

The Ukrainian Civil Front – An Interim Assessment

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One of the key aspects of the war that Russia imposed on Ukraine is the surprising level of steadfastness among the Ukrainian civilian front, which prevents Russia from realizing its military advantage and determining the outcome of the war. The civilian home front in Ukraine was rebuilt after Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and it functions remarkably well based on the general mobilizing of recruits and volunteering of civilians for a variety of national and local missions, including combat, in the territorial defense frameworks. All this is on the basis of a national narrative, successfully shaped by the Zelensky government despite the historical rifts between Ukrainians and Russians and other ethnic minorities. Alongside considerable achievements, highlighted by Ukrainian propaganda, there is severe and multidimensional damage to the civilian home front, national infrastructure, and the local economy. Most destructive is the phenomenon of refugees and internally displaced persons, whose number already reaches about one fifth of the total population. All these could undermine Ukraine's national resilience and its capacity to bounce back and successfully forge a postwar unified society based on a Ukrainian national identity. These factors might be crucial to the outcome of the war in the medium and long term.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has (so far) created three strategic surprises: Russia's military failure to reach a quick, decisive victory and thereby realize its clear military advantage over Ukraine; the active involvement, albeit without direct military intervention, by the United States and Western Europe, to act vigorously against Russian aggression; and the Ukrainian success, not only in impeding the invasion militarily but also in mobilizing the civilian population for what seems thus far to be solid and impressive national steadfastness in the face of the aggressor. This article focuses on the national steadfastness of the Ukrainian civilian population, which is naturally affected by the other dimensions of the war. At this point, the war – initiated by Russia as part of its strategic confrontation with the US and NATO – is taking place in the Ukrainian

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arena. Russia now uses its military forces mainly against civilian targets and critical national infrastructure, to the point of having created a severe humanitarian crisis. Ukraine prepared in advance for such a war based on the lessons of the previous round in 2014; it responds by maximizing the capabilities of the civilian population.

The mobilization of the Ukrainian population consists of three main dimensions, which feed into each other:

1. The majority of the public has expressed increasing support for President Zelensky, who is making a considerable effort in this domain. In a poll conducted on December 21, 2021, after the Russians had already deployed large forces near the Ukrainian border, 33% of respondents (excluding those living in the separatist regions of eastern Ukraine) said they would undertake armed resistance if Russia initiated broad military action. Another 22% indicated they would participate in civil resistance. About 15% said they would move to safer areas, and about 9% said they would seek refuge abroad. In a poll conducted by the Ukrainian Rating Group (March 1), after the start of the war, 80% of Ukrainian respondents (outside the separatist regions in the east) indicated they were willing to defend their country with weapons in hand. The numbers fell to 60% for respondents living in the non-separatist eastern part of the country. In a March 12 poll, 76% of respondents indicated that matters in the country were moving in the right direction, as in another poll (March 18) conducted by the same group.
2. Since the outbreak of the war, Ukrainian civil society has shown an impressive degree of responsiveness to enlist and volunteer in many diverse fields. This mobilization sometimes includes direct assistance to the military and the war effort, to the point of presenting it as a symbol of the resolve of the civilian population, as a key to victory over the Russians, and as a source of Ukrainian national identity and pride.
3. The state of national emergency and the general mobilization of men aged 18–60 at the beginning of the war brought about a revolution in the capabilities and conduct of the Ukrainian struggle against the Russian army. These were based on preliminary preparations, which

had been taking place since 2014 in various spheres of civil defense led by Ukraine's Ministry of Interior. Since the start of the war, about 100,000 civilians have reportedly enlisted in the Territorial Defense Forces. They are involved not only in a variety of civil defense, policing, and direct assistance missions serving the municipal systems but also provide significant reinforcement to the military effort by disrupting the Russian forces with civilian attack squads.

Alongside these considerable accomplishments, which are highlighted in Ukrainian propaganda, the civilian home front has also suffered severe, multidimensional damage. Russia's attacks against civilian targets have intensified and have assumed the character of attrition, given its difficulty in establishing large-scale ground maneuvers. This is especially evident in the huge, growing wave of refugees (probably already more than four million, most of them women and children, who have left the country) alongside internally displaced persons (about 6.5 million). At this stage, the refugees and the internally displaced persons constitute more than one-fifth of the civilian population. This rate of refugees and IDPs, as well as the great destruction of buildings, critical infrastructure, and the economy point to the enormous challenge that Ukraine faces in continuing to function as a state and society and to the great difficulty that may impede its recovery after the end of the war.

Even if the steadfastness of the Ukrainian civilian population is indeed high – if the messages of Ukrainian propaganda do not completely distort reality – it still does not necessarily mean that Ukraine's societal resilience is high as well. There are both connections and differences between civilian steadfastness and civilian resilience.

The professional literature on natural and manmade mass disasters such as war makes an important distinction between resistance or mitigation of the disaster, before or during its occurrence, and societal resilience, which is mainly manifested during and after the disaster. Societal resilience is expressed by a high capacity of functional continuity during the disaster and primarily in quickly recovering from the crisis and even moving toward growth after the crisis has ended. There is usually a circumstantial connection between the two concepts, since steadfastness (during war, for example) is supposed to strengthen societal resilience and promote

recovery and growth. However, other important factors also affect resilience, including the level of the country's pre-disaster preparedness, the magnitude of the direct and collateral damage caused by the disaster, the assistance of the state and international parties to the population, and even the local and national leadership and the public consciousness of the affected society.

The public consciousness has great importance, as it appears in the present war. From the perspective of the Ukrainian government and particularly that of President Zelensky, as the main bearer of the cognitive effort (internally and externally), it is evident that the centrality of the public consciousness, both local and international, is clear to them. That is why the Ukrainian leadership invests a large and seemingly successful effort in this. Internally, the government strives to present an image of "robust national steadfastness" also by framing the war as a defining national event.

This is of crucial importance above and beyond the conduct of the war effort itself. It is also an ongoing effort to create a unified Ukrainian national identity, transforming Ukraine from a divided society, composed of different ethnic groups, into a cohesive nation state, united behind a common national idea. Yet historically, Ukraine is a country with a mixed Ukrainian-Russian national identity, as 17.5% of its citizens are identified as Russians and about 30% of Ukrainians are native Russian speakers. This binational nature is reversed in favor of the Russian side in the eastern and southeastern regions of Ukraine, where most of the fighting is taking place. In this acute context, local extremist separatist forces of Russian origin are operating on the ground against the Ukrainian state. Against them and the Russian army, radical Ukrainian nationalist groups are also active. In fact, there is a "minor war" between these ethnic groups, manifested by mutual terrorism against civilians, which will affect the ethnic identity of the country.

Despite the ethnic strife and the heavy propaganda screen, it seems that the internal civilian front is an important factor in fueling Ukraine's ability to successfully withstand the Russian invasion. Yet the extent of the role of the civilian front in Ukraine's future is still unclear. Its role largely depends on the duration of the war, its damage, and the intensity of the intra-

Ukrainian struggle. The Ukrainian leadership seems to be well aware of this and is therefore directing supreme efforts in the cognitive realm, relying as much as possible on framing and disseminating the national patriotic narrative. So far, this effort has helped undermine Russia's strategic advantage. The question still remains whether the civilian population's steadfastness in the face of the Russian invader will be shaped into sustainable postwar national resilience, which would enable a rapid recovery. For Ukraine, the answer to this question will largely determine the results of the war.