increased during this period is the proportion of "difficult to say" responses, which rose in one year from 4% to 18% of responses, and up to 28% in the east of the country, closest to the front line. The uncertainties of a period where Ukrainians have realised that their partners' aid was not giving them the means for a military victory over Russia, have inscribed the war in another temporality in the eyes of the population: "as long as it takes" is no longer counted in months, but in decades, and introduces trouble.

In a recurring survey conducted by Rating Group, to the question "Do you believe Ukraine will win this war?", 97% of respondents answered positively during the first two years of war. The rate of positive responses has dropped to 88% since February 2024. What is mainly changing is the distribution between those who declare themselves "certain" that Ukraine will win the war (81% in early 2022, 56% in autumn 2024) and those who think it will "probably" win (16% in 2022, 32% in 2024). What these surveys indicate is both the maintenance of a social consensus around a war perceived as just, and a confrontation with increased difficulties, both within society and in international support for Ukraine.

However, beyond the figures, observation of Ukrainians' daily practices shows a society in constant evolution, engaged in a dynamic of permanent adjustments to new problems as they arise. Behind the front, many Ukrainians are engaged on their own initiative in defence activities. For example, since the realisation of the centrality of drones on today's battlefield, private or associative drone pilot training centres, research initiatives on associated technologies, artisanal or industrial workshops for manufacturing this equipment, and fundraising for drone purchases have multiplied in society. When the battlefield problematic changes or new needs arise, society reorganises itself.

In territories diversely affected by the fighting, Ukrainians are working very actively to preserve the fundamentals of civilian life: continuity of education, maintenance of public services, economic activities, cultural life. This paradoxical normality, so surprising for the foreign visitor who is amazed to see shops open and cappuccinos served on the terraces of Ukrainian city cafés, is not a sign of disengagement from a society that would like to forget the war, but an act of daily resistance. While our media kept promising Ukraine a catastrophic winter 2024-2025 without heating or electricity, Ukraine seems to be countering attacks on its infrastructure better than expected. Repelling, rebuilding, getting things working again, rescuing after a bombing is Sisyphean work, but it is this that best shows Ukrainian society's capacity to be tired while continuing to seek new resources to move forward.

"Ukraine can no longer recruit fighters"

"Yes, but what about the front?", the attentive reader will retort. The difficulties of the Ukrainian army on the battlefield are staged daily in media reports, with extensive use of maps showing troop advances or retreats, so zoomed in that they become illegible. While the litany of names of localities taken or abandoned by the belligerents on any given day blurs understanding and merges into a

monotonous din, one message stands out clearly: the Ukrainian army lacks fighters, cannot recruit enough, and faces multiplying desertions.

Once again, the message comes with an implication: if the army is struggling to recruit and retain fighters, perhaps Ukrainians no longer wish to fight and no longer consent to continue this war. Here too, it is essential to separate the question of consent to take up arms from that of consent to war. Seeking to understand the social logics and administrative constraints at work in the recruitment of fighters offers a much more heuristic entry point into the crucial question of recruiting civilians for war.

Military mobilisation is not just a performative act, it is also a set of administrative actions that ensure its implementation, carried out by institutions more or less capable of conducting it. The great surge of voluntary engagement in the army that immediately followed the Russian aggression ensured the constitution of combat units during the first period of the war, but also masked the fragilities of the military administration for several months.

One of these fragilities was the difficulty for the armed forces to identify the civilians they wished to mobilise: the registers of citizens regarding their military obligation were in paper format, located in scattered offices, and above all very unevenly updated. The general mobilisation provided for in Ukrainian legislation does not follow a logic of random selection, but proceeds progressively, from citizens with the best military experience to those who have none. While it was relatively easy to identify citizens who had recently left the armed forces or done their military service shortly before, the military administration experienced increasing difficulties as the war progressed, as it had to draw from categories of citizens whose connection with the army was much more tenuous, who had never updated their file in the registers.

The difficulty was less in rural areas, where it was easier to census those eligible for mobilisation, than in large cities, which led the army to over-recruit in the countryside, giving the image of an unequal and socially unjust mobilisation. In cities, recruitment offices, equipped with increasingly irrelevant files on men less and less socialised to the army, multiplied their excesses. The widely publicised practices of raids, where soldiers were filmed arresting and taking away men in the middle of the street, were revealing of the tension between the order given to recruitment offices to mobilise a certain number of men, and the inadequacy of the administrative tools at their disposal to do so. The digitisation of military registers is indeed underway, and a unified electronic database has been operational for a few months, signalling the Ukrainian state's awareness of the disastrous consequences of this administrative flaw. Thanks to this new tool, recruitment practices may evolve.

Beyond practical difficulties, the war poses a fundamental question in Ukraine: that of the model of civic duty in force in society, and the adequacy of the military mobilisation system to this model. Designed for yesterday's wars and societies, the mobilisation model rests on the figure of the citizen-soldier, the basic unit of the armed forces which the latter can use indiscriminately. This model comes to clash with the contours of citizenship and civic duty elaborated in Ukraine in recent decades. In a society where the state was perceived as fragile and potentially failing, and where liberal ideas of initiative and autonomy have been valued instead, citizens have developed particular modes of action for the common good.

From the beginning of the war in Donbas in 2014, citizens engaged in the country's defence, but within restricted communities. Many civilians had joined volunteer battalions, sensitive to freedom and camaraderie in their operation. Others engaged in associative groups, around projects: purchasing equipment for the army, evacuating wounded, reintegrating veterans... Being effective and useful, making the best use of one's skills in service of one's country, in support of one's state, has become the most valued mode of fulfilling one's civic duty. By focusing strictly on the military

institution, analysts often neglect an entire segment of Ukrainian society actively engaged in defence, such as the drone initiatives mentioned above. These initiatives, external to the army, nevertheless come in support of the conduct of war. They also contribute to creating a vast social space, between civilian and military, of citizens already concretely engaged in the war.

Mobilisation, anonymous and blind to the life experience of the conscript, to their projects and their perception of their usefulness in service of the country, comes to clash head-on with this model of citizenship. The shock is further accentuated by the demographic profile of those mobilised. The average age of the Ukrainian army is indeed quite high, around 40-45 years. These men arrive in the army rich in personal and professional experience, aware of their handicaps, including physical unpreparedness, but aware also of their assets. They are, even less than others, ready to become interchangeable units on the front.

The Ukrainian state has become aware of this problem, and is today testing devices to adjust recruitment modes to these demands of society. Thanks to initiatives initially proposed by civil society, the state is putting in place more decentralised recruitment circuits aligned with private sector practices, where civilians apply on their own initiative to job offers proposed by this or that brigade of the armed forces. Composing an army from a social body of civilians, in the urgency of war, is not just a logistical operation: mobilisation also confronts the state with the foundations of its social contract and the content of civic duty.

Desertion, also widely publicised as a sign of Ukrainian demoralisation, also stems from much more complex social logics. Many deserters, both those who have newly arrived at the front and those who have been fighting for nearly three years, point to very specific reasons for their refusal to continue. The absence of a maximum duration of mobilisation is one of the sticking points. While at the beginning of the war, fighters did not question the duration of their engagement, the temporality of the conflict has changed. Aware of a Russian army that is reorganising and strengthening itself, and of Western partners who, in the Ukrainian perception, take care to give Ukraine just enough weapons to hold on, but not enough to win, Ukrainians today see their war inscribed in a very long time. Therefore, being mobilised for the total duration of the war amounts to committing until death, and having to abandon all post-war projects which becomes a horizon that recedes as one advances. This situation is today unbearable for many fighters who desert to signify their protest, and demand the setting of a demobilisation date in exchange for their return to the front. The Ukrainian state is therefore in a difficult equation to solve: it must mobilise more fighters, but to be able to attract them, it must accept to demobilise.

Finally, the reasons for desertion, mentioned notably in a recently published survey, also stem from problems of capacity building in the Ukrainian army: the lack of competent commanders, defects in supervision and defects in training are notably highlighted by deserters as main reasons for their departure. These organisational problems are a major challenge for the Ukrainian army and certainly play on troop morale. However, they are very far from marking a state of moral debacle and do not necessarily accompany a loss of the sense of war. Often seen as an “exit”, Ukrainian desertion sometimes approaches instead the “voice”, an active speaking out to demand reforms from the state.

“Ukrainians want to negotiate”

Words matter. “Do you think the time for official *peace talks* between Ukraine and Russia has come?”, the Democratic Initiatives Foundation polling institute asks the Ukrainian population in June 2024. 44% of respondents answer positively. The figure quickly begins to circulate in the media, but with a slightly different wording: “44% of Ukrainians are ready for *negotiations with* Russia”, thus reports Public Sénat in an article.

“Should Ukraine enter into *talks* with Russia to try to achieve peace?”, asks the International Institute of Sociology in a poll, and obtains 57% positive responses in May 2024. However, in the English version of this survey, commissioned by the American think tank National Democratic Institute, the term talks (“переговори” in Ukrainian) has disappeared, replaced by that of “negotiations”: “Do you think that Ukraine should engage in *negotiations* with Russia to try to achieve peace?”, says the English version. The wording is repeated identically by *Le Monde* a few months later, stating that the share of Ukrainians “open to negotiations would have gone from 33%, in May 2023, to 57%, a year later”, and headlining “Ukrainians increasingly open to negotiations”.

Talks or negotiations? This translation game is not a linguists’ quarrel. The idea of a growing willingness of Ukrainians to *negotiate*, thus engage in a game of compromise and concessions, is increasingly part of common sense, where the polls were making Ukrainians react to their acceptance of *talks*, that is, the addition of a diplomatic track to the military track to try to achieve peace. Whether conscious or not, the manipulation produces effects, by creating a distorted representation of the state of mind of Ukrainians in our societies, but also putting pressure on Ukraine.

External pressure to negotiate is well perceived in Ukrainian society. Opinion polls allow us to dig deeper into the subject, to understand how citizens react to these pressures. In December 2024, as Donald Trump’s presidency and his desire to push for a quick agreement are already anticipated, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology proposes different negotiation scenarios to Ukrainians, questioning them on the acceptability of the proposed hypotheses.

The “optimistic” scenario of a Russia that keeps control of the separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk and Crimea, but returns the occupied regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to Ukraine, with Ukraine becoming a member of NATO and the EU, obtaining serious security guarantees and reconstruction aid, obtains the assent of 60% of respondents. The “intermediate” scenario of a Russia that keeps control of all occupied territories, but of a Ukraine that becomes a member of NATO, the EU, and obtains security guarantees and reconstruction aid, is declared acceptable by 64% of Ukrainians interviewed. However, for more than 2/3 of those, accepting such an agreement would be a “painful decision to take”. The third scenario that can be described as “pessimistic”, that of a Russia that keeps control of occupied territories, with a Ukraine that renounces joining NATO, but becomes a member of the European Union and obtains the necessary support for reconstruction, is “painful, but ultimately acceptable” for 34% of respondents, and easily acceptable for 7%.

Few Ukrainians are ready for a peace agreement at any price, these surveys tell us. More than the territorial factor, it is security guarantees that make the difference. Ukraine’s primary concern is to preserve its sovereignty in the face of a Russia whose main intention is, in its eyes, at best to subjugate the country, at worst to plunge it into chaos. It is not so much territories that concern Ukrainians as the fate of those who are in these territories, under an occupation whose violence Ukraine never ceases to emphasise.

The temporality of the war and this perception of Russia’s aspirations are central here for understanding the attitude of Ukrainians. While the imperatives of political action and time constrained by electoral deadlines encourage our leaders to reason in the short term, and to project themselves primarily until a ceasefire, Ukrainian society sees upcoming negotiations as merely one stage in a war inscribed in a time that is not counted in years, but in decades. There is today a consensus in Ukrainian society to affirm that Russian hostility to a sovereign Ukraine is not limited to Putin’s figure, and will not stop with him. Today’s war continues that of 2014-2022, and will probably be followed, in the eyes of Ukrainians, by tomorrow’s war, where Russia governed by Putin or another will pursue the project of removing from Ukraine the mastery of its destiny.

Ukrainians' attachment to their European Union membership should be understood in this perspective: if 71% of Ukrainians surveyed affirm in August 2024 that it is unacceptable for Russia to force them to renounce joining the EU, it is because beyond its military aid capabilities, Europe represents for them a political guarantee of escaping the destabilisation and collapse desired by Russia. This political guarantee plays out in the long term, that long term that we have such difficulty grasping and anticipating in this war.

Avoiding quick interpretations not only allows us to escape the trap of easy solutions and gives us keys to understanding events in their historical and social inscription. It also allows us to open our eyes to questions that concern our own societies at the highest level, particularly those that would be more comfortable not to ask. What price will we have to pay for our difficulty in projecting ourselves in the long term? What is the model of civic duty observable in our societies? How would our societies react to the necessity of mobilising in the face of danger, and what would be the springs of engagement? What are our tools of resilience and resistance? Is the perceived power of our states a strength or a weakness? So many questions that Ukraine sends back to us, like a mirror of our own doubts.

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P.S.

<https://www.solidarity-ukraine-belgium.com/post/trois-idees-recues-sur-lukraine-en-guerre>

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