

CURRENT HISTORY

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The Ukrainian State under Russian Aggression: Resilience and Resistance

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On the morning of February 24, 2022, minutes after Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the start of the “special military operation” against Ukraine, missiles hit over 100 targets in all regions of the country. Simultaneously, Russian troops crossed into Ukrainian territory from three directions in a coordinated multipronged assault. One contingent entered from the territory of Belarus in an attempt to encircle and seize the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. Another one, coming from western Russia, sought to capture the second-largest city, Kharkiv. The third rolled into southern Ukraine from Crimea and rapidly advanced to the region’s capital, Kherson.

In the first hours of the offensive, many Western officials issued dire predictions about the likely “decapitation” of the Ukrainian government and the quick capture of Ukrainian territory by the “militarily superior” Russian forces. Informally, Western leaders advised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to abandon Kyiv and move to western Ukraine, or even as far as Poland. Russian leaders, acting on similar presuppositions, provided detailed instructions to their field commanders on the step-by-step takeover of Ukrainian government buildings. Few believed that Ukraine could survive such a massive assault and maintain control over its major cities.

A little over a month later, however, Russia withdrew most of its troops from Ukraine’s northern regions and ended its attempt to take Kyiv. It also regrouped most of its forces in the east around

Kharkiv and deployed them in a new effort to capture Ukraine-controlled parts of the Donbas region. And although Russian forces managed to occupy the southern region, they faced outbursts of civic protest and defiance on the part of local officials, public sector employees, and ordinary residents.

Rather than leading to the downfall of the Ukrainian state, the Russian assault revealed the resilience of Ukrainian state institutions at the national and local levels. It also made clear that Ukrainian society had overcome many of the internal divides that had plagued the nation since its independence. The appearance of Russian soldiers on the streets of Ukrainian villages and towns did not lead to a replay of the 2014 “Russian spring” staged in Crimea and Donbas, with welcoming rallies under Russian flags. Instead, it drew a universal and unequivocal rejection that produced a rare moment of political unity. In the first weeks of the war, over two-thirds of Ukrainian survey respondents—the largest share in the country’s history—said that they would like to see Ukraine join the European Union and NATO. The seemingly perennial internal divide between Ukrainians seeking closer ties with the West and those sympathetic to Russia was no more.

The success of the Ukrainian state in repelling the Russian onslaught and sustaining its operations in the first months of the war grew out of the humiliating experience of 2014. Then, the Ukrainian government had watched helplessly as its military units surrendered to Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms, law enforcement personnel defected to the Russian side, local officials declared allegiance to Moscow or separatist governments, and citizens joined self-defense groups

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to fight the Ukrainian army. Facing little resistance, Russia swiftly occupied and annexed Crimea, while most of Donbas fell under the control of two self-proclaimed republics. Ukrainian society's response to these events was equally disorienting. Although most believed that Russia had engaged in an act of aggression against Ukraine, some said that Putin was merely intervening to protect Ukrainians from being punished for their political views.

Ukraine's weakness in 2014 was a function of four main deficiencies. First, its political institutions lacked sufficient legitimacy to mobilize the public and political elites against Russian aggression. Second, Ukraine lacked the defensive capacity to fight back against Russian military incursions and destroy Russian proxies in Donbas. Third, the nation lacked a shared set of values that would allow a unifying response to Russia's actions. Fourth, Ukraine lacked sufficient support from the international community to ensure tangible military and economic assistance to withstand Russian aggression.

Over the next eight years, Ukraine achieved a qualitative improvement in each of these four dimensions. As a result, Russia's full-scale invasion failed to push Ukraine anywhere near the point of collapse. Instead, the country's response reassured both Ukrainian citizens and the world that it had secured long-term viability.

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH

The initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2014 began at a moment when the state was in disarray, and Ukrainian society was deeply divided regarding the country's future. After months of increasingly violent protests in Kyiv and other cities, known as the Euromaidan Revolution, the government dissolved and President Viktor Yanukovich fled. The new cabinet, comprising members of the opposition parties, and acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, selected by the parliament, lacked legitimacy in southeastern regions, particularly in Crimea and Donbas. This opened space for pro-Russian protesters backed by armed Russian agents to claim power at the local level and demand that referendums be held on the secession of these regions.

Local authorities received no guidance from Kyiv on how to respond to the separatist

challenges. They also lacked support from the security agencies, which often sympathized with the separatist cause and were scornful about the post-revolution government. Local administrators in Donbas acquiesced to separatist demands and even assisted with holding secessionist referendums. Some of them organized local residents to obstruct the movement of Ukrainian troops through their towns and impede the "anti-terrorist operation" launched by Kyiv. The low level of public confidence in the Ukrainian armed forces and widespread disdain for the post-Maidan authorities created a favorable environment for the mounting separatist insurrection in Donbas.

Putin counted on a similar response when he announced the launch of the "special military operation." In his address, Putin promised to "de-Nazify" the Ukrainian political system and "liberate" Ukrainians from their nationalist rulers. This time, however, Russian leaders proved utterly detached from Ukrainian political realities. Three years earlier, incumbent President Petro Poroshenko had lost his reelection bid to an un-

expected contender, Zelensky, who had a background in entertainment and no prior political experience. Zelensky won the 2019 election with a larger share of the vote than any of his predecessors. He received the most support—

over 80 percent—in exactly those eastern and southern border regions where Putin would direct his assault in 2022.

Although Zelensky's approval rating declined early in his tenure, he remained the most popular political leader in the country and was favored to win reelection in 2024. He also maintained control over the parliament, where his party, Servant of the People, garnered a majority in early elections in July 2019. This allowed Zelensky to install his picks for all cabinet positions and prevented the kind of intra-executive conflicts that plagued the presidencies of both Poroshenko and Viktor Yushchenko (2005–15).

Local governments across Ukraine received a new democratic mandate in October 2020 municipal elections. The composition of the city councils was substantially renewed, with about 70 percent of the deputies elected for the first time. Most of the incumbent mayors in the regional centers retained their positions; some, like the heads of Mariupol, Chernihiv, and Zaporizhzhia, won

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with absolute majorities in the first round. Kharkiv elected a new mayor, Ihor Terekhov, in October 2021 following the death of the incumbent. Another new mayor, Ihor Kolyhaev, was elected in Kherson. Thus, all of the major cities targeted by the Russian invasion in 2022 had recently elected leaders whose authority rested on democratic legitimacy.

They were further empowered by a recently launched decentralization reform that provided city administrations with additional funds from local tax collection and allowed them to set spending priorities. This led to noticeable improvement in the quality and delivery of public services. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in May–June 2021 showed that over half of respondents in most Ukrainian cities were satisfied with the performance of their mayors. They also expressed overwhelming support for the Ukrainian army, with residents in only three cities out of twenty-four—Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, and Odesa—offering less than 50 percent approval.

Once Moscow began its February 2022 assault, dozens of Ukrainian towns were under threat of Russian occupation. The response by local governments across Ukraine in the first days of the war was crucial both for exposing the duplicity behind Putin's war justifications and for preparing their communities for resistance. While issuing statements condemning the Russian attack, local authorities coordinated territorial defense units, set up checkpoints around their towns, and maintained supplies of basic necessities.

The swiftness of the Russian advance meant that some local administrators had to continue governing their communities in the presence of Russian troops. In certain cases, as in the towns of Svatove and Starobilsk in Luhansk oblast (province), mayors sought to negotiate with the occupiers, demanding noninterference in their daily activities. In other instances, such as in Henichesk and Skadovsk in Kherson oblast, they had to resign and leave their towns under Russian pressure.

Yet in places like Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia oblast, mayors openly defied the Russian military and encouraged nonviolent protests against occupation. They kept Ukrainian flags flying over the government buildings and used social media to make regular public appeals reasserting their loyalty to Kyiv. In early March, Russian forces started abducting local administrators to coerce them into collaboration. Some were ultimately released and

forced to flee, while several others disappeared or were confirmed to have been killed.

In contrast to Crimea or Donbas eight years earlier, only a handful of local mayors, in towns like Rubizhne in Luhansk oblast and Kupiansk in Kharkiv oblast, openly switched sides and continued in their positions under Russian authority. In the largest cities that the Russians seized, such as Kherson, Melitopol, or Mariupol, the elected mayors rejected offers to collaborate and either left or resigned. As a result, in most occupied cities and towns, the Russians had to look for lower-level officials or public sector employees to fill top positions. Those who agreed were mostly members of pro-Russian political parties that had been promptly banned at the start of the Russian invasion.

Such instances of collaboration were strictly individual in nature. Despite attempts by the Russians to coerce deputies, none of the local assemblies issued statements in support of the occupation. In 2014, such resolutions by local councils in Crimea and Donbas had been used to lend an impression of legality to the secessionist process. But in March 2022, the Kherson oblast council, convened in a special session, adopted a resolution asserting that the region would remain part of Ukraine and dismissing as illegitimate any attempts to hold a referendum on turning it into a new self-proclaimed state.

DEFENSIVE CAPACITY

Throughout Ukraine's first decades of independence, its military sector remained chronically unreformed and underfunded. The national security strategy adopted in 2007 under Yushchenko and amended in 2012 under Yanukovich lacked a precise articulation of immediate threats and did not even consider the possibility of Russian aggression. Russia was mentioned along with Moldova and Belarus as a country with which Ukraine had an "undemarcated border," but it was not identified as posing a potential challenge to Ukraine's integrity. The document even called for a "strategic partnership" model for dealing with Russia that would entail a "search for common approaches to forming an all-European collective security system." Although the strategy noted the "deteriorating conditions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and defense industry" and the "ineffectiveness of its intelligence and counterintelligence bodies," it contained no specific recommendations on how to reverse these trends or benchmarks to measure the progress of reforms.

Low levels of defense spending (under 1 percent of GDP annually) prevented modernization of military equipment or adequate training of personnel. The continuous downsizing of the armed forces, with a selloff of equipment and changes in the force structure, left Ukraine unprepared to deal with the challenges of hybrid warfare. As Russia launched its covert and overt operations on Ukraine's territory in early 2014, the Ukrainian defense minister reported having barely 6,000 combat-ready troops under his command. A mass defection to the Russian side in Crimea, with about 75 percent of Ukrainian personnel switching sides in March 2014, exposed weak commitment to the Ukrainian state and lack of trust in national leadership. Similar defections at the outset of the armed conflict in Donbas that year had a demoralizing effect on units, weakening their resolve to fight the separatist challenge.

In the years since, Ukraine adopted a range of policies that helped strengthen its defensive capabilities. Among the most crucial was the establishment of a mechanism for quick enlistment of civilians. Mobilization of highly motivated volunteers into auxiliary battalions played a decisive role in stopping Russia's "hybrid" aggression during the intense conflict phase in the summer of 2014. Volunteer battalions were later integrated into the newly formed National Guard and subordinated to the interior minister.

The auxiliary forces controlled by the Defense Ministry were organized as "territorial defense" battalions and emerged as a vital element of the defense strategy adopted by Zelensky. Under the 2021 Law on the Foundations of National Resistance, they became a stand-alone branch of the armed forces, consisting of 25 brigades and 150 battalions, with one battalion per raion (the administrative unit below the oblast level), comprising 10,000 active-duty servicemen in total for the country. They were to be buttressed by up to 130,000 reservists who had to undergo regular training to be ready for mobilization during wartime. The aim of these units, as the commander in chief of the armed forces, General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, stressed just two weeks before the Russian attack, was to stage "resistance in each town, in each village, on each street, and in each building."

Local government leaders and heads of raion and oblast administrations received authority over

the formation of territorial defense units alongside military commanders. This recognized the importance of the civilian component in defense planning and corresponded to principles of government decentralization enacted since 2014. But the new law went into effect on January 1, 2022, so the formation of these units remained incomplete at the time of the Russian invasion.

Two weeks before Russia launched its attack, Zaluzhnyi reported that the battalions in only 13 border oblasts had reached about 70 percent of their peacetime capacity, while units in some cities, like Kyiv, Mariupol, and Odesa, were falling behind in the pace of mobilization. Belated organization of territorial defense was emblematic of the failure to organize a proper defense of cities and towns in southern Ukraine and allowed for the quick occupation of Kherson. Local authorities in that city neglected to provide a permanent base for its territorial defense unit, while many of its members remained unarmed. The attempt to resist the Russian advance in the south in the first week of the war led to numerous casualties among the locals who joined these units.

Still, territorial defense became an immediate draw for civilians willing to contribute to the war effort once the full-scale invasion began. In the first two weeks of the war, 100,000 Ukrainians reportedly

joined territorial defense units across the country. Checkpoints organized spontaneously in towns around Kyiv, Cherkasy, and Kharkiv were manned by local volunteers whose resistance prevented a rapid Russian advance at the outset of the war.

In subsequent months, the tasks of these units broadened from improving local defense capabilities to participating in combat operations outside their original deployment areas, alongside regular soldiers. Legislative changes allowed their deployment in combat zones and expanded the types of weaponry that their members could use to include mortars, artillery, and rocket systems. Units from western Ukraine were transferred to the east to reinforce defensive operations against Russian forces. The liberation of the northern regions of Ukraine was achieved with the participation of territorial defense units that joined the army's counteroffensive operations. But many of the fighters arrived on the front lines poorly trained and equipped, resulting in a particularly high casualty rate among them.

*Rising civic attachment
strengthened commitment
to defending the country.*

Since 2014, Ukraine's defensive capabilities have also benefited from increased funding, structural reform, enhanced training, and external support. The armed forces grew to over 200,000 active-duty personnel, at least a third of them having combat experience in Donbas. Defense spending has increased by 72 percent since 2014; according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it amounted to \$5.9 billion, or 3.2 percent of GDP, in 2021.

The Joint Operations Command, facilitating improved tactical control and coordination, was reintroduced after having been disbanded under Yanukovich. The Special Operations Forces (SOF) emerged as a separate branch of the armed forces and launched a combat training program in 2016 with major assistance from the United States and NATO. Ukrainian SOF units, provided with modern equipment including advanced communication devices, proved crucial in the successful defense of Kyiv during the early weeks of the war in 2022. They compounded Russia's logistical problems by operating behind enemy lines to ambush its armored vehicles and break its supply chains. The failure of the first phase of the Russian invasion was the result of Ukraine's reinforced defense capability, combined with the strong morale of its forces.

NATION-BUILDING

Since 2004, political competition in Ukraine's presidential elections had been organized around regional cleavages, with most voters in the south and east favoring candidates who were strongly opposed by majorities in the west. This resulted in heightened regional polarization as the two opposing political camps—pro-Western “orange” and pro-Russian “blue”—took increasingly irreconcilable positions.

Another factor contributing to intense cross-regional confrontation was the persistent strength of regional identities in Donbas and Crimea, which were often framed in terms incompatible with the Ukrainian state. Calls to maintain economic and cultural ties to Russia were often linked with support for Ukrainian membership in a Moscow-led economic and political union, which for many represented a reconstituted Soviet Union. In August 2013, a Rating poll showed that 57 percent of Donbas residents fully or partially opposed Ukraine's independent statehood. Separatist groups in Donbas justified their activities by citing the need to protect regional interests in dealings with Kyiv.

The Euromaidan protests in 2013–14 sharpened these regional divides. Survey respondents in the west viewed the uprising as a civil rights movement, whereas easterners perceived it largely as an illicit power grab by opposition leaders. The fall of Yanukovich's regime resulted in growing separatist sentiment. In March 2014, about a third of respondents to an International Republican Institute survey in the south and east endorsed the option of Crimea joining Russia or becoming an independent state. In April 2014, a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that about a third of Donbas respondents indicated a preference for the region to secede.

My own research showed that regional identification underpinned support for armed militancy in Donbas. Those who viewed themselves primarily as residents of the region or of their localities, as opposed to being citizens of Ukraine, were likely to have a more sympathetic view of insurgents and attribute their actions to ideational rather than material motives.

The onset of the armed conflict in Donbas and the ensuing violence that spread to other regions, however, led Ukrainians of Russian descent in the southern and eastern regions to reclassify their nationality as Ukrainian. John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal found in a 2020 study that “about one in three Russians appear to have reclassified their nationality” in the period between April and December 2014. This was followed by a shift in language use. An increasing number of Ukrainians, according to Kyiv International Institute of Sociology surveys, reported using the Russian and Ukrainian languages equally at home. Between 2014 and 2017, the share of exclusive or predominant Russian language users dropped from 34.7 percent to 25.7 percent.

At the same time, as Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson found in a 2018 study, a growing number of Ukrainians identified Ukraine as their homeland (an increase of 11 percent between 2012 and 2015). They also expressed a greater sense of pride in state symbols, such as the anthem and flag.

Most importantly, the regional polarization that characterized the preceding decade became less pronounced in voting results. In both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, the winning candidate received majority support in almost all electoral precincts across the country. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the positioning of Zelensky's Servant of the People as what Paul

Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield describe as the “catch-all” party allowed voters to transcend the traditional ideological divisions and unite around valence-based issues, such as competence or anti-corruption appeals.

This strengthening of civic identification was paralleled in a set of government policies aimed at minimizing Russian political and cultural influence in Ukraine. In 2014, the authorities banned broadcasts of Russian television channels in Ukraine, blocked access to Russian social media networks, halted the circulation of Russian newspapers and public showings of newly released Russian films, and compiled lists of books to be barred from sale for allegedly containing Russian propaganda. The government also restricted entry to Ukraine for over 100 Russian artists and celebrities who had endorsed Putin’s actions or visited occupied territories of Ukraine. These policies were combined with changes in the education law that limited Russian-language instruction in schools and further regulated use of Russian in television and print media.

Finally, the government reasserted its own historical narratives in order to emphasize the tragic consequences of Soviet rule for the Ukrainian nation. The decommunization campaign led to the removal of over 1,000 monuments to Lenin or other Soviet-era figures and the elimination of communist imagery from public spaces. It also equated communism with national socialism, and criminalized promotion of the symbols of any such regimes. Ukrainians who fought the Soviet regime, either during or after World War II, were now revered as heroes. Although some of these measures proved controversial, especially those commemorating nationalist leaders with records of Nazi collaboration, their overall effect was to deny the Russian government levers of influence over public opinion in Ukraine. After August 2014, Rating surveys showed, Putin remained the least popular world leader in Ukraine: 81 percent of respondents in September 2021 expressed a largely or fully negative opinion of him, doubling from October 2013.

One implication of this rising civic attachment within Ukrainian society was strengthened cross-regional commitment to defend the country in the event of a full-scale Russian attack. A KIIS survey indicated that between December 2021 and February 2022, the share of Ukrainians willing to participate in armed resistance to Russia grew from 33.3 percent to 37.3 percent. Weeks before the

Russian invasion, over half of respondents across Ukraine (57 percent) suggested that they were willing to participate in either armed or nonviolent resistance against Russia. By March, according to a Rating survey, 59 percent of Ukrainians said they were willing to take up arms in Ukraine’s defense.

In southern Ukraine, which came under direct Russian attack early on, the majority (53 percent) said they were fully ready to fight back. In the first weeks of the war, Ukrainians in occupied areas showed their attachment to the state by staging regular demonstrations under Ukrainian flags. Despite the risks, hundreds of Ukrainians held marches in Kherson, Berdiansk, and Melitopol, calling on the Russian forces to leave their towns.

Once the Russians resorted to arrests and abductions of pro-Ukrainian activists, the resistance moved underground and turned violent. A string of targeted assassinations of local collaborators demonstrated that Russia’s occupation remained tenuous, and made it more difficult for Moscow to co-opt local actors to govern the occupied territories. Though such underground resistance would be insufficient to end the occupation, it raises the cost of Russia’s presence and undermines its narratives about being welcomed by a popular embrace. Over the longer term, continued internal resistance and lack of popular support will make it harder for Moscow to pursue either annexation of these lands or their transformation into quasi-states.

STRATEGIC SHIFTS

Russia’s military actions against Ukraine drew opprobrium from the West in both 2014 and 2022. What differed markedly was the intensity of outside support for the Ukrainian state. The Kremlin’s decision to annex Crimea in March 2014 resulted in the most serious diplomatic standoff with Russia since the end of the Cold War, but it did not lead to immediate reinforcement of Ukraine’s defenses. Over the next eight years, the West sought to deter Russia from further aggressive actions and calibrated all of its policies to avert potential escalation of the crisis into a full-blown war.

In March 2014, Russia lost its seat in the group of the world’s most advanced economies (the G-8), and several international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, severed their ties with Moscow. The United States took the lead in imposing sanctions on individuals in Putin’s inner circle and on entire sectors of the Russian economy. The

European Union's support for the sanctions policy was belated and more cautious. Though Europeans endorsed sanctions against individual defense or energy companies, they were not willing to end their economic cooperation with Russia in key areas such as the energy trade. The embodiment of Europe's contradictory approach was the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia to Germany, launched by the Russian state-owned company Gazprom in 2018 with financing from British, French, German, and Austrian firms.

Although the United States was more consistent in its application of sanctions and authorized billions of dollars in security and economic assistance to Ukraine, the Obama administration sided with the Europeans in denying Ukraine's requests for arms supplies. Only in December 2017 did US President Donald Trump approve the first arms sale to Ukraine—a shipment of a limited number of anti-tank missiles and launchers for defensive purposes. The ultimate goal of the West was to keep Moscow engaged in talks over Ukraine, searching for a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Donbas while keeping the issue of Crimea on the back burner.

Western leaders proved more unified and determined in their response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They immediately applied some of the costliest sanctions to date against the Russian financial sector, freezing the country's assets in Western institutions, removing its banks from the financial messaging system Swift, and barring Russian firms from borrowing money in the West. They also agreed on far-reaching changes in energy trading with Russia by committing to banning all imports of Russian oil and gold, ending the Nord Stream 2 project, and substantially reducing gas imports. Meanwhile, all top Russian officials, major Russian oligarchs, and even members of Putin's family were placed under individual sanctions, and their assets were frozen or confiscated.

The clearest shift in Western policy was in the area of security assistance. The West now largely agreed on the need to defeat Russia in Ukraine rather than merely deter it, and to hold Putin accountable for the crime of aggression against a sovereign state. This approach led to the unprecedented supply of advanced weaponry to the Ukrainian armed forces, eventually including artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems, with the goal not only of stopping the Russian advance, but

also of helping Ukraine regain its occupied territories militarily. Whereas before February 2022, Western leaders had sought a diplomatic “off-ramp” to resolve the crisis, since then, in the words of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, they wanted to “see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things it has done in Ukraine.” US aid totaled \$54 billion just in the first three months of the war.

For the West, achieving its objectives in the Russian-Ukrainian war now rests, to a large degree, on the capacity of the Ukrainian state. Though its survival as a political unit is no longer at stake, the challenges that Ukraine faces will only multiply. Russia's continued violation of its integrity will deny Ukraine the ability to develop economically and will deepen its dependence on foreign assistance to meet its rising security needs. It will also lead to major demographic changes and social dislocation, as millions of Ukrainians are forced to give up their jobs and flee their homes.

Although Ukrainians have demonstrated unprecedented unity in the face of aggression, internal societal rifts may reemerge as the nation struggles with the mounting loss of territory and human life. A prolonged war could strain Ukraine's political institutions and endanger some of the key democratic norms, such as free media and competitive elections, that set it apart from its neighbors. The effects of the Russian invasion and territorial conquest will reverberate through this century. Even if Russia ultimately concedes defeat, a major ideational shift and generational change will be required for it to accept the permanence of the Ukrainian state and find a way to coexist with it peacefully.

For some Ukrainians, though, the Russian invasion also offers a small glimmer of hope. The war will forever reshape the physical and symbolic landscape that tied Ukrainians to the Soviet past. The horrific destruction of Ukrainian cities could signify the end of post-Soviet Ukraine, which maintained some of the worst cultural and institutional traits of the communist system. The heroic sacrifice of tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers could generate a national consensus around new ethical norms and guarantee the provision of accountability and justice. And the sense of national pride that came and went with every revolution may now become a permanent unifying pillar of Ukrainian identity. ■