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The impact of the war on the dynamics of the political and social situation in Ukraine

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Russian aggression affected the balance of political forces in Ukraine. Pro-Russian groups disappeared from the scene. Also, as long as the war continues, there will be no elections, perpetuating the current situation. At the same time, political conflicts and existing problems such as corruption and inefficiency of political elites are being revived. However, the morale of society remains high, and the growing civic and political awareness heralds the possibility of far-reaching political and social changes

The balance of political forces. In Ukraine, there is currently a sort of wartime consensus that eliminates open political conflict. The dynamics of the political scene slowed down; however, after a relative and temporary stabilization in the first months after the invasion, political conflicts revived, including those within the ruling establishment. The war has provided additional pretexts here, i.e., currently, the particular interests of individual circles and people are camouflaged with slogans about “patriotism” on the one hand and accusations of “treason” on the other.

This negatively affects both the transparency and quality of the political debate. Especially since during the current martial law, mass protests and speeches are prohibited, which makes it difficult to identify internal conflicts and does not allow social emotions to find an outlet.

As long as martial law lasts, no elections can be held, which in practice means freezing the balance of political forces. At the moment, it is difficult to predict when and to what extent it will be reconstructed (apart from the changes that are a direct consequence of the war, i.e., the banning of pro-Russian groups). The Verkhovna Rada (parliament) currently has 405 deputies (grouped in 8 factions and groups, as well as 21 independent deputies), including 237 deputies from the ruling Servant of the People party, which is associated with the president. Political extra-parliamentary forces play no role in this arrangement.

Russian aggression has strengthened the position of President Volodymyr Zelensky, the Office of the President, the National Security and Defense Council (RBNO), and the army command, especially the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

The tendency to centralize power, and even toward authoritarianism, for which Zelensky and his entourage were criticized before the war, have turned out to be largely beneficial under the conditions of war by improving the management of the crisis situation, and Zelensky himself became an undisputed symbol of resistance. The changes that have been implemented in Ukraine since 2014 have also played a positive role. Nevertheless, over time, the excessive centralization of power – currently the most important are the Office of the President and the RBNO, which de facto push other state authorities and institutions into a supporting and administrative role – turn out to be less effective. Also, the parliament, despite the distribution of seats, which allows the presidential party considerable legislative freedom, is not able to operate efficiently and effectively.

One of the consequences of this is the low level of public trust in the power structures and the political class in general, which in the case of Ukraine is a permanent trend. Those state institutions that are the most active in the context of the ongoing war enjoy the greatest trust, i.e., the president, the armed forces, the ministers of foreign affairs and defense, and the RBNO.

The role of the oligarchs. The oligarchy, which had hitherto had considerable political influence, lost its importance. The war has brought many key oligarchs serious losses, so they focus mainly on saving their own assets. However, it is possible that in the future they will want to exert influence on the functioning of the state again, as they are already taking various actions to adapt to the changed situation (including by engaging in social activities and supporting the army).

Nevertheless, it is not only the war that may prevent the regaining of previous influence – in November 2021, the so-called “anti-oligarchic law” was adopted, under which a “register of oligarchs” was created – these people cannot finance political parties, and public officials must report all contacts with them. There are many indications that if Zelensky stays in power for a long time (i.e., also after the war), he will push for the continuation of the process of “de-oligarchization”.

Pro-Russian political forces. Currently, there are no significant pro-Russian forces in Ukraine and their return should not be expected in the foreseeable future. The authorities banned a total of 17 political groups sympathizing with Russia, including the parliamentary parties Opposition Platform – For Life and the Opposition Bloc. Moreover, as a result of Russian aggression and occupation, those regions of Ukraine that had relatively positive attitudes towards Russia before the invasion were the ones that suffered the most; where originally such favourable opinions were expressed by 53% of the inhabitants of eastern and 45% of southern Ukraine, in May 2022, it was only 4% and 1%, respectively. At the local level, few pro-Russian politicians decided to openly take the side of the aggressor – apart from being illegal, it also turned out to be dangerous.

Russia’s efforts to reactivate pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, e.g., creating Viktor Medvedchuk as a leader of such forces, have no chance of success at the moment (Medvedchuk himself was deprived of Ukrainian citizenship in January 2023).

A separate problem is the attitude of the Ukrainian authorities towards the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been accused (in many cases not without justification) of favouring Russia and acting to the detriment of Ukraine. However, the decisive actions taken by the Ukrainian authorities in this matter have aroused mixed feelings among Ukrainians, and they also provide arguments and pretexts for Russian propaganda.

Social changes. There is a noticeable increase in the civic and state awareness of Ukrainians who have mobilized to defend their country. Ukrainian civil society is clearly gaining importance and position. The citizens of Ukraine have realized that they could be the causative agent. In the context of the socio-political passivity that characterizes post-Soviet societies, this change in Ukraine can be described as revolutionary. This completes the process started on the Maidan – the formation of a political nation.

Another positive phenomenon is the increase in the level of social control. Independent media are gaining importance (which is also contributed to by the process of de-oligarchization of the media), monitoring and informing the public more and more effectively about the activities not only of the authorities but also of the political and financial elites in general. It is thanks to the media that most corruption scandals have been revealed and publicized.

The role not only of civic organizations and movements but also of veterans is growing. After the end of the war, even if they do not actively participate in political life, their voice will be important. According to an IRI study from January 2023, 63% of Ukrainians have someone close to them who fights; 95% trust the Ukrainian Armed Forces, 93% trust veterans returning from the front, and it is an increasing trend. At the same time, 91% of respondents believe that society treats veterans appropriately, while only 53% believe that the state is able to take care of them. However, less than half of Ukrainians would like veterans to become politicians – a reflection of the general attitude toward politicians.

Despite the difficult economic situation and 14 months of war, the public mood is optimistic. In February 2023, as many as 93% of Ukrainians believed that the future of the country was good, and 97% believed in victory in the war. The level of support for Ukraine’s membership in the European Union (85%) and NATO (82%) is stable. However, this may change: post-war problems with reconstruction, and economic, political, and social instability

may be more difficult than the war itself. Similarly, the process of accession negotiations with the EU and NATO can take years. Both of these factors can significantly affect public sentiment.

New old problems. Despite the war and the extraordinary mobilization of the state and society, the political mechanisms have not changed, as exemplified by the controversial, informal cooperation of the Servant of the People faction with deputies of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life party. This party was banned, but some of its 44 deputies joined a new faction called Platform for Life and Peace (currently 22 deputies), and some founded their own: Revival of Ukraine (18 deputies). The Servant of the People faction protects them from losing their seats, and in return receives support in controversial votes. On December 13, 2022, thanks to their votes, the law on housing construction was adopted, against which other parties protested, as well as mayors of many cities and a significant part of society (the law was adopted with the votes of 228 deputies, compared to the required 226).

Old corruption schemes and habits were also revived, with the principle of krysha (“protection” or “roof”) at the forefront. Particularly at the regional level, the functioning of “clans” is noticeable, e.g., monopolizing the distribution of public funds, including external aid.

Spectacular anti-corruption measures taken by President Zelensky at the turn of January and February 2023 resulted in a number of resignations and dismissals in the Verkhovna Rada, the Office of the President, ministries (especially the Ministry of Defense), the general prosecutor’s office, regional administrations, state-owned enterprises, and other institutions.

Many close associates of the president and members of the ruling party were involved in these scandals. The quality of the political elite is still low, which translates into the level of social trust: parliament is trusted by 41% of citizens, and the government by 53% (although it should be noted that before 2022 these indicators were even lower). The level of this trust is declining, as is the case with local authorities (especially as martial law also means limiting access to public information, e.g., to politicians’ asset declarations).

Volodymyr Zelensky still enjoys support at the level of 90%. This is mainly because he has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance – but it may not be enough to stay in power in the long run. On the one hand, accusations of being guided by one’s own interests are already recurring, especially towards his entourage. On the other hand, expectations are growing (as before the 2019 elections) regarding the curbing of all pathologies.

Conclusions

- Russian aggression did not manage to break the morale of Ukrainians or lead to the collapse of the functioning of the state – on the contrary, in many dimensions, it contributed to its consolidation. However, the current lack of open political conflicts is the calm before the storm, and Ukraine’s past problems continue to affect political and social life. However, the war has had an impact on the political scene and triggered processes that created the potential for an exchange of political and business elites. Nevertheless, it is the outcome of the war that will be crucial.