



THE CRUCIBLE OF FREEDOM: WAR AND DEMOCRACY SUPPORT IN UKRAINE

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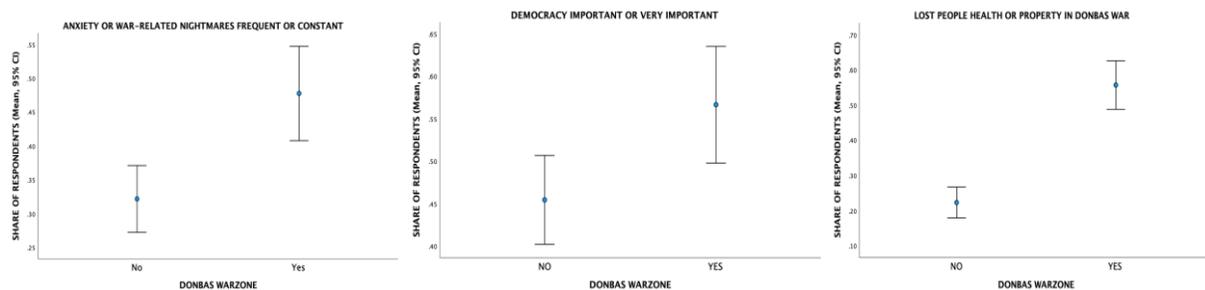
The Crucible of Freedom: War and Democracy Support in Ukraine

In its analysis of Ukrainian society’s inspired resilience in the face of a massive and brutal Russian military invasion, *The Economist* (April 16, 2022) warned: “...there will be a risk of backsliding on democracy and liberalism in a country which will be focused on its security as never before.” This warning resonates with sociological research indicating that democracy support declines when people lose family, friends, homes, and jobs; when they get traumatized; when their assumptions of personal safety shatter; when they experience “a ball of rage.” Using country-level data for the entire world, political scientists found that from 1816 to 1992 democracy had a hard time taking root in states involved in military conflict.

But Ukraine tells a different story. Annual opinion surveys of the Ukraine National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (UNASIS) showed that public support for democracy across Ukraine increased after the 2014 Donbas war onset. On average, from 2002 through 2012, about 67 percent respondents (N=1,800/year) considered democracy important or very important to them personally. The average for 2014 through 2020 was 73 percent. And the number of respondents who said freedom of expression was important to them increased over the same time periods from 64 to 74 percent. This trend continued right up to Russia’s full-scale invasion: in the December 2021 UNASIS poll the numbers were 83 percent for democracy importance and 81 percent for freedom of expression.

Moreover, inside the war-torn Donbas region under Kyiv control since 2014, war exposure boosted democracy support. Following the most intense first two years of the 2014 Russia-Ukraine war over the Donbas, 57 percent of the region’s residents who reported having lived in the warzone (N=203, June 2017 UNASIS survey) said democracy was important to them, compared to 45 percent of those who didn’t report such experience (N=350)—a statistically significant difference. Strikingly, respondents with warzone experience also reported significantly higher levels of post-traumatic stress and personal loss—factors associated with erosion of and not support for democracy in prior research (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



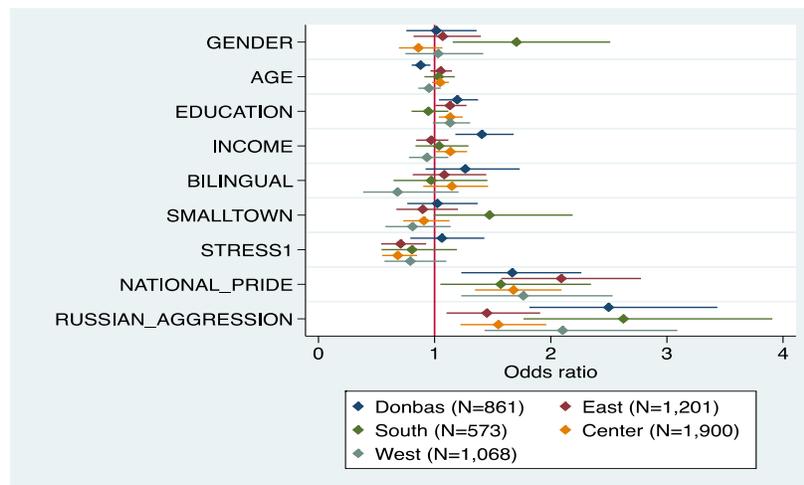
The Donbas probe indicates that instead of pro-authoritarian “ball of rage,” war exposure engendered pro-democracy rallying. A paneled comparison of means showed with 95 percent confidence that people in social groups typically less supportive of democracy in the Donbas

region were more supportive if they had warzone experience—specifically, those in the 60-69 age bracket (14 percent of the Donbas sample); those with vocational/community college level education (49.7 percent); those whose income enough to cover only their basic needs (27 percent); and those in whose families Ukrainian is not spoken (64 percent).

To explain sustained public support for democracy in the face of war in Ukraine, I statistically tested competing hypotheses with the UNASIS data from nationwide surveys conducted in June 13 through July 4, 2016 (N=1,802); June 1 through June 19, 2017 (N=1,800 plus an oversample in the Donbas GCA with N=399); and September 13 through October 1, 2018 (N=1,800). I separately tested for year and region, including multiyear tests with the pooled data for all three survey years (N=4,763).

The results are clear. Identification of Russia as the principal enemy in the Donbas war came through as by far the strongest and most robust predictor of democracy support in Ukraine. Even warzone residence was not significant once Russian aggression was factored in. National pride came close second. Age, education, income, language, and the rural/urban cleavage were significant in some of the tests, but none of them was significant in all the tests and none generated better odds of democracy support than enemy identification and national pride (Figure 2).¹ In essence, rallying around the flag in Ukraine meant rallying for democracy. (And not for the leader, with the then president Poroshenko approval ratings plummeting from 55 percent in 2014 to 6 percent in 2016).

Figure 2. Democracy Support in Ukraine: Logit Results (pooled 2016-2018 data by region)



¹ “Bilingual” stands for respondents reporting using both Ukrainian and Russian at home; this measure is used rather than speaking mostly either Russian or Ukrainian, because the number of respondents speaking only Ukrainian in the Donbas and those speaking mostly Russian in the West was close to zero. Additional tests showed that using Ukrainian or Russian in other regions as a control for language didn’t affect the results.

Questions and Implications

The fundamental question deserving investigation is to what extent legitimation of democracy and the evolution of democratic values in any state may be shaped by international system factors above and beyond the state- or individual-level factors. In other words, what if the fortunes of democracy around the world are more a function of war and alliances than of levels of socioeconomic development, identities, or culture within states? Further we may ask:

- To what extent are individual democracy preferences a function of the desired geopolitical identity of one's state? Is geopolitical threat perception a particularly salient factor?
- Is the disappearance of the global communist threat something that conditioned deep polarization and nationalist populism in the West after the Cold War? Is that why democracy support increased in places like Ukraine and Taiwan and declined in places like Hungary and the United States?
- Could the loss of faith in the prospects of joining the alliances of Western democracies lead to the erosion of democratic prospects in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (as it likely did in Turkey with Erdogan's moves toward authoritarianism following the diminution of EU membership prospects)?
- On the flip side, is external aggression (e.g. capitalist/British/NATO "encirclement") threat--falsely ascribed to democracies and amplified by propaganda—the principal tool of the consolidation of tyranny from Stalin and Hitler to Putin and Xi Jinping?
- Did the money and effort spent by the US and its allies on democracy support worldwide yield success only when the geopolitical conditions were right (i.e., in the Cold-War Europe and East Asia, but not in the post-Cold War Russia and Central Asia)?

Finally, the findings indicate that Ukraine's resistance to the massive Russian invasion not only has strong foundations, but will be renewed and amplified through interactive effects of the Russian aggression threat and democracy support. Russia will have to resort to exceedingly atrocious means to gain victories. And this raises the question of how much more brutality the world will witness and should tolerate in any territory Russia occupies and holds, beyond Bucha, beyond Mariupol, beyond imagination as the Kremlin persists with its aggressive expansionism.

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