

War as the new normal: Ukraine six months since the Russian invasion

Tadeusz Iwański

On 24 August 2021 Ukraine was celebrating the beginning of the fourth decade of its independence. Selected units of its Armed Forces paraded through Khreshchatyk, Kyiv's main street. It would never have occurred to the Ukrainian citizens and politicians or foreign guests who gathered on that day in Kyiv that half a year later the same units would face a full-scale invasion, and even more so, that six months after invasion they would still be successfully defending themselves. After six months, war is slowly becoming the new normal. Although Russia is trudging towards the borders of the Donetsk oblast in the east, and Ukraine still lacks sufficient forces to launch a counteroffensive in the south, the series of explosions at military facilities seen in August in Crimea, which has been occupied by Russia since 2014, shows that Kyiv has the potential for offensive actions. The Ukrainian public is getting poorer and increasingly tired, but it still remains resolute in resisting the aggressor and supporting the government's policies. Only a small minority believe that Ukraine should put an end to the war at the price of political concessions, and the view that territorial concessions should be made remains a marginal one. The economy is also adapting to the wartime conditions. Despite the deep crisis, the decline in exports is abating, and companies are resuming their businesses or moving them to safer areas of the country while looking for new sales channels abroad. However, the state budget is still dependent on financial support from the West, and this will not change in the coming months.

Although public debate is limited, political rivalry is reviving: criticism of the government is intensifying, attempts to hold the government accountable are emerging, and the government is deploying its still significant reserves of public trust to fight its opponents, and sometimes employs controversial methods. The situation in Ukraine is not deteriorating further, thanks to successful efforts to obtain military and financial support in the international arena. This strengthens the country in the face of challenges: the continuing military conflict, the approaching difficulties of the heating season and the necessary reforms for European integration.



How Ukrainian citizens see the war

Brutal war crimes, deliberately committed by the aggressor's troops, have not intimidated Ukrainians.¹ This stance is not just apparent on the battlefield – the will to fight is also present among civilians. It is manifested, for example, through public fundraising to aid the soldiers. For example, the celebrity and activist Serhiy Prytula raised over 600 million hryvnias (almost \$17 million) for three Bayraktar drones in just three days,² and the writer Andriy Lyubka purchased 40 used off-road vehicles for the needs of the army. The government and various foundations have also been successful in fundraising. Most of the funds are transferred to the armed forces, because Russia's military defeat is considered the best guarantee of lasting peace and the development of the country after the war. Surveys published in mid-August indicate that 98% of the country's residents believe in victory, and since April the percentage of those who believe that Ukraine will regain all lost territories, including Crimea and Donbas, has also increased (from 53 to 64%).³

The faith in triumph grows as the enemy's army has not made any significant progress in recent weeks and is further fuelled by Kyiv's well-planned and effective

” After six months of invasion, Zelensky's public mandate to govern the country as the head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces remains strong.

information campaign. Plans for a counteroffensive in the south and the recapture of Kherson appeared in May, but insufficient supplies of heavy weapons from the West have prevented Kyiv from carrying these out. However, this does not preclude a mind game aimed at improving the mood among citizens and demoralising enemy troops. The effects of this game have been further strengthened since August by the 'unexplained explosions' in Crimea and in Russian territory (Belgorod Oblast, Krasnodar Krai). Although they are most likely the aftermath of Ukrainian sabotage actions, Kyiv does not explicitly confirm this. In this manner, it provokes panic on the peninsula and raises morale in other parts of the invaded country, which is essential in the prelude to the 31st anniversary of regaining independence.

The success of the six-month-long resistance, the fervent belief in victory and the consolidation around this goal, on the one hand, and the deteriorating economic situation of households on the other, give rise to an increase in attitudes questioning the need to maintain all the existing restrictions of martial law. Since May, Volodymyr Zelensky has received three petitions (each of which had to gain more than 25,000 votes) to allow men aged 18–60 with no military experience to travel abroad. The authors argued that the number of trained volunteers is sufficient to conduct military operations. The president did not grant the requests. He referred to the martial law regulations, the general mobilisation act and the need to supplement the losses incurred every day at the military front. The government remains unrelenting, but people increasingly need to leave Ukraine to earn money. This has caused the intensification of illegal transfer of men to neighbouring countries. From the beginning of the invasion to early July, almost 5,000 people were detained during attempts to cross the border using forged documents.⁴

¹ For more information see the text published 100 days after the start of the Russian invasion: T. Iwański, 'Ukraine: 100 days of existential war', *OSW Commentary*, no. 453, 4 June 2022, osw.waw.pl.

² The Turkish company donated the drones for free. Prytula used the funds that had been raised this way to purchase access to photos of the territory of Ukraine for the needs of the army, taken by a satellite belonging to the Polish-Finnish company ICEYE.

³ The surveys were conducted by the International Republican Institute: *Public opinion survey of residents of Ukraine (June 2022)*, Rating Group Ukraine, 15 August 2022, ratinggroup.ua.

⁴ П. Вуєць, 'Контрабанда під час війни, візи для росіян та нові проблеми Бориса Апреля. Інтерв'ю з речником Прикордонної служби', *Главком*, 4 July 2022, glavcom.ua.

Back to politics

After six months of invasion, Zelensky's public mandate to govern the country as the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces remains robust. According to a poll published in mid-August, only 27% of respondents believe that in wartime conditions it is more important to preserve the democratic system than to have a strong leader, and 79% believe that the president should be able to interfere in the activities of parliament and the cabinet in order to safeguard the country's defence. Almost half believe that the government should be able to break the law, and almost two-thirds are of the opinion that even constructive criticism of the rulers is unacceptable in wartime.⁵ Although these results confirm that a 'rally round the flag' effect has taken root, they also open up opportunities for abuse among the president's entourage. Depriving the well-known businessman Hennadiy Korban and the oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi of Ukrainian citizenship is a good illustration of the legally controversial decisions taken by the Presidential Administration. Korban most likely lost the citizenship due to the allegation that he had suggested in a conversation with the U.S. Congresswoman Victoria Spartz that Andriy Yermak, the Head of Presidential Administration, had ties with Russia. This allegation gained resonance in U.S. policy and undermined the credibility of Ukraine's leadership. In the case of Kolomoyskyi, the decision may have been motivated by Zelensky's desire to finally cut himself off from the oligarch who has significantly supported his presidential campaign. Another possible reason might be the facilitation of handing over Kolomoyskyi to American justice authorities, since lawsuits are pending against him in the USA. Whatever the real reasons behind these decisions, they indicate that the Ukrainian leadership is putting political objectives ahead of the rule of law and keeping the public informed.

The restrictions on public debate and political rivalry, envisaged by the regulations of martial law, and the strong public mandate are used by Ukraine's political leaders

” Opinions that Zelensky should be held accountable for his actions before the Russian attack and in the first days of the invasion are being voiced with increasing confidence in the media.

in their domestic political struggle. Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky's most important opponent before the invasion, who is now actively engaged in seeking support for Ukraine among the international community, suffered temporary difficulties in leaving the country. The former president is under investigation, with the charges including treason.⁶ The mayor of Chernihiv, who had taken the liberty of criticising the government, did not attend a conference on the reconstruction of Ukraine. The renewed tension between the centre and the regions can also be seen in Dnieper, whose mayor Boris Filatov openly supports Korban and speaks critically about the president's actions. Their conflict has its origins in the past⁷ but, in fact, it concerns the future: the prospects of a new, post-war political reshuffle. Both the government and the opposition have the same attitude towards Russia, believe that Ukraine needs to integrate with the West and share the same views regarding most international issues. However, unlike in the first months of the aggression, there is a growing reluctance to accept the president's way of exercising power and his moves in domestic politics.

Opinions that Zelensky should be held accountable for his actions prior to the Russian attack and in the first days of the invasion are voiced with increasing confidence in the media. The president is accused of lying about informing citizens about the upcoming invasion, and of failing to adequately

⁵ The poll was conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology and the Opora network: 'Democracy, rights and freedoms of citizens and media consumption in the conditions of war', Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 17 August 2022, kiis.com.ua.

⁶ J. Rogoża, 'Ukraine: Poroshenko faces charges', OSW, 12 January 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁷ 'Філатов заключил пари с президентом: не отремонтируют мост – уйдет в отставку', Українська правда, 12 July 2019, pravda.com.ua.

prepare for it and take the right actions at the outset, resulting in the rapid loss of southern territories, including the capital of Kherson oblast.⁸ The fact that a wide debate⁹ was sparked after Zelensky's interview for The Washington Post, in which he claimed that he had not warned the public of the upcoming aggression because he had been concerned about the country's economy, is one sign of change. Prior to this, personal accusations against the head of state were sporadic and could rather be heard on social networks and the opposition media.

Some personnel changes took place when the president's inner circle became aware of growing criticism. The removal of Ivan Ba-

” The budget still relies mostly on international aid and domestic loans, rather than on tax and customs revenues.

kanov from his position as the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in July was preceded by the arrest of the former head of the SBU's Crimean branch on charges of treason. This was followed by further reshuffles both inside the SBU and in the Prosecutor General's Office. The latter allegedly made insufficient efforts in prosecuting traitors and Russia's collaborators. In this way, the SBU was pointed out as the institution that was largely responsible for the defeat in the south in the first days of the invasion. In turn, the army is rarely criticised by the government, and the military intelligence is even gaining in importance, due to harsh statements and effective sabotage actions in the occupied territories. Accordingly, Kyrylo Budanov, the young (he is 36) and energetic head of the Chief Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence, is gaining increasing influence over the president's key associates: Yermak, Davyd Arakhamia, who is the leader of the Servant of the People faction, and the army.

Thanks to successes on the battlefield, the armed forces still enjoy the highest level of public support (88%). At the same time, as the Ukrainian public is becoming inured to the war and, as a result, criticism of the government is becoming more and more acceptable, their opinions about the country's leaders have become more grounded. While in April Zelensky's moves were fully approved by 74% of citizens, in June this share was reduced by 15 percentage points (32% partially supported him). There has also been a decrease in unconditional support for the activity of the government (from 32% to 16%; 45% partially supported it), the parliament (from 23% to 10%; 43% partially supported it) and individual ministers and officials. Zelensky and his inner circle, who want to seek re-election after the war, are likely to be concerned about these signals,¹⁰ because their political plans may be challenged as the army is gaining popularity.

Economy – the crisis has stabilised

Despite very difficult conditions, Ukraine's economic situation is stabilising. Although forecasts remain extremely negative, and GDP at the end of the year will fall by at least 33% (forecast by the National Bank of Ukraine), there are also some positive signs. On 1 August, thanks to the agreement negotiated in Istanbul, Kyiv began exporting grain and oilseeds through the grain corridor. Although in the first month it will probably be possible to export only a third of the planned 3 million tonnes of goods via this route, this would still represent an improvement compared to previous months. The absence of incidents reduces the freight and insurance prices of products transported through the corridor, which encourages market participants to increase the volume of transported products. In

⁸ 'Бутусов про швидкий наступ РФ на півдні України: "Запитання – чому не було наказу про підірив мостів і дамб"', 5 канал, 13 June 2022, 5.ua.

⁹ 'Не попередили — чи не хотіли вірити? Україна сперечається, чи мав би Зеленський прямо оголосити про ризик вторгнення: головні аргументи', NV, 18 August 2022, nv.ua.

¹⁰ Р. Романюк, Р. Кравець, 'Політика під час війни: як Зеленський знищує конкурентів', Українська правда, 21 April 2022, pravda.com.ua.

parallel, alternative transport routes across the land border with the EU are being developed. A total of 2.6 million tonnes of food were exported in July, i.e. 0.5 million tonnes (22.7%) more than in June.

However, these increases will not be enough to balance the budget, which still relies mostly on international aid and domestic loans, rather than on tax and customs revenues. In recent weeks, cheap loans and grants from Western countries have been coming in faster: in July the deficit amounted to 4 billion hryvnias (about \$110 million), while in June it reached 144 billion hryvnias (\$3.9 billion). Nevertheless, this positive trend is unlikely to continue in subsequent periods. The country's debt will continue to grow. According to the International Monetary Fund's forecasts, it will reach 86% of GDP at the end of this year, although consent to restructure the debt expressed by foreign creditors of some Ukrainian securities is a positive sign.¹¹

Taxes on imported goods have been reimposed, VAT refunds for exporters have been reduced and a new tax on the purchase of foreign currencies has been

” Kyiv is dependent on financial and military aid from outside, and Western solidarity and will to support Ukraine is bound to be put to a serious test in the coming autumn and winter months.

introduced. Therefore, Kyiv hopes that budget revenues from domestic sources will increase in the coming months. The program of relocating business to areas far from hostilities may bring beneficial effects. Almost 500 companies had started operating in new locations by the beginning of August.¹² Revenues from electricity exports are expected to be another source of income. Ukraine obtained the relevant permits and on 30 June it began selling electricity to the EU, with which it has been synchronised since March within a single system. The government optimistically assumes that once the target transmission capacity of 2.5 GW is achieved¹³ in response to the growing demand in Europe, it will earn 70 billion hryvnias per year (almost \$2 billion). In July, the transmission capacity of the lines running through Slovakia and Romania was 100 MW. Kyiv has received permission from ENTSO-E to increase it to 250 MW since August. In spite of this, the export plans may be thwarted due to the situation at the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant, which has been occupied by Russian troops since the beginning of March and only produces energy to a limited extent. The militarisation and shelling of the facility – in order to accuse Ukrainian forces of the attacks – as well as the aggressor's plans to switch power to the occupied territories in the south of the country and to Russia, increase the risk that a serious incident may arise in Europe's largest nuclear power plant (6 MW), and also that the Ukrainian energy system will be cut off from a major energy source right before the heating season.

Challenges and prospects

Ukraine is quickly learning how to function in a state of war, but the relative stability of the military situation does not eliminate the serious challenges it needs to face. The biggest of them is continuing effective resistance on the battlefield, where the Russian army, bogged down on the front line and entangled in exhausting clashes, but still no less dangerous, continues its military operations both on land and from the air. Another challenge will be the referendums on the annexation to Russia of the areas in the south and east of Ukraine occupied by the invaders after 24 February (scheduled for autumn), which Kyiv will endeavour to prevent from being held. One more challenge is the likely Russian show trial of the defenders of Mariupol from the Azov regiment, which will trigger a new wave of

¹¹ 'Держателі ВВП-варантів України схвалили пропозицію щодо реструктуризації', Економічна правда, 9 August 2022, [epravda.com.ua](http://pravda.com.ua).

¹² 'Релокація бізнесу триває і Комітет з питань економічного розвитку докладає усіх зусиль задля покращення умов її здійснення', Верховна Рада України, 8 August 2022, rada.gov.ua.

¹³ In August, the renovation of the line from the Khmelnytskyi Nuclear Power Plant to Rzeszów began. Thanks to it, the energy export capacity to Poland is expected to increase by 1 MW. See: 'Ukrenergo and the Polish transmission system operator PSE S.A. began to restore the cross-border power transmission line', Ukrenergo, 9 August 2022, ua.energy.

accusations against the government concerning ineffective protection. Kyiv will also be unwilling to resume talks with the Kremlin on freezing military operations, as it rightly believes that this solution is non-functional, beneficial primarily for Russia, and may result in an agreement similar to Minsk-3, i.e. a de facto postponement of the war for a few years.

However, the attitudes of the Ukrainian army, public and politicians will not be the only factors that will decide whether Ukraine will get a better chance to permanently end the war in its favour. Kyiv is dependent on financial and military aid from outside, and Western solidarity and will to support Ukraine is bound to be put to a serious test in the coming autumn and winter months. The high prices of energy supplies and their shortage, deliberately exacerbated by the Kremlin, create additional opportunities for Russia to put pressure on Western European consumers. In exchange for gas, Moscow will demand concessions in the behind-the-scenes negotiations, such as halting aid to Ukraine and lifting (or at least easing) the sanctions. The outcome of the November mid-term elections to the US Congress will also constitute a challenge. A sweeping Republican victory may strengthen the 'dovish' faction within the president's inner circle, and may have a demotivating effect on the continuation of US support for Kyiv in the run-up to the presidential election scheduled for 2024.

The heating season 2022/2023 will probably be the most difficult in history. Ukraine has over 12 billion m³ of gas in underground tanks (of which 4–5 billion is the so-called technical gas, and the rest of the reserves, which are difficult to estimate, belong to foreign companies and may be used outside the country). However, in order to reach the level of 19 billion m³ set by the government, Kyiv would have to find gas and allocate over ten billion dollars for it, which it is presently trying to obtain. The government announced that by mid-August it had accumulated 1.9 million tonnes of coal, yet there is a risk that in the event of power plants or combined heat-and-power (CHP) plant facilities coming under shelling, nearby coal depots could also be destroyed.

Although energy consumption has decreased by about 40%, in response to the destruction of the combined heat-and-power plants in Chernihiv, Kremenchuk and Okhtyrka, among other damaged facilities and output reduction, Ukraine's heat and electricity generation potential has been seriously undermined. It is also likely that deliberate shelling of critical infrastructure (power plants, CHP plants, electricity and gas transmission lines, etc.) may cause a humanitarian catastrophe in other regions of the country and bring about a new wave of refugees, some of whom will flee abroad. Helping them remains an unresolved problem. The number of internally displaced persons was estimated at 6.6 million at the end of July. As many as 60% of them have lost their jobs, 35% live on no more than 5,000 hryvnias per month, and 25% are concerned that they will have to leave their current place of residence before winter due to lack of funds for heating.¹⁴

With the war and preparations for the winter in the background, Kyiv is trying to implement the reforms it has committed to carrying out before the EU summit in June, at which Ukraine was granted candidate status. There are tentative signs of progress in the key reform of the judiciary: the process of selecting the head of the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office has been completed, a competition for the head of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine has been launched, and the first members of the renewed Supreme Council of Justice (judicial self-government) have been elected. However, more work is needed to meet all seven criteria of the European Commission by the end of the year and to have the arguments in place to convince the EU to take the next steps on the accession path.

¹⁴ A study conducted by the International Organisation for Migration, *Звіт Про Внутрішнє Переміщення В Україні Опитування Загального Населення Раунд 7*, DTM, 23 July 2022, displacement.iom.int.

European integration and the related reconstruction of the country after winning the war could become a unifying national idea: implemented by the government, shared by the opposition and supported by over 90% of society. It is an opportunity around which political life and the bureaucratic process should be organised. To seize the historic moment, Zelensky must reform the country quickly and effectively.¹⁵ Then the Ukrainian people's struggle for Western values, which is appreciated and still closely watched by the world, may bring institutional, and thus real, success.

¹⁵ For more information about the background of Ukraine's integration with the EU, see: T. Iwański, 'Czy Zełenskiemu wystarczy determinacji do trudnych reform? Status kandydata to dopiero początek', Klub Jagielloński, 18 July 2022, klubjagiellonski.pl.