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# The social foundations for peace: violence, peace, and (dis)order in Ukraine

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# Abstract

While peace is often associated with stability, the process of peace building involves a range of conflicts. Using Ukraine as a powerful case study, we examine how violence, insecurity, resilience, and desire for peace intersect within state borders. The paper's main purpose is to raise awareness of the local political and social dynamics that will shape the implementation of any peace settlement following Russia's war against Ukraine – dynamics that adversaries may seek to exploit.

We challenge conventional assumptions about peace by focusing on the lived experiences of those directly affected by the war, in particular internally displaced women. We stress the diversity of Ukrainian agency in peacebuilding and seek to elevate voices often excluded from dominant narratives of Russia's war against Ukraine.

After every war  
someone has to clean up.  
Things won't  
straighten themselves up, after all.  
...  
Photogenic it's not,  
and takes years.  
All the cameras have left  
for another war.  
from 'The End and the Beginning' (Szymborska 2001)

# Introduction

Discussions for a peace settlement to Russia's war against Ukraine imply that peace and stability in international relations and domestic politics occurs just as Jack Plumb, a historian of 17th- and 18th-century England, imagined the arrival of political stability: 'quite quickly, as suddenly as water becomes ice' (Plumb 1969: 13). Our paper queries this assumption about a sudden, swift, and straightforward transition from war to peace. It conceptualises the transition from war to peace as a conflictual and often contradictory process. Any strategy towards peace between Russia and Ukraine must account for the fundamental risk posed by significant political and social instability in Ukraine. Ukrainian civil society actors in particular have drawn attention to the importance of creating a 'fair' and 'real' peace in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine (Matviichuk 2025).

There is currently very little analysis of what this entails and very little detailed empirical information on what Ukrainians think this entails. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we seek to highlight the importance of peacebuilding in Ukrainian society and the inherently conflictual nature of this process. Second, we discuss important, yet often neglected Ukrainian voices – internally displaced Ukrainians, most of them women – in terms of their expectations and hopes for the transition from war to peace.

Our analysis is based mainly on 70 in-depth interviews with internally displaced women conducted in August–September 2023 and July–August 2024.<sup>1</sup> These women represent a critical yet often overlooked voice in Ukraine's evolving debates about the meaning and shape of peace, particularly as their displacement is intimately connected to the course and nature of the war. Their experiences reflect the deep ruptures and unresolved tensions in post-war societies. Though they may not participate directly in combat, their lives are profoundly shaped by war and displacement: of the participants, 37 recounted direct experiences of violence in their hometowns or during evacuation; 30 had endured double displacement – first in 2014 and again in 2022; 22 had a close relative or partner currently serving in the Ukrainian armed forces; and 2 had survived captivity and torture.

Our study captures a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, reflecting the diversity of participants' backgrounds, including former teachers, sales assistants, university professors, civil society activists, humanitarian workers, entrepreneurs, and homemakers. To contextualise and validate these qualitative insights, we also draw on relevant survey data including both male and female respondents, demonstrating that the views expressed by our interviewees are not isolated but reflect broader societal trends. In doing so, this research highlights how grassroots perspectives, particularly those of internally displaced women, challenge externally imposed and distorted narratives of how peace will be reached and what it will entail.

Internally displaced women offer a particularly valuable case study for our analysis. Recent research has highlighted that experiences of displacement are closely intertwined with expectations of peace (Hujale 2023). Among internally displaced people, women bear a disproportionate share of hardship, especially in conflict-affected settings. As underscored by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), women and children make up the vast majority of civilians affected by armed conflict and are increasingly targeted by armed groups, and their experiences have profound consequences for achieving durable peace and reconciliation.

In Ukraine, internal displacement has disproportionately impacted women, who make up 60 per cent of all internally displaced people and 72 per cent of those receiving social protection. Many have assumed the role of sole caregivers, while male family members serve on the front lines (U4GenderEquality Reform Helpdesk 2023). Economic vulnerability is also more pronounced among women: according to a March 2023 survey by Info Sapiens, 50 per cent of internally displaced women in Ukraine reported job loss, compared to just 28 per cent of men (Vološevych 2023). These figures underscore the gendered dimensions of displacement and recovery.

While our paper does not focus explicitly on the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding, it is informed by scholarship that treats gender as an underlying structure shaping conflict and post-conflict realities (Hudson 2009; Pepper 2023:113). Our approach builds on and contributes to the literature that investigates the role of diverse social groups in peace processes (Ozcelik et al. 2021), offering new insights into how internally displaced populations, particularly women, understand, experience, and potentially reshape notions of peace.

Our findings have implications beyond our case study, as we draw attention to the fundamental mismatch between expectations, hopes, and aspirations of peace and the societal and political realities (Hedström/Olivius 2023a). We also underscore the importance of overcoming the 'fragmentation between fields' that characterises most research on post-war transformations

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted by Daryna Dvornichenko and ethics approval was obtained by the University of Oxford prior to data collection.

(Hedström & Olivius 2023b: 6); we build on research from a wide array of relevant research expertise pertaining to different geographical locales and disciplinary fields, from anthropology and sociology to history and heritage, including some insights from studies on women, peace, and security (Arimatsu & Chinkin 2024).

## How do societies transition from war to peace?

Peace is widely understood as more than just the absence of violence or war; it is not merely 'symmetric to war' (Diehl 2016, 2). While war and peace may appear as opposites, they involve distinct experiences, expectations, and analytical approaches (Wegner 2002:XVIII–XIX). In this context, it is important to distinguish between negotiating and building peace. The former typically focuses on halting violence, whereas the latter addresses the deeper structural causes of conflict, such as poverty, inequality, injustice, and lack of opportunity.

Peacebuilding is a transformative process through which the norms of peace and civilian conflict management gradually replace reliance on violence. Over time, an expectation of violence gives way to an expectation of peace (Bonacker 2024, Brock 2024, 131-133, Brock 2002). Peacebuilding is an 'inherently conflictual process' that is characterised by a high degree of 'constant friction' (Björkdahl & Höglund 2013: 289 and 292). Indeed, what 'peace' entails is contested between different actors and the meaning of 'peace' is the subject of negotiations (Bonacker 2024: 112; Guarrieri et al. 2017: 2 and 8).

Though the liberal peacebuilding literature has assumed that peace can be created through social or political engineering, this has proven to be illusory (Paffenholz 2021:367 and 369, Berg 2020). We also know that transitions from war to peace have historically been longer-term processes rather than short events and that the end of war often cannot be clearly identified – it is relatively rare to end wars through negotiations and peace treaties (Wegner 2002:XXI; Herbert & Schildt 1998; Hoffmann et al. 2015).

War changes the fabric and structure of a society: it strengthens the position of the central state as it intervenes more directly and often more coercively in the lives of its citizens, while at the same time, society mobilises as part of the war effort. War also changes the nature of a country's economy and therefore the nature of its social and economic hierarchies, leading to a significantly higher degree of state intervention but also to strengthened informal networks, thus leading to 'mass informal practices' (Artiukh & Fedirko 2025: 59-60, 68; generally: Berdal & Zaum 2015: 36; Torjesen 2015: 85-86).

Given these changes, the period of transition from war to peace is a 'period of substantial, multidirectional societal changes that follow the end of war' and that have 'no set direction' (Hedström & Olivius 2023b: 6, following Klem 2018). 'Reconstruction' after wartime has therefore always been a misnomer, as war fundamentally changes pre-war politics and society: there is little there to reconstruct because society has changed.

In this paper, we explore these conceptual distinctions and tensions through the lens of Ukraine, using it as a case study to examine how peacebuilding, societal transformation, and the contested meanings of 'peace' unfold in the context of ongoing war and post-war transitions.

## Actors and modalities of the transition from war to peace

Discussions for a peace settlement to end Russia's war against Ukraine have so far focused almost exclusively on diplomatic negotiations, the question of military peacekeeping afterwards (for example, European troop deployments (see Hedberg 2024; Fischer 2025), and historical models for a negotiated peace settlement (Heisbourg 2023).

A key factor influencing the prospects for any peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine is the interplay between domestic and international dynamics. Ukraine has been heavily reliant on economic and military support from the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom, and the United States (Arthiuk & Fedirko 2025). The willingness or reluctance of these international actors to continue their support directly influences the situation on the front line and, by extension, shapes the parameters of any potential agreement. As a result, Ukraine's domestic political agency is constrained by external factors it can attempt to influence but cannot fully control. This asymmetry risks positioning Ukraine more as an object than a subject in many international discussions for a potential peace settlement (Karjalainen 2024).

This interaction between the domestic and international levels has implications for external actors vis-à-vis Ukraine. By aligning themselves with certain political actors over others, international partners become directly involved in Ukraine's internal political landscape (conceptually: Zaum 2017: 410). Given the scale of their political, economic, and military investments, it would not be in the interest of these actors to endorse a peace settlement that leaves Ukraine weakened and vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression. This reinforces their stake in the outcome and their influence over the process.

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## Shifting the focus from diplomacy to society: visions of peace among displaced Ukrainians

There is little evidence to suggest that current negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have meaningfully incorporated the visions or experiences of those most affected by the war. Yet, research in history and the social sciences consistently shows that peace is deeply tied to the lived experiences, hopes, and aspirations of diverse social actors (Weller 2025, cf. Edler et al. 2024).

Voices from Ukrainian society will become increasingly important. Peace negotiations alone have rarely resulted in the immediate arrival of peace, however defined (Nehring & Pharo 2008); thus, Ukraine's transition from war to peace will largely depend on reconciling the outcomes of high-level negotiations with the visions of peace held by those directly affected by the conflict. The extent to which these visions are reflected in the final settlement will shape its legitimacy and the prospects for building a sustainable peace. In this section, we examine how Ukrainians understand peace, and how these understandings should inform the design of a durable post-war settlement.

## What kind of peace?

While a recent Gallup poll shows significant weakening of support in Ukrainian society for a position arguing for fighting towards victory and growing support for a negotiated settlement (Vigers 2025), the values and beliefs associated with such a settlement are an expression of moral beliefs that, as such, appear to have remained quite stable (Hrushetskyi 2025). Earlier opinion polls indicate that Ukrainians show an 'overwhelming' commitment to preserving the territorial and political integrity of their country, even at great cost (Dill et al., 2023:15). Displaced Ukrainians, primarily women, conceptualise 'peace' in ways that reaffirm, sharpen, and complicate that commitment. Their vision of peace is not defined simply by the cessation of hostilities but by the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, including the return of Crimea and Donetsk. Most respondents regard any concession of territory as a profound betrayal – both of justice and of those who continue to suffer under occupation.

One participant from Nova Kakhovka, now living in Zakarpattia, expressed clear frustration with international suggestions of compromise:

I can't listen when foreign representatives suggest that our territories remain with the occupiers. No, only with the full return of the South and Crimea. I am ready to sacrifice more time and wait for the complete liberation of Ukraine's territories.

While displaced Ukrainians overwhelmingly aspire to the full liberation of all occupied regions, this aspiration is not necessarily tied to expectations of their immediate return. Many displaced individuals recognise that even if Ukraine regains full territorial control, the scale of destruction will make rebuilding a generational task. Barriers to return are not limited to damaged infrastructure but also include profound environmental risks, deep social fractures, and ongoing uncertainties about security.

Nonetheless, Ukrainians' commitment to complete territorial liberation remains fundamental. It is seen not merely as a symbolic or emotional goal but as a necessary condition to ensure long-term stability and prevent future cycles of violence. As explained by one participant, a twice-displaced woman originally from Donetsk who fled to Mariupol in 2014 and then to Kolomyia in 2022: if Ukraine does not regain its 1991 borders, 'this tumor will continue to pressure us. They [Russians] will simply regroup, take time to reformat, and in 5–10 years, everything will start again'.

This perspective reflects a broader sentiment shared by many Ukrainians, not just women, as evidenced by survey data showing that 96 per cent say Russia must withdraw from all occupied territories for peace to be achieved (Gonik & Ciaramella 2024). This overwhelming consensus underscores a widespread conviction that any form of incomplete territorial liberation would leave Ukraine vulnerable to future aggression. Building a sustainable peace, therefore, requires addressing what Roger MacGinty (2025: 2) terms 'anticipatory violence' – the individual or collective expectation that violence will return. These perceptions cast a long shadow over the prospective post-war period, shaping how Ukrainians envision the future and complicating efforts to establish lasting stability (Pepper 2023: 112).

While much of the Western media debates 'desirable' versus 'realistic' peace scenarios, for Ukrainians, especially those most affected by the war, the latter often represents a distortion of the very concept of peace (Lampert 2024), legitimising violence and paving the way for future aggression rather than preventing it. Understanding this perversion of 'peace' is crucial to grasping why Ukrainians so resolutely reject compromises that would legitimise ongoing occupation.

A fundamental tension, then, characterises Ukrainian attitudes towards peace: on the one hand, the desire for an end of the fighting and suffering; on the other, the hope for a peace settlement that fully satisfies Ukrainian demands that could mean the continuation of fighting until the hope has been fulfilled. Ultimately, this tension can be explained by the Ukrainians' desire to see that the sacrifices of war have been worth it (see e.g. Maidukov 2025). It is this fundamental constellation from which other questions spring.

Justice is a central demand among displaced Ukrainians. Firsthand testimonies from displaced individuals reveal the extreme scale and brutality of violations they have endured. In interviews with internally displaced women, many described directly experiencing or having witnessed acts of arbitrary body searches, forced nudity, gender-based violence, torture, and captivity. One respondent explained, without visible emotion: 'I was in captivity and tortured by the occupiers in the local detention centre'.

Such testimonies are not isolated; nearly every account documents serious crimes committed by Russian forces. Moreover, contrary to common assumptions that survivors avoid discussing their experiences, many participants were open and motivated by a clear desire for justice. As one woman stated, 'I want the world to know what horror is happening'.

These testimonies underscore a critical point: failure to address wartime atrocities risks perpetuating cycles of violence and resentment (Haider 2016). At the same time, approaches to addressing wartime atrocities currently face obstacles to the arrest and prosecution of those responsible for aggression against Ukraine and war crimes. In response, alternative mechanisms such as financial compensation have gained traction. In 2023, the Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine was established by the Council of Europe, detailing a wide range of eligible claims.

However, Ukrainian public opinion strongly favours legal accountability. A total of 75 per cent of respondents in a nationwide opinion poll say that justice can only be achieved through the arrest and trial of those responsible for the aggression and war crimes, while 22 per cent say that justice might still be possible without prosecutions. At the same time, a quarter of respondents identify financial compensation as a key priority (Rating 2024), which indicates that while compensation is a vital tool, it must complement – not replace – legal accountability.

There are different models for war crimes trials under discussion (Butchard 2024). The issue of reparations is directly related to this issue (Chassany & Foy 2025; historically: Fisch 1979). Irreconcilable differences on both issues have already been shown to be stumbling blocks for peace negotiations. It is likely that any implementation will be postponed till after a ceasefire. This will be a significant challenge for both domestic society and international politics: a pragmatic politics of the past by any Ukrainian government will likely lack legitimacy; international arrangements of a war crimes tribunal that do not fully satisfy Ukrainian needs will probably be met by Ukrainian unilateral action, for example through targeted killings or other covert operations. While the former approach is likely to destabilise domestic politics, the latter is likely to further destabilise the international system and could even undermine international support for Ukraine.

Building a credible, victim-centred justice process is therefore essential. It would not only address the immediate needs of those affected but also lay the foundation for long-term peace and prevent future violence.

This vision of peace – often labelled as maximalist – appears to diverge from the formal negotiation tracks and the positions of Ukraine's international partners. In official diplomatic discussions, a return to Ukraine's 1991 borders and the prosecution of those responsible for

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aggression and war crimes are often seen as unrealistic, creating a perceived disconnect between the negotiation frameworks and public expectations. However, this divergence is not rooted in Ukrainians' ideological inflexibility but rather in a strategic concern shared by many Ukrainians: the prevention of future aggression.

Addressing this concern does not necessarily require fulfilling every demand of public opinion, such as full territorial restoration or immediate trials for war crimes. Instead, alternative security guarantees – such as NATO membership for Ukraine or the provisional application of NATO's Article 5 in the event of renewed aggression – could serve to reconcile public expectations with geopolitical realities.

The consequences of a peace settlement that fails to reflect these concerns could be profound. In this context, perceptions of social cohesion and public trust will emerge as critical variables in the peace negotiations and the following peacebuilding. In the remainder of this paper, we examine these dynamics more closely, exploring how they influence the prospects for long-term peacebuilding in Ukraine.

## Peace and perceptions of social cohesion

While wartime societies are often marked by a high degree of political and social cohesion, the transition to peace can generate significant friction. The unity forged in conflict can quickly dissolve in the face of competing interests, divergent experiences, and unresolved grievances.

Despite the widespread perception internationally that normal political life in Ukraine came to a halt on 24 February 2022, with all attention shifting to the front line and military affairs, political debates and conflicts have persisted. The real risk lies in these political tensions evolving in ways that could undermine political authority. Productively addressing this challenge requires confronting sensitive and divisive issues. Building sustainable peace means creating inclusive spaces where all Ukrainians, regardless of background, language, or wartime roles, can engage, contribute, and feel recognised. As one respondent, displaced from Horlivka to Kyiv, explained:

Now it's necessary to unite because we have soldiers who speak Russian, and they're fighting for our statehood. We need to unite, but not on the basis that everyone from the east must switch to the Ukrainian language. That's not unification; in essence, that's assimilation. It's important to show that language is not a border.

Divisions run deeper than language. Respondents described tensions between those on the front lines and those who avoided mobilisation, between those who fled Ukraine and those who remained, between those who donate to the Ukrainian armed forces and those who no longer do or never did, between internally displaced persons and their host communities. Such fractures are already visible: one participant now living in Kyiv noted that local residents rarely attend events at the Donetsk Hub, a cultural space established by displaced people from eastern Ukraine.

The question of how to address collaboration in the liberated territories is particularly urgent. Some collaborators, particularly former law enforcement officers, reportedly committed severe abuses against civilians. Respondents consistently emphasised the need for accountability measures. A displaced woman from Berdiansk, now in Kyiv, called for 'massive fines on collaborators so they feel that they are traitors'. Another respondent, now twice displaced and living in Dnipro, advocated revoking citizenship from those who switched sides.

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Inclusivity must also extend to former prisoners of war returning from Russian captivity and veterans, whose integration into civilian life is fraught with challenges, not only due to their prolonged exposure to violence, but also because they represent the living embodiment of war. Their presence evokes strong symbolic and emotional responses, and their needs for medical, psychological, and social support are often complex (see Cohen 2001; Stegmann 2023).

Extensive reporting by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the International Organization for Migration has brought sustained attention to the challenges facing Ukrainian veterans. Their findings highlight serious human rights concerns, including the unprecedented prevalence of conflict-related amputations, the often unseen psychological and social consequences of captivity among former prisoners of war, and entrenched cultural norms that deter veterans from accessing support services (UN OHCHR 2025). In addition, ongoing obstacles to veterans' social and economic reintegration have been emphasised (IOM, 2022; 2025). A report by the United Nations Population Fund published in March 2025, points to a significant rise in violence against women by returning soldiers. It warns that other political priorities and the status of soldiers as heroes have prevented the implementation of support and care for the victims of violence (UNFPA 2025). Addressing this issue will be a key political challenge for social reconstruction.

Additionally, as military violence subsides, new fault lines may emerge. Tensions between civil society actors and political elites are likely to intensify, and long-standing regional divides may resurface, influencing relations between the capital and other regions (Barrington & Herron 2004; Myshlovska 2020; Nizhnikau & Moshes 2020; Zarembo 2023; Zarembo & Martin 2023). These tensions will likely be compounded by increasing contestation over political authority, particularly that of President Zelenskyy and his administration. The recent debates around the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption agencies offer a glimpse of what this may involve and the role that civil society actors can play in contesting authority (Miller 2025b). The subsequent widening of the investigation by the Ukrainian anti-corruption agency culminated in a number of high-profile arrests and led to the resignation of President Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Yermak (Deprez 2025a). This episode highlights that the transition from a period where politics was dominated by the pragmatics of war time that followed previous patterns of state action (Méheut/Barker 2025) towards a post-war society has already begun. The appointment of Kyrylo Budanov to succeed Yermak signals the transition of Ukrainian politics and society towards one fundamentally shaped by war (Deprez/Miller 2026).

As the war's immediate urgency fades, political debates may shift towards perceived failures in military leadership and the handling of wartime governance (Trenkler 2025). Such tensions will be further compounded by potential conflicts between returning soldiers and a militarised civil society at home about how to interpret wartime experiences and, especially, about mistakes that have been made. These tensions are already visible in the growing debate about conscription (Deprez 2025).

In late November 2025, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Ukrainian commander in chief, offered one of the first Ukrainian political actors to open a debate around the relevance of this topic for a post-war transition, presumably with the aim of forming a political movement around this. While observing that 'war does not always end with victory of one side and the defeat of the other', he argued for an urgent focus on the importance of political reforms and a movement against corruption and criticised President Zelensky for preparing the country insufficiently for war (Zaluzhni 2025). More generally, such interventions are already beginning to take the form of a 'stab in the back' myth as international and domestic actors are looking to identify actors that

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have betrayed Ukrainian interests (Bota/ Thumann 2025; Lucas 2025). We know from historical experience that such myths have destabilising effects in post-war societies (Barth 2003).

This is not only about physical or institutional demobilisation. The memorialisation of war and violence must also reflect the diverse and often painful experiences of those affected. These processes are rarely neutral. Competing interpretations of what the war and its future outcome will mean, who should be honoured, and what peace should look like can deepen existing divides. For some, the war is a story of heroic resistance; for others, it is marked by displacement or abandonment. Even the question of who counts as a fallen soldier is contested: civil society activists are challenging the official recognition of only front-line deaths as fallen soldiers (Hassel 2025).

These divergent interpretations, shaped by various wartime roles, risk crystallising into incompatible memories that hinder the emergence of a basis social consensus. Cultural demobilisation will therefore likely be highly contested, especially where national symbols, languages, or interpretations of key battles are concerned (cf. Pancheva et al. 2024; Macleod 2025). How Ukrainians choose to remember this war will shape not only the contours of collective memory but also the boundaries of belonging and the prospects for genuine, inclusive unity in the post-war era.

Heritage can play a key role in aiding this transition. Recent research on Ukraine has shown how efforts to preserve heritage locally are deeply embedded in local civil society networks and fulfil functions that go beyond care for material objects: just as the preservation of heritage is 'intertwined with humanitarian responses' by creating a social infrastructure of care in local communities in museums, parks, and galleries, heritage sites and organisations are uniquely placed to help with the work of 'social recovery' and 'collective grieving' (Vonnák & Jones 2025: 47, 72, 75).

There is growing evidence that Russia is exploiting internal tensions in Ukraine by recruiting teenagers as spies and saboteurs, often using financial incentives to do so. Orphans and internally displaced children are particularly vulnerable to such recruitment efforts. Since the spring of 2024, approximately 25 per cent of the 700 Ukrainian citizens arrested for collaboration have been under the age of 18 (Miller 2025a). As Ukraine transitions from war to peace, Russia is likely to continue to manipulate political and social fault lines. Preventing the fragmentation of wartime unity will require intentional efforts to foster inclusive dialogue, recognise the diversity of wartime experiences, and protect vulnerable groups from being instrumentalised in emerging post-war conflicts.

## Peace and trust

Despite the challenges of a protracted war, public trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU) remains exceptionally high. This trust stems from a collective recognition that the army is exerting maximum effort under extremely difficult circumstances. Recent survey data confirm this sentiment, with trust in the army and satisfaction with its performance at an impressive six out of seven (Tamilina & Ma 2024).

The perception of the military as a symbol of bravery, determination, and national pride is also evident in interviews with internally displaced women. As one respondent, displaced from Kharkiv to Chernivtsi in 2022, explained:

Our army has already been fighting this monster [Russia] for such a long time, that's already a victory. Ukraine has already won. It showed to the whole world how brave it is.

This view stresses that the military remains an embodiment of Ukraine's national identity and courage, even despite recent debates about its high degree of desertion and a lack of combat motivation (Koshiw 2024).

This high level of trust in the military extends beyond wartime efforts and shapes public perceptions of leadership and governance more broadly. A recent survey by the Razumkov Centre (2024) found that Ukrainians expect new political forces to emerge more from the military than from other sectors of society. However, the qualities Ukrainians value in future leaders remain diverse: only a small minority (9 per cent) prioritise military experience, while a larger share favour qualities such as a capacity for national healing (29 per cent), a firm anti-corruption stance (24 per cent), and economic competence (19 per cent) (Gonik & Ciaramella 2024).

Yet this trust in the ZSU stands in stark contrast to the public's perception of other state institutions. Many Ukrainians express deep frustration over the government's failure to adequately support its civilians throughout the war. A woman who was displaced from Donetsk to Kharkiv in 2014 and then again to Dnipro in 2022 described the lack of adequate shelter during the early months of the full-scale invasion despite years of prior conflict. Another respondent cited a complete lack of preparedness in providing basic safety infrastructure such as bomb shelters.

Corruption only reinforces this disillusionment. Displaced Ukrainians frequently point to the mismanagement and theft of humanitarian aid as a major breach of public trust. One respondent from Berdiansk, now in Kyiv, criticised the authorities for a lack of 'control over the flow of humanitarian aid'.

This is a clear paradox: while the military is a unifying and trusted institution, many civilian institutions are viewed as corrupt, inefficient, and disconnected from the lived realities of war. These findings align with what Tamulina and Ma (2024) term the 'Ukrainian syndrome', in which public trust in institutions is driven more by pragmatic satisfaction with their performance than by ideological convictions about the regime or nation's future. In this context, grassroots initiatives and volunteer networks have become vital, stepping in where official institutions fall short. For many Ukrainians, the army and volunteers have become the backbone of national resilience. As observed by one woman who was displaced from Odesa to Lviv: 'Ukraine relies on the army and volunteers. Without them, the war would have ended on February 25, but not in Ukraine's favour'.

Trust in international partners will be a defining factor in Ukraine's transition from war to peace. Our interviews reveal that displaced Ukrainians overwhelmingly perceive international partners, particularly the EU, as essential architects of the country's recovery. Trust in the EU is largely transactional, grounded in the belief that 'Europe will rebuild Ukraine' as shared by a Ukrainian who was displaced from Kherson to Odesa; it is a cornerstone of many people's faith in a future beyond the war.

In contrast, trust in the United States and NATO is tied primarily to security. Ukrainians view these actors as the only ones capable of providing credible defence guarantees. Their experience of the Budapest Memorandum, which failed to prevent Russian aggression, has left deep scepticism towards political assurances. As a result, there is little faith in vague promises – only clear, binding commitments about what will happen if Ukraine is attacked again are seen

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as meaningful. Without such guarantees, trust in international actors may erode, undermining the peace process.

A lack of timely, comprehensive, and visible support from the EU, combined with the absence of credible security guarantees, could have serious consequences for Ukraine's peace process. Disillusionment may grow among the Ukrainian public, creating fertile ground for Russian propaganda. Narratives portraying the West as having 'betrayed Ukraine' could be weaponised to erode public trust, delegitimise Ukraine's Western-oriented transformation, and destabilise the post-war recovery.

## Key findings and policy recommendations

We have developed policy recommendations to support Ukraine's transition from war to peace once the weapons have fallen silent. Strategic planning and the development of scenarios for these should start now and should assume that there will not be a smooth transition from war to peace as a realistic assumption.

### Key findings

1. Our interviews suggest that attitudes towards war and peace in Ukraine cannot be adequately analysed by focusing on the binary question of whether Ukrainians approve or oppose a particular peace settlement. Hopes for peace are closely tied to views on fairness and morality as well as the role of the state and society in Ukraine, and they reflect broader and often diverse views of community and society.
2. Even in the context of weakening support to pursue a strategy of war, we identified strong feelings about the war's aims, commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, emphasis on the role of civil society as opposed to elites, and a transactional nature to trust and relationships with external partners. This means that if Ukraine is forced to accept a peace agreement that fails to address the main concern of its broader population – the prevention of future aggression – this could seriously undermine the legitimacy of its political leadership and erode public trust in its international partners. Such an outcome risks deepening internal divisions and triggering political instability. A weakened and fragmented Ukraine would be more vulnerable to renewed Russian aggression, whether through military means or political interference.
3. Our research suggests that the internally displaced Ukrainians we interviewed, in particular the younger and better skilled ones, would consider external migration if post-war Ukraine emerges as unstable or fragile. This would not only hinder Ukraine's ability to rebuild its infrastructure and institutions but also place additional pressure on the European countries that would receive new waves of displaced individuals. For the EU, such a scenario would create a strategic vacuum on its eastern border.

### Specific recommendations for Ukraine

1. Strengthening trust in civilian institutions through transparency and responsiveness is essential to prevent citizens' political disillusionment and to reinforce democratic

resilience during the transition to peace. To avoid the risks of militarisation, Ukraine should focus on earning public trust, invest in civic education, and promote inclusive decision-making that reflects the diversity of Ukrainian society beyond the battlefield.

2. Emphasis should be given to sharing the costs of war across Ukrainian society socially and economically. The care for war veterans is likely to assume an especially important and symbolic role, as will support for displaced people as well as women affected by gender-based violence. In this context, working closely with civil society organisations will be essential. Equally important is the need to explore how experiences from other war and post-war transitions can inform and guide Ukraine's approaches to long-term peacebuilding.
3. Mechanisms, including at the local level, should be created for vulnerable groups, and especially women and the displaced, to be able to participate actively in the process of transition from war to peace. Establishing care for these vulnerable groups is also essential – work around heritage projects in local communities could offer good templates. Dialogue with good practices of involving civil society actors elsewhere, both inside and outside the EU, is important in this regard.

### **Specific recommendations for international actors**

1. Ukraine, European actors, and other international partners share a common strategic goal - ensuring that the conditions of peace prevent future aggression from Russia. This objective should be treated as paramount in all decision-making processes. European actors must actively steer negotiations toward outcomes that support this objective, ensuring that Ukraine is presented with multiple strategic options. These options should define robust, enforceable security guarantees rather than vague political commitments like those in the Budapest Memorandum, where obligations to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity were ambiguous.
2. European actors should articulate its role as Ukraine's ally through explicit, actionable commitments. This includes specifying which countries will provide which resources, the scale and timing of military support, and other forms of assistance necessary to uphold Ukraine's security. Clear, detailed commitments will provide Ukraine with credible security assurances and represent a meaningful step toward establishing an enforceable security framework that deters future aggression from Russia.

### **General recommendations**

1. Planning for post-war and post-civil war contexts should move beyond the idea of 'reconstruction': war and violence change societies; bringing the pre-war situation back is not possible.
2. When devising policies to accompany the transition from war to peace, a holistic approach is important: political and socio-economic factors as well as cultural norms will be intertwined in the ways that populations experience this transition.
3. In terms of evidence-based policymaking, this requires engaging across different forms of expertise, from history and heritage research to public policy, economics, anthropology, and sociology. Learning from different geographical experiences is also important.

4. Diverse historical memories of war and violence will need to be taken into account and the diverse heritage of war and violence engaged with. Cultural commemorations that are anchored in local networks and communities and civil societies could be a good way forward. They should be accompanied, if relevant, by mediation between different social groups.
5. The accountability for (in this case Russian) war crimes plays a key role in the transition from war to peace. The tension between a pragmatic approach on the one hand and an approach focused on retribution is unlikely to be resolved before a ceasefire or even a more formal peace agreement. As in the other area, transparency, a process governed by the rule of law and clear communication about these are essential for avoiding the weaponisation of the topic by bad actors.
6. The transition from war to peace only works if social actors experience this transformation as positive. Statistical indicators alone are not sufficient to measure success. This means that the success of the transition from war to peace cannot be gauged through key performance indicators alone, such as economic growth, spending on healthcare or other relevant public policy targets. Performance data should be correlated with the measurement of outcomes and the perception of these outcomes in these key policy areas as to whether the population can see progress in the provision of energy, of housing, of healthcare and of other public goods. This approach should be accompanied by an open discussion of the challenges posed by the transition from war to a sustainable peace in order to maintain the legitimacy of the government and the state. Issues that outsiders might regard as symbolic – such as achieving accountability for Russian war crimes or the treatment of vulnerable groups especially affected by the war – are likely to play a prominent role as mobilisation points for broader issues around political morality and social justice.

## Conclusion

If we include the period since the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region, Ukraine has been at war for more than 10 years; and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will, by late spring 2026, have lasted longer than the First World War. As a result, Ukraine – its state, its society, its economy, and its natural environment – have been remade by the violence of war. Regardless of the outcome of any negotiations for a ceasefire or a more comprehensive peace, Ukraine is facing a long period of transition. While the violence of war kept international society's attention, the silence of peace is much less likely to do so.

Our paper has drawn attention to the profound impact the war has had on Ukrainian society and emphasised the importance of Ukrainian agency in shaping the transition from war to peace. Instead of discussing economic or financial questions or issues relating directly to demobilisation, our paper has emphasised the importance of social perceptions and political-cultural repercussions of such developments for the legitimacy of Ukrainian state institutions as well as that of any post-war government. The political challenges arising from this are likely to be profound and will be difficult to resolve. They not only affect Ukraine, but they will also have repercussions for the politics of the EU as well as individual European countries. Magical thinking – bold rhetoric often not matched by action – in the way that characterised the European approach to the war itself is not going to help resolve these issues. The violence of war will influence the post-war period for a long time to come.

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