



Investigating the Russo-Ukrainian War:

Evidence and Analysis from
PeaceRep's Ukraine Programme

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Introduction

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) has investigated the development of the Russo-Ukraine War from a holistic and multidimensional set of perspectives and lines of enquiry. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme starts from the premise that the war needs to be analysed from a sociological and political economy vantage point and not understood narrowly as a state-based geopolitical dispute. Our research has assisted Ukrainian policymakers with approaches and policy frameworks that support resilience and a politically just and sustainable peace. The Ukraine programme (see box) was initiated after the full-scale invasion in February 2022 as an additional suite of work under the auspices of the existing PeaceRep programme.

The programme was established as an international partnership, working closely with Ukrainian and institutions based in or with specialist expertise on Central and Eastern Europe. We also established several ad hoc partnerships around specific initiatives such as research publications, conferences and workshops.

The present policy brief aims to draw together concluding research findings from the PeaceRep programme, examples of where we have delivered impactful research-policy-practice outcomes, and an account of the role of our overall research method – what we call “civic network research” – in delivering these activities.

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme	Broader ad hoc partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• University of Edinburgh (<i>PeaceRep lead</i>)• London School of Economics and Political Science (<i>Ukraine lead</i>)• Kyiv School of Economics• Jagiellonian University• Institute for Human Sciences (Vienna)• Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies• Ukraine Industry Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clingendael Institute• Centre for Civil Liberties (Kyiv)• People First• Friedrich Ebert Stiftung• USAID Economic Resilience Activity

Key Findings

- ▶ Civic network research is a methodology that aims to generate knowledge about conflict sites (or potentially other contexts) by developing formal and informal international partnerships with activists and institutions in-country. By drawing on the knowledge bases and creating forums for reflective discussion around empirics, concepts and policies this approach aims to “crowdsource in” a range of perspective in order to support evidence-based policymaking.
- ▶ For funders like the UK Government/UK FCDO, the approach of civic network research offers granular evidence bases from conflict affected societies and a means to assist civic networks and activists that are pursuing democratic and rights-based policies on the ground. In this view of the research process, rights-based outcomes and inclusive policies can also become grounds for assessing a research programme’s success through qualitative key performance indicators (pushing back against the trend to focus on quantitative metrics when assessing outcomes).
- ▶ The Russo-Ukrainian War complicates the new/old war distinction. While the war is a conventional interstate conflict, the authoritarian regime dynamics on the Russian side draw some comparison with situations of intractable conflict whereby rentier logics sustain the conflict.
- ▶ Despite the rise in discourse around “great power competition” and “great power politics”, the geopolitical context in which the Russo-Ukrainian War is embedded is highly fluid and fragmentary, lacking rigidly fixed geopolitical alliances and marked by greater transactionalism.
- ▶ Ukraine’s state has transformed its capacity during the war, but with the country heavily dependent on financial aid from allies, this transformation entails acute external dependency. Russia and Ukraine’s war economies observe similar dynamics of military Keynesianism but in the context of quite different forms of external dependency. In Russia’s case, fossil fuel exports have played a critical role in funding the war and stabilising its heavily sanctioned economy.

- ▶ By 2024, Ukraine's massive military spending was driving economic demand, providing a lifeline for the market economy through government tendering and expanding the public sector payroll with military recruitment – but we also warned that in a number of sectors the rise in state demand was not sufficient to offset the loss of private demand. This development of demand-based “military Keynesianism” needs to be combined however with other industrial policy instruments, supporting and driving forward investment in the real economy. Localisation policy can play a key role in this regard in supporting Ukraine's industrial growth.
- ▶ Evidence from our network of local activist researchers highlights the tensions present in local communities between groups and the ways in which decentralisation reforms are coming under strain. For policymakers, this research highlights critical resilience challenges that alleviation strategies should focus on, as well as a list of local communities that can be specifically targeted for additional support (available on request). Further research into these localities could identify how reconstruction efforts can be calibrated to support the goals of inclusion and ameliorate community tensions. It could explore how activists in our network are working in their communities to alleviate tensions and how development strategies can be inclusively designed to support this work, drawing on the insights provided from this bank of participatory research.
- ▶ Civic networks have played a critical role in supporting Ukraine's resilience in the context of the full-scale invasion, building on the culture of do-it-yourself citizenship that has long been a feature of Ukraine's democratic development (existing in tension-laden relationship to the state). These networks exist in Ukraine and transnationally, fusing formal and informal dimensions, from everyday mutual aid and self-help systems to larger infrastructures. The transnational dimension relies on the connections of Ukrainians living abroad – both longer-term migrant communities as well those displaced because of the war. The dynamic of civic networks established on an ad hoc basis in the first months of the full-scale invasion became the backbone to the mobilisation of support for Ukraine and Ukrainian forced migrants in Europe. Evidence gathered from the networks supporting relief efforts from Russian occupied territories provides testimonies of severe human rights abuses.

- ▶ In an age of global fragmentation and growing authoritarianisation, peace negotiations can become vehicles for the prosecution of and entrenchment of "bad actor" demands. To address and overcome this challenge, it is vitally important that spaces are developed within negotiations, as well as the wider public policy ecosystems that surround them, for civic actors to seek humanitarian and rights-based concessions from the "bad actors" within the talks. This approach was pursued by PeaceRep's Ukraine team in collaboration with civil society partners in our development of 31 points to protect the human dimension in the 2025 peace talks – with several of these incorporated into the Ukraine-Europe April 2025 outline negotiating position.

Recommendations for UK FCDO / UK Government and other major donors of research and policy engagement activity in the Russo-Ukrainian War

- ▶ Actively support the creation of research-policy-practice ecosystems drawing together key stakeholders and institutions for open discussion on challenging policy issues as a transmission pathway between evidence-based academic analysis and the formulation of public policy.
- ▶ Utilise qualitative performance indicators when designing and assessing programme delivery.
- ▶ Prioritise the development of Ukraine's productive economy as the critical basis for sustaining its political sovereignty, both to defend against Russian aggression and reduce dependency on external allies for the war effort. Commission research assessing downstream financing risks.
- ▶ Make the development of in-country partnerships that recognise the strength of Ukrainian civic and research institutions a condition of programme financing to ensure research/output quality.
- ▶ Recognise the development of research-policy-practice ecosystems around major conferences like the Ukraine Recovery Conference as important to the "soft power" of democratic states.
- ▶ Maintain support for the decentralisation reform agenda, which was key for resilience and creating "civil networks" on the local level.

Research Methods and Qualitative Outcomes

Methodology: the practice of civic network research

Our research methodology has drawn from and adapted the way in which PeaceRep country teams have undertaken field research in challenging war-afflicted contexts, which itself built on previous projects including the DFID-funded Conflict Research Programme. This has since been formalised as a methodology we refer to as “civic network research”:¹ a form of participatory and collaborative research based on working with human rights and civic-orientated activists in conflict-impacted settings to co-create knowledge about such contexts. It starts from the premise that individuals and groups on the ground will know their society and its conditions better than anyone else; and that academic research will both be more rigorous and more effectively calibrated to support positive outcomes when it utilises the knowledge of these communities. A related concept was advanced by our PeaceRep partner, Kyiv School of Economics, at the outset of the full-scale Russian invasion: they set out to form international partnerships around the principle of defending Ukraine’s “intellectual sovereignty”.² This recognised that academic research about the war would be stronger through such partnerships and that this activity could play a practical role in strengthening Ukraine’s institutions and democracy. Intellectual sovereignty alludes to attempts to tackle and reflect on the power asymmetries between institutions in the West and those in Ukraine, even though it is not possible for a research project to entirely overcome such inequalities (which are, for example, unavoidably present in the contracting of funded research).³

PeaceRep-Ukraine’s use of the civic network research method has involved different clusters of organisations and networks and a range of different practical methodologies, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, desk research, publicly available data, informal discussions and structured dialogues with academics and practitioners. The latter activity, which is variously termed knowledge exchange, stakeholder engagement, research impact, etc., usually tends to refer to the dissemination of research findings that have already been produced. By contrast, in our conception the process of engagement with collaborative networks actually forms a constitutive element in the knowledge production process.

In Figure 1, we conceptualise this view of the research process as one that seeks to continually overlay more concrete evidence into the analysis in order to capture the complexity of events and processes.

The civic network research approach to knowledge creation recognises that the theories we build are only ever partial approximations of the events and processes that we study. This methodology mixes inductive and reflective theory building. Analyses are derived from on-the-ground evidence bases, but also involve the mobilisation of conceptual ideas to make these evidence bases intelligible and potentially generalisable to other contexts. This aims to “crowdsource in” ideas and evidence from a broad range of networks and, in turn, create forums for reflection and interrogation of approaches. The cyclical conception is also designed to generate fluidity and flexibility as the research network can adapt to new challenges and problems as they arise. This is particularly appropriate in conflict affected societies where change can be rapid, throwing into question prior assumptions and posing new questions.

Benefits of civic network research to international funders of conflict research

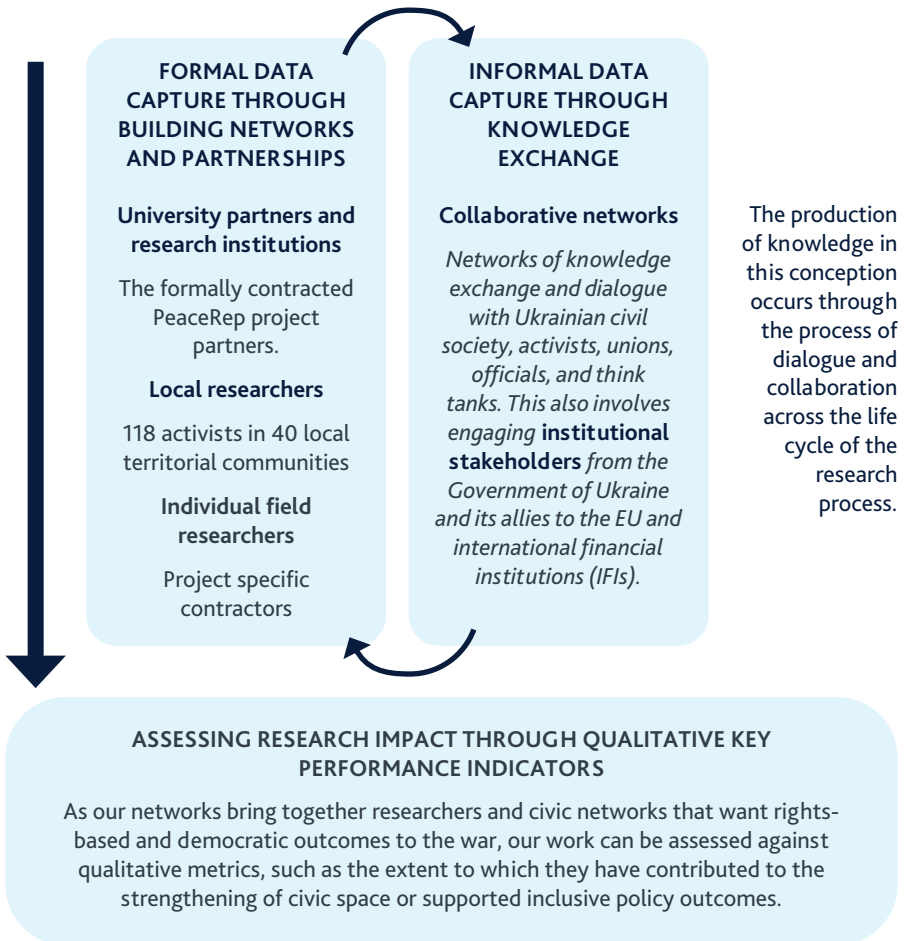
For research funders, such as the UK FCDO, civic network research has several benefits. Recognising these positives can aid the design of future programmes and tenders that are better calibrated to support long term peace and transition goals. We identify three benefits that we have seen in the Ukraine research:

Quality evidence from well established, sustainable partnerships

This approach to the research process offers granular evidence bases from conflict impacted settings, with higher research quality able to underpin better policymaking. Societies experiencing conflict are inherently difficult and, by definition, dangerous to navigate without strong in-country knowledge bases and connections. As levels of mistrust can be high, working alongside experts with established networks and partnerships can assist funders in navigating contexts often marked by low information quality. Civic activists in conflict impacted societies are also not simply researchers but tend to be engaging in public interest oriented activity at different levels. These can range from any number of basic everyday actions that contribute to the public good or more formalised advocacy for democratic and rights-based policies. For those engaged in such activity, strong international partnerships can provide material resources to support this work. At the same time, they can also provide access to global forums and international decision-makers that they that they may otherwise find difficult to gain access to. When selecting researchers and building ecosystems of discussion around research oriented policy, it is important to be mindful of the risks of partisanship and being drawn into in-country political polarisation.

We sought to avoid the danger of presenting the research we were undertaking as entirely technocratic and “value free”, when it was clearly engaging matters of political and, indeed, moral contention, while also seeking to not get drawn into local or international controversies which would be inappropriate for a public interest oriented research programme. For example, our formal network of 118 activists in 40 local territorial communities were selected through a screening process conducted by an external agency to identify individuals who were both engaged in their community and working with local government but without known political associations. Our colleagues at the Kyiv School of Economics worked closely with the agency to manage this due diligence and review process, where the status of local researchers as experts on conditions in their communities was carefully established.⁴ By contrast, the discussion ecosystems we brought together – including around the Ukraine Recovery Conference – actively involved high level political stakeholders as well as civil society actors, think tankers, etc., many of whom had known advocacy positions and alignments. Our aim in this area was to improve the policymaking process by bringing individuals with a diverse range of views into forums for knowledge exchange where differences could be discussed in a collegiate, evidence-based manner. We therefore took a different approach to managing risks of political capture in the establishment of the formal network (aimed to not be politically aligned) and the informal collaborative networks (aimed to include a range of sometimes political viewpoints among individuals with known advocacy positions).

Figure 1: PeaceRep-Ukraine's use of the civic network research: knowledge production through collaborative dialogue



The problem of patronising "bad actors" with development aid finance

Long-term, relatively stable partnerships offering insight into on-the-ground risks of various kinds are important for funders to navigate complexity and avoid poor policy outcomes. While such partnerships are themselves not "risk free" – for example they may themselves become a source of rent capture by predatory actors – such risks can be mitigated by the types of ecosystem that they seek to establish. The civic network approach aims to draw a range of participants with broadly shared underlying democratic values, while being heterogeneous enough to perform a cross-check and triangulation function. This approach aims to crowd-source a range of perspectives, improving the policy process while mitigating the risks of programme capture where proposals become unduly influenced by elite interests.

Supporting more equitable programme design through international partnerships

Our research has identified the problem of large INGOs crowding out local capacities in Ukraine, where donor financing has in some cases led to "salary dumping" as in-country NGOs cannot compete with the wages offered by big global players. The civic network approach offers a means to address this by ensuring that the in-country aspect of the research is primarily led by the programme's international partners. Industrial policy-style instruments of the type that our research has identified as important for Ukraine's reindustrialisation can also be applied to global development funding to mitigate the risk that aid delivery systems dominated by international agencies push out more dynamic civic operators.

Research-policy-practice in action: qualitative outcomes supported by our research

Our work on the Ukrainian economy illustrates the practice visualised in Figure 1. It has benefited from and evolved through regular dialogue with the Ukrainian and global policymaking community. This has included several years of engagement with the Ukraine Recovery Conference, side events, presentations and discussions with policymakers, as well as regular discussions with the UK FCDO Ukraine Early Recovery and Reconstruction team. We also took PeaceRep's Ukraine research into the LSE IDEAS Short Course, *Ukraine's Recovery and Reconstruction in an Era of Global Transition*, a four-week executive education course on major debates in global political economy and global governance for Ukrainian government officials and ministers, which at the time of writing has engaged four cohorts of decision-makers.

Our research was interrogated and sharpened through these engagement activities, providing the research team with the on-going feedback and challenges necessary for rigorous research.

Another example of these research-policy-practice relationships lies in our engagement with the human rights community in Ukraine and Russia. Our proposed framework for the 2025 Ukraine-Russia negotiations, which comprised 31 key policy areas to prioritise the "human dimension", was developed at a workshop in Istanbul in December 2024 made up of civil society representatives from Ukraine, Russia and the international community.⁵ Discussions at the workshop also led directly to the formation of the People First coalition, the first major joint advocacy initiative of Ukrainian and Russian civil society since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶ This marked a concrete strengthening of transnational civic space, which our research and participatory conception of knowledge production contributed to.

We would argue that the importance of such qualitative outcomes has implications for what metrics are utilised to assess the long-term impact and sustainability of academic research funded for the goals of international development (or for the wider public interest). It highlights the importance of assessing success or failure against key performance indicators (KPIs) that are qualitative and not simply quantitative (how many reports, meetings with policymakers, international partnerships, and so on). While these quantitative indicators and benchmarks certainly have their place, they need to be combined with the assessment of qualitative outcomes to fully assess the rigour of research-for-impact.

The PeaceRep-Ukraine programme has delivered several qualitative outcomes (also see Table 1):

- ▶ Provided early warning to policymakers on the risks of a domestic taxation funding shortfall from proposed tax cuts and deregulation measures and worked with policymakers to adjust policies.
- ▶ Supported through our partnership with Ukraine Industry Expertise the development of new localisation and local content measures to assist Ukrainian producers, including providing evidence to policymakers in Brussels on the need to modify their opposition to such policy frameworks in light of the new situation posed by the all-out-war.
- ▶ Assisted the UK Government with the development of its Medium Term Strategy for Ukraine's Economy through a written advice note and expert roundtable discussion in March 2024.
- ▶ Developed policy proposals for innovative funding mechanisms to support Ukraine's on-going resilience in the war and future recovery and engaged key stakeholders in dialogue on these policies.
- ▶ Created a research ecosystem with Ukrainian and Russian civil society representatives around priorities for the 2025 negotiations, leading to the formation of the People First advocacy coalition.
- ▶ Established a network of 118 activists across 40 different territorial communities, engaging this network in discussion on their localities and drawing on this to inform inclusive recovery goals.

Table 1: Examples of qualitative outcomes for impact from the PeaceRep-Ukraine programme

Research and analysis	Our international partnerships	Key stakeholder relationships	Key events and milestone	Qualitative outcomes
Tax revenue mobilisation in Ukraine and criticism of 10/10/10 proposals for wartime tax cuts ⁷	Kyiv School of Economics	International Monetary Fund (IMF) Government of Ukraine UK FCDO	November 2022 – June 2023 series of events and discussions with key global stakeholders in run-in to the 2023 Ukraine Recovery Conference ⁸ including early engagement dialogue with IMF colleagues	International Monetary Fund and Government of Ukraine formulate and agree National Revenue Strategy 2024–2030 (Dec 2023)
Localisation and local content policy ⁹	Ukraine Industry Expertise USAID Ukraine Economic Resilience Activity Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	European Commission – Ukraine Service Government of Ukraine UK FCDO	USAID Economic Resilience Activity conference co-sponsored by the LSE on 7 June 2023 ¹⁰ and side events to the 2023 ¹¹ and 2024 ¹² Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024 LSE-Ukraine Industry Expertise report highlights need for localisation strategy in garments sector and potential in other sectors ¹³	Government of Ukraine launch Made in Ukraine strategy (February 2024) ¹⁴ Ukraine Rada passes ¹⁵ new military localisation law (Nov 2025) highlighting the need to support local garments production
UK Government Medium Term Strategy for Ukraine's Economy	Individual researchers from our network	UK FCDO / UK Government	The LSE drafted an extensive policy memo responding to key prompts from UK FCDO in March 2024 and hosted an expert roundtable for HMG on 6 March 2024	Development of UK Government Medium Term Strategy for Ukraine's Economy

Research and analysis	Our international partnerships	Key stakeholder relationships	Key events and milestone	Qualitative outcomes
<p>Innovative finance mechanisms for Ukraine</p>	<p>Friedrich Ebert Stiftung</p> <p>Individual researchers from our network</p>	<p>UK FCDO / UK Government European Union (Commission, Council, Parliament) Government of Ukraine</p>	<p>Delegation to Brussels EU institutions (20–21 May 2025) and pre-event for Ukraine Recovery Conference on 22 May 2025¹⁶</p>	<p>On-going engagement with policymakers around financing funds for Ukraine (guarantee fund, stabilisation fund, public-private investment fund)</p>
<p>Captives of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and prioritising the human dimension in the peace talks</p> <p>Strengthening transnational civic society space between Russia-Ukraine</p>	<p>Civil society representatives from Ukraine, Russia and the international community</p>	<p>The coalition of civil society organisations supporting the People First¹⁷ advocacy campaign</p> <p>UK FCDO</p>	<p>December 2024 PeaceRep workshop in Istanbul.</p>	<p>Briefing UK FCDO negotiations team on 31 points to prioritise the human dimension¹⁸</p> <p>The formation of the People First coalition¹⁹ advocacy campaign – the first joint initiative of Russian and Ukrainian civil society since February 2022</p> <p>People First demands incorporated into Ukraine-Europe April 2025 ceasefire proposal²⁰</p>

Research and analysis	Our international partnerships	Key stakeholder relationships	Key events and milestone	Qualitative outcomes
Supporting the strengthening of civic space in Ukraine	Kyiv School of Economics	Creating a network of 118 local activists spread across 40 territorial communities.	From October 2022 to the present, we have established and gathered data from a network of activists o their local communities	Strengthening of civic space through participatory online focus groups creating dialogues and points of interconnection among local activists

Key Research Findings

Analysing the Russo-Ukrainian War in a new age of disorder and crisis

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme has applied a multi-scalar and multi-angle lens, identifying how different levels of analysis from the local to the global interact in analytically significant ways to shape the course of conflict in the Russo-Ukrainian War. This approach starts from the premise that state-centric categories will not capture the complexity of the war. Ukraine has illustrated for example the ways that social relations and encounters that traverse national borders can be important in securing *national sovereignty*, while also creating a web of external dependencies on its main allies and donors.

The nature of the war

In the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2014–2022) conflict management on the contact lines in Eastern Ukraine, or at the de facto border to the illegally annexed Crimea, was shaped by a combination of official direction/micromanagement and the practices of local agents.²¹ This period of the war from 2014–2022 had many of the appearances of a situation of intractable violence²² of the type PeaceRep has studied in other conflict sites. These tend to involve a range of actors and networks including state and non-state actors and external intervening parties. In the Ukrainian case, the 2014 to 2022 period saw Russia patronise an insurgency, support it from August 2014 with regular forces, and promote exclusionary identity politics²³ in the form of an expansionary Russian ethnonationalism.

Ukraine also faced a severe balance of payment crisis resulting in an IMF programme in an economy already struggling with long-term economic stagnation.²⁴ Despite these conditions being often associated with state fragmentation, the conflict remained localised and Ukraine's coherence as a political entity in unoccupied territories was not subject to significant challenge from seditionist actors.

Those eastern elites that remained committed to some form of geopolitical relationship with Russia largely did not back an armed insurrection against Kyiv. Peace talks in this earlier phase (2014–2022) were also typical of the problems of predatory peace-making often encountered in situations of intractable conflict, where the talks themselves become a means for kleptocratic actors to seize and control resources. Russia attempted to conceal this approach by positioning itself as a "third party" mediator,²⁵ despite its de facto involvement as an aggressor and critical sponsor of client networks.

Meanwhile, the Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory removed citizens in these areas from Ukraine's electorate, favouring the pro-western forces politically.²⁶ In the occupied Donbas, Russia's patronage of the so-called peoples' republics in Luhansk and Donetsk applied the model of intervention it had previously undertaken in its other patronised post-Soviet de facto states. This entails careful cultivation of proxies and criminal networks through the provision of crucial economic, political and strategic resources, mobilising ethnonationalist identity politics, and exporting its own authoritarian model. In addition, thanks to authoritarian forms of "peacekeeping" and the instrumentalization of peace negotiations to achieve predatory goals, Russia deliberately engineered irresolution and ensured the persistence of the status quo on which these de facto states depend. In summary, this careful cultivation of proxies and "exporting" of its domestic authoritarianism aims to expand its perceived strategic interests in its near abroad by reducing the space for accountable democratic politics.²⁷

Complicating the "new"/"old" war distinction

With the full-scale invasion of February 2022, the war appeared to transition into a more conventional interstate war fought for the political control of territory – a so-called "old" war.²⁸ But this distinction between old/new or intractable/conventional can be overstated in the Russo-Ukrainian case. As discussed above, both the nature of the Russian regime as an authoritarian and militarily aggressive state²⁹ and the logic of its war goals draw comparison with many other sites of conflict. If Ukraine were, for instance, to become a site of state breakdown and intractable conflict, then this would represent a form of victory for the Russian side, given that it would make impossible Ukraine's further integration into NATO and the European Union.³⁰ The Kremlin would take advantage of this scenario to extract resources from clients inside Ukraine, use these relations to maintain formal/informal control of strategic territory and infrastructure, while casting Ukraine as a so-called "buffer" or "frontier" state between Russia and the West. This method of conflict management based on manufactured socioeconomic decline and cultivation of criminal networks draws comparison with the various sovereignty-claiming de facto states (such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia)³¹ but also Russia's management of relations in Chechnya. This analysis in turn informs how Ukraine's theory of victory and a just outcome of the war is conceptualised. It posits the critical need for Ukraine to maintain societal cohesion and coherent state institutions in the face of Russia's attempts to dismantle them.³²

While the Russo-Ukrainian War does not involve multiple state and non-state actors as warring parties, a characteristic often associated with "new wars", various forms of non-state actor involvement have been observed. These include the cultivation of Russian Federation clients in occupied territories since 2014, as well as the role of external networks and actors – such as civic coalitions, traditional civil society, and international business – in mobilising resources for the war effort on both sides.³³ In addition, while for Ukraine the political objective remains paramount – i.e., democratic institutions and territorial integrity – this is less clear cut on the Russian side. The war may be creating an incentive structure through the war economy combined with a hyper-nationalist ideology that gives it an "embedded" and "new war-like" logic. War may become embedded in the structure of the Russian state and economy as a social formation based on permanent war mobilisation.³⁴ Such states and societies are, of course, potentially fractious, and this scenario poses risks for Russia. However, with the short-lived exception of the Wagner rebellion of June 2023, the Russian state has succeeded in externalising this violent political economy onto Ukraine. But the nature of the autocratic regime and internal conflict among political entrepreneurs and factions mean that the resilience of this system may be overstated, especially given Russia's ongoing economic problems.³⁵

The transformation of state and society in wartime Ukraine

Ukraine's fluid state society relations have been transformed by the war and the "landing zone" for these changes is still uncertain. Prior to the full-scale invasion, Ukraine's citizen-state relations tended to be characterised by mistrust due to corruption and the failures of the post-Soviet transition. But this has long been entangled with a very strong civil society and culture of active citizenship, driving a self-help culture of do-it-yourself activism.³⁶ All-out-war has introduced new contradictions and tensions into this mix. Ukraine's resilience has been underpinned by networks of volunteer activists operating across multiple spheres. At the same time, relatively robust tax revenues (reflecting a shift in voluntary compliance with authorities)³⁷ and very high levels of confidence in the armed forces implies attitudinal shifts are underway. To a certain extent, it may be possible to talk about a new social contract between state and citizen that has been struck through these wartime transformations. Whereas the state was once seen as a rentier force vis-à-vis citizens, now many Ukrainians actively donate income beyond their taxes to the war effort. Some 86% of Ukrainians have provided donations through Monobank alone, a popular banking app, with a value of equivalent to £1.4bn in the first 1000 days of the all-out-war.³⁸

This aspect of what we could refer to as Ukraine's participatory model of security aligns with what conflict researchers have referred to as "civicness": a set of behaviours based on mutual obligation towards other citizens that construct an implicit form of social contract.³⁹ These networks have played a key role in generating public goods, whether through fundraising for the armed forces⁴⁰ or conducting evacuations from occupied territory.⁴¹ The voluntary mobilisation of citizens also crossed national borders, as Ukrainian communities overseas and the new migrant population undertook a massive aid effort in conjunction with host communities and international partners. These networks often blurred the distinction between military and humanitarian aid to support Ukraine's security and right of self-defence, delivered through personal and informal channels.⁴² Ukraine's on-going state transformation during the war has been shaped by these conditions, with citizens normally distrustful of the state "rallying around the flag".⁴³ Significantly, the popular mobilisation against the Russian invasion united previously rival, identity-based camps, creating a much more inclusive, civic form of nationalism as actors previously seen as pro-Russian in sentiment rallied strongly and, in some cases, dramatically, to the Ukrainian cause.⁴⁴ Yet this transformation in state-citizen relations also exists in tandem with tensions and ambivalences towards military draft recruitment.⁴⁵ Above all, the story of Ukraine's rising state capacity through revenue raising is one of simultaneous external dependency, critically underpinned by financial aid from its allies.⁴⁶ This dependency has been aggressively leveraged by the new US administration in 2025, as it appeared to attempt – in a very chaotic and constantly shifting, evolving manner – to force Kyiv to provide preferential access to its critical mineral reserves and make territorial concessions to Russia.⁴⁷

The mobilisation of Ukrainian nationals residing abroad, including those that have experienced forced displacement as a result of the war, has intersected with this dynamic. A decentralised, post-Fordist model of humanitarian relief has emerged with the large migrant population at the forefront of networks of mobilisation to support the Ukrainian population "at home", which interfaces with conventional aid organisations in a complex manner that sometimes involves tensions and frustrations.⁴⁸ This also tended to blur the distinction between traditional humanitarian and military aid,⁴⁹ with formal and informal organisations and networks emerging that are fundraising directly to purchase/produce drones and dual use items, as well as to meet the needs of individual battalions and regiments in the armed forces.⁵⁰

Ukraine's place in the fragmentation of global order

By approaching analyses of the Russo-Ukraine War from a sociological and political economy vantage point, our work has questioned and problematised the persistence of state-centric conceptions of international order. This is often expressed in the idea of a "return of geopolitics" or "great power competition".⁵¹ The problem with such frames is that they ignore the central fact that Russia has struggled to translate its overwhelming military superiority into achieving its political goals in Ukraine (of forcing the country to accept a position within its "sphere of influence" as a client state).⁵² Seen in the context of other failures to translate military superiority into political goals, for example the US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, this may point to a general tendency.⁵³ There is an irony present in some emerging liberal security discourses around so-called "great power politics" and "great power competition", notably present in the Biden administration's foreign policy posture, which prioritise geopolitical interests over liberal principles but combine this with criticisms of concepts that deny Ukraine's democratic agency (such as "sphere of influence" and "proxy war").⁵⁴ This suggests that liberal western policymakers are struggling to articulate coherent, practical alternatives to authoritarian frames.

Whereas the concepts of unipolarity, multipolarity and great power competition all denote a world of attenuated hierarchy, Russia's hitherto failure to force Ukraine to accept a position in its "sphere of influence" suggests a need to rethink such assumptions about global order. Rather than spheres of influence and the organisation of world order around the security interests of powerful states (i.e., the "return of geopolitics"), the war in Ukraine may be better read as a crisis of great power politics,⁵⁵ or at least as a contradiction between an imaginary of great power control and the reality of a world order marked by a far greater diffusion of power than was the case at the end of the Cold War. This greater complexity has created a complex global bargaining space marked by fluidity in traditional alignments and a tendency for states and non-state actors to prioritise short term transactional and extractive goals.⁵⁶

This analysis points to the recalibration of foreign policy goals in a manner that is sensitive to and takes account of power diffusion. The majority of the world's states want relationships with big players such as the United States and China and do not imagine themselves as internal to the "sphere of influence" of either. Calling into question the ability to use military force to "compel" changes of behaviour in other states and/or secure control of territory can also tailor defence strategies more closely to the complexity and range of today's authoritarian threats and the challenge of building resilient democracies.

Fragmentation standing behind unity: NATO's response to the Russo-Ukrainian War

NATO's response to the Russo-Ukrainian War provides a good illustration of these dynamics of world order, given that even such a highly hierarchal and centralised military-security organisation – which could be seen, albeit superficially, as resembling an “American sphere of influence” – exists in a state of fragmentation and internal negotiation, including divergent strategies for defence against Russia existing within the same space, even before the disruptive impact of the second Trump White House.

Our research investigated the regional security implications of the war in Ukraine from the perspective of NATO's frontline states, advancing this as a framework for research on the distinct experiences and related security doctrines among the states bordering the Russian Federation.⁵⁷ Our research team conducted desk and field research in seven states (Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and the United States). In each of these cases, we analysed of the strategic discourse of the selected European NATO member states, including frontline states i.e., Finland, Estonia, Poland, the Western Allies i.e., Germany and the Netherlands, as well as Hungary as an outlier in the former group.⁵⁸

While the war has produced a discourse of NATO unity in the face of Russian aggression, our research identified how beneath this exterior stand a growing diversification of distinct security strategies. We showed how internal divisions could potentially deepen existing divergent perspectives within the alliance (i.e., TSI and B9 formats; frontline states versus the Southern flank) and hinder its effectiveness in contributing to the reconstruction of the regional security order in Europe (and the related deterrent capabilities of NATO).⁵⁹ This explored how frontline states had to grapple with both traditional military threats and comprehensive (non-state and non-military) security challenges but tend to emphasise state-centric military threats, reflecting their geographic proximity to Russia. By contrast, their western allies tend towards more holistic, broader categories of threat perception in their security frameworks. There are, however, within this picture some divergences, indeed fragmentations, with Russia identified as a direct state threat by Germany, but not by Hungary and the Netherlands, for example. Our research also developed the argument that of the new NATO members not only Finland but also Sweden should be analysed under the rubric of the “frontline states” concept, owing to the latter's position as a Baltic Sea power and the related sense of security threat that the Russo-Ukraine war ignited.⁶⁰

Differing conceptions of civil-military relations and their implications for strategic defence

For most of the frontline states, the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 was the pivot point driving a transformation in perception and defence strategy. Estonia was an outlier in developing a post-2014-like security discourse prior to the full development of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.⁶¹ The outlier in the other direction was Hungary, which meets the criteria of a frontline state (owing to its border with Ukraine) but has not echoed security narratives around Russia from its European partners.⁶² Our analysis highlighted how different postures have emerged in response to the threat from the Russian Federation. We identified two distinct models.⁶³ The first model, represented by Finland and Estonia, fully reflects the idea that security is all-encompassing and in order to answer the complex threats of today, all actors need to be active and included. Therefore, the responsibility for the provision of security is very broad and dispersed, ranging from the international community, through the various levels of state authority, public institutions (including the armed forces and law enforcement), private sector, volunteering and not-for-profit organisations, as well as individual citizens. The second model, represented by the rest of the analysed states, assumes a rather limited participation of civilian entities in the provision of security. While it does recognise the requirement of cross-sectoral cooperation, it either limits its extent to specific types of engagement or does not include some of the civilian actors as active security providers. Poland represents a case that bridges these two models, with indications of developing societal readiness for defence while also militarising certain aspects of civilian involvement.

Findings from our network of local activist-researchers

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme established a network of activists spread across 40 local territorial communities (Hromada) in Ukraine. They constituted a panel of 118 people recruited on the basis that they were undertaking some level of civic engagement and volunteering within their local communities and excluding those with strong political affiliations. Surveys, interviews and online focus group data was captured from the network, allowing us to build up a picture of the governance, security and economic challenges in government controlled Ukrainian territory since the full-scale Russian invasion. This applied a research method originally developed by the PeaceRep Syria team, originally under the auspices of the Conflict Research Programme.⁶⁴

Resilience from the bottom-up

Ukraine has largely been successful in maintaining its infrastructure and services after the full-scale invasion. Our network reported important positive developments locally such as the expansion of local Centres of Administrative Services, offering residency registration, social services, land and real estate services, civil status registration, passport services, etc. Territorial communities are also establishing Resilience Centres to support vulnerable populations.⁶⁵ While the challenges in frontline and de-occupied areas are extremely acute, Ukraine has adapted to the war and strengthened its state capacity.

The "civic network state" and the dangers of war exhaustion

With volunteer activists playing a key role in maintaining social ties and infrastructure, a "civic network state" has emerged, but faces the risk of activist burnout in light of growing demands. This is also a contentious "push and pull" process, with activists both cooperating with the state to provide public goods and also experiencing disenchantment with the authorities, driving discord and contention.⁶⁶ Volunteer networks evacuating people from occupied areas became involved in these activities because the state was unable to meet this urgent need. Their efforts in effect substitute for state services, not out of hostility or confrontation, but as a pragmatic response, and recognising civic networks are better placed to operate across Russian and Ukrainian controlled territory, notwithstanding the clear risks. Activists cooperate with authorities when they reach the limits of their own capacity, recognizing that while they provide essential public goods, they cannot replace formal service provision. However, their encounters with state bureaucracy and reliance on personal connections often produce disillusionment, reflecting the wider push-and-pull of Ukrainian civic activism, in which the state is at once a source of frustration, a symbol of democratic aspiration, and at times an obstacle that hinders civic efforts.⁶⁷

Local activist respondents provide support for the idea that Ukraine's strong culture of active citizenship and associated civic networks have interacted successfully with the decentralisation reforms of the government to improve resilience in the war. In the first wave of survey and interview data (March–August 2023) 85% reported that the local government had made efforts to "involve business or the public in dealing with problems caused by the full-scale invasion". Significantly, 31% of activists reported being involved in the implementation ("execution" or "coordination") of a local government action to deal with a problem.⁶⁸

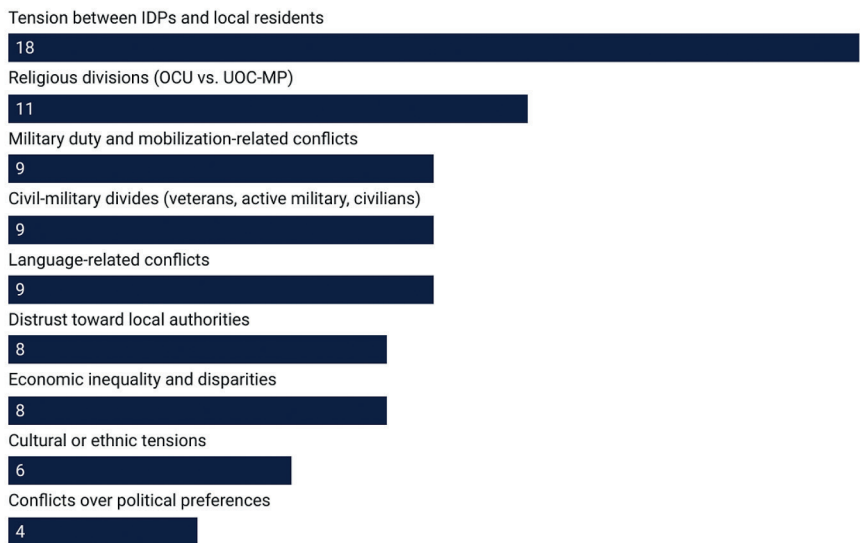
Similarly, 46% of activists reported being involved in some way in the local recovery and reconstruction process.⁶⁹ However, perceptions of local government's effective coordination with activists and other public authorities fell in the second wave (November 2023), and activists often expressed frustration over their inability to effectively participate in local government decision-making processes.⁷⁰ Burnout of activists and volunteers represents a clear risk to the strength of Ukraine's civic-networks and their role in societal resilience with 29% of activists reporting a lack of time due to other commitments as a factor limiting their engagement with the state.⁷¹

Activists acknowledge rising tensions between groups at the local level

Due to the "rally around the flag" effect in Ukraine, the acknowledgement of tensions and divisions can be taboo, especially when interlocutors are engaging the international research community. Nonetheless, within our local network a number of activists acknowledge such divisions (Figure 2). Some 43% of activists identify the presence of disagreements and tensions in the community,⁷² giving the examples of issues such as religious affiliations and the orthodox churches; between soldiers, veterans and civilians over values/priorities; the language issue, especially vis-à-vis Russian-speaking IDPs and the Ukrainian speaking population; and conflicts over resource distribution (including between IDPs and locals).

Figure 2: Reports of sources of local community tensions in response to open questions

Open question: "Do you think there are conflicts between different social groups in your community? Please specify which groups? What caused these disagreements or tensions?"



These tensions provide a list of issues for policymakers to focus on alleviation strategies for, as well as local communities that can be specifically targeted for additional support. Further research into these communities could identify, for example, how reconstruction efforts can be redesigned and calibrated to support inclusive development outcomes, improving economic wellbeing while reducing social division.

Interviews with our local activists allow us to zone in on some of the most prevalent issues, adding context and depth.⁷³ Religious tensions tend to concern the August 2024 law (No. 3894-IX "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations"), which prohibits the activities of religious organisations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. Activists from our network have acknowledged that this issue has resulted in tensions in some local communities:

“ *The issue of the church - Moscow Patriarchate versus Ukrainian Patriarchate - is quite sensitive. In our area, where the village council and administrative services are located, there is a monastery under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). This naturally raises concerns. People start arguing among themselves, creating unnecessary division at a time when unity is crucial.* ”

In light of the sensitivity and potential for community division on this issue some in our network have been involved in structured dialogues to overcome these tensions. One interlocutor described this:

“ *There was a meeting [initiated by the deputies], the clergy were invited with lawyers representing them, and all the deputies were present. They presented their documents, proof of what they were saying: "Yes, if there is an all-Ukrainian law signed by the president that they really have to rule in Ukrainian, they will switch." They talked and argued a bit. The community members were also present. Everyone left in a tolerant manner.* ”

This positive example of local political and civic intervention around a social integration policy indicates some of the proactive strategies – which could also be linked holistically to recovery and reconstruction efforts – that may calm social tensions and support inclusive development goals.

Tensions between Russian language and Ukrainian language speakers can also be observed in communities that have long been Russian speakers, as well as among those with an influx of IDPs. One of the activists in the city of Poltava indicated their own internal ambiguity on this issue.

“ *The interaction between Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers is a deeply personal issue for me. In Poltava, we have quite a lot of Russian speakers, and it's unclear how to navigate this. If we simply ignore it, we'll lose strategically again because the Russian-speaking environment keeps eroding our cultural and mental boundaries. But at the same time, you can't just pressure people either.* ”

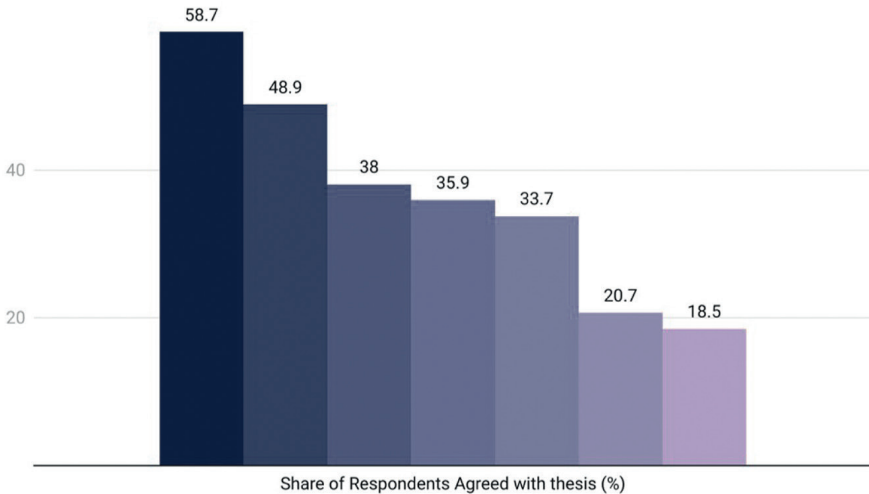
Decentralisation efforts are under strain – and 2025 saw a dramatic return of mass protest

Our activist network highlights how the war has impacted decentralisation reforms (devolution of significant power including over fiscal resources to the local territorial community or Hromada level). The Hromada's fiscal power has mostly remained intact – though the government did re-route taxes from military personnel from the local to the central budget in 2024. The broader consolidation of power in the Office of the Presidency/ executive tends to be cast as temporary, reflecting the pressures posed by the Russian invasion, with the legal foundation for decentralisation still remaining intact. However, the publication of our last set of findings coincided with the dramatic re-politicisation of questions of power centralisation and corruption. The national government's move to abolish the independence of key corruption agencies triggered the first mass demonstrations in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion.⁷⁴ With key EU allies backing the protestors and threatening to suspend the flow of funds to Ukraine, Kyiv undertook a rapid u-turn, providing therefore an illustrative case of the different levels shaping Ukraine's state formation, combining external financial dependency and the internal “push-and-pull” negotiations with the citizenry. This provides a further political context for some of the strains reported by the local activist network.⁷⁵ While the majority focus on fiscal centralisation as the main challenge, others raise issues of trust, accountability and corruption as sources of on-going strain.

Figure 2: Activist network responses on impact of the war on decentralisation reform agenda

How did the full-scale war affect the decentralisation reform in your hromada?

- Redistribution of taxes (military PIT) from local authorities to the central government
- Allocation of local resources for defense and social support of the population affected by the war
- Reduction of financial autonomy of hromadas
- Undermining trust in local authorities due to inefficiency, corruption, and neglect of community needs
- Security challenges, especially in areas under threat or territorial occupation
- Centralization of mass media, affecting the development of local media and the spread of local information
- Introduction of military administration and removal of elected officials



The Ukrainian war-economy: evidence-based research supporting economic stability

The internal fragmentations and breakdowns characteristic of "new wars" are strongly associated with severe economic readjustments and debt crises, marked by falling production, rising joblessness and responses that tend to aggravate these conditions further by choking off demand and investment.

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme highlighted this risk at the outset of the full-scale invasion when Ukraine experienced a severe war-induced recession and supply and demand crisis. Owing to physical destruction and increased investment risk, markets tend to freeze up in war, presenting a need for state intervention on both the supply and demand side to support the economy while directing resources to military needs.⁷⁶ In 2022, however, the Ukrainian government was contemplating an experiment based on deregulation and steep tax reductions, rather than mobilising state capacity to support fragile markets.⁷⁷ Our research highlighted relevant historical examples for fighting an all-out-war based on high levels of state intervention and supported the efforts of key stakeholders to adjust policies.⁷⁸ To some extent, the sheer scale of resources mobilised for the war effort "solved" this issue, requiring Ukraine to move towards greater extraction of taxation revenues and developing a form of militarised state capitalism. As Ukraine directed vast resources to the war effort, this had a knock-on effect on the market economy, supporting demand in otherwise fragile and contracting markets. Interestingly, despite the often-stated preference of Ukraine's political elites for economically libertarian policies, the trend towards state capitalism was already present in the crises prior to February 2022 (e.g., expressed in the 2016 nationalisation of Privatbank, to stabilise the financial sector, which created a largely state owned and highly concentrated banking system). After the full-scale invasion, Ukraine was under pressure from allies to raise taxes to fund the war and came to resemble a more conventional war-economy with a push for tax administration reform and revenue mobilisation taking precedence over tax reductions.⁷⁹

Our research has supported several years of engagement in the Ukraine Recovery Conference process (London, 2023, Berlin, 2024 and Rome, 2025). This included an official side event co-organised with the UK Government and Government of Ukraine (London 2023),⁸⁰ a major international conference organised with civil society partners (Berlin 2024)⁸¹ and a preparatory workshop which shaped subsequent dialogues in the run-in to the conference (Rome 2025).⁸² Through these policy dialogue and engagement events, we argued that economic demand from the war effort could offset the crisis afflicting the economy, driving investment and stabilising markets. Our research showed how, by 2024, massive military spending was driving economic demand, providing a lifeline for the market economy, through government tendering and expanding the public sector payroll with military recruitment. However, we also warned that in a number of sectors the rise in state demand was not sufficient to offset the loss of private demand.⁸³ This shows that the development of demand based "military Keynesianism" needs to be combined with other industrial policy instruments aimed at supporting and driving forward investment in the real economy. Research undertaken in collaboration with our partners, Ukraine Industry Expertise, USAID Economic Resilience Activity and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung identified the undercapacity in the Ukrainian industrial economy and the potential for "localisation" policies.⁸⁴ This research highlighted the potential that an active industrial policy including local content requirements and other preferential trade instruments can play to support Ukraine's war economy.⁸⁵ As many as 90% of the materials needed for reconstruction could for example be sourced locally.⁸⁶ By growing this domestic productive capacity through state intervention as a critical purchaser of goods and services from the private sector, Ukraine's economic resilience can be undergirded. Our researchers engaged in discussions with decision-makers in Brussels and Kyiv supporting the moderation of the EU's position in relation to localisation policy, and a number of these proposals made it into Ukraine's "Made in Ukraine" strategy. According to the Government of Ukraine, the Made in Ukraine policies delivered real GDP growth of 0.95% in 2025 (more than half of the total 1.8% growth in this period).

Analysing the economic balance of power vis-à-vis Russia

As the war is both a military and economic contest, the stability of either side's war economy can, in turn, be expected to shape their negotiating calculations and how they interpret the war's domestic political trade-offs and risk of regime instability. In 2025, we provided an evidence-based assessment of the balance of power between the Russian and Ukrainian political economies and their relative strengths and vulnerabilities on the eve of the US-led ceasefire negotiations.⁸⁷

Building on our previous work,⁸⁸ we argued that Russia and Ukraine have developed comparable models of state-led war economies, with both sides utilising war-generated demand to support fragile war impacted market economies and stopping short of a full scale centralisation of resources around the war effort. But, at the same time, they had quite different external vulnerabilities: Russia was highly dependent on financing from war revenues and was shut out of international financial markets, while Ukraine's external dependency was primarily geopolitical, requiring continuous inflow of financing from allies to prosecute the war. From this analysis we built a nine-part metric to assess the differing strengths/vulnerabilities (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Russia and Ukraine's comparative strengths and vulnerabilities*⁸⁹

	Ukraine strengths	Ukraine vulnerabilities	Russia strengths	Russia vulnerabilities
State capacity for autonomous organisation	Highly successful wartime administrative mobilisation	Dependent on external military and financial aid	Authoritarian system and state dominated economy	Kleptocratic institutions; war economy deepens elite rent dependencies
Economic model	Mixed economy supported by donor aid and reform-driven taxation policy	Negative savings rate; highly dependent on grants and loans	Rent-financed state capitalism with large military-industrial output	Overreliance on fossil fuel rents; weak productive diversification
Revenue sources	Strong growth in tax and non-tax revenues; donor-financed budget stability through 2027	Domestic revenue insufficient for total war costs	Significant rent income from oil and gas; control of fossil fuel assets	Highly exposed to negative oil price movements
Military mobilisation	Innovative voluntary schemes and high patriotic mobilisation	Ongoing mobilisation challenges	Financial incentives drive high recruitment; avoids forced conscription (except Chechnya)	Rising costs of mobilisation; the "meat grinder" approach to war fighting

	Ukraine strengths	Ukraine vulnerabilities	Russia strengths	Russia vulnerabilities
Labour market	Less tight labour market in principle offers room to expand workforce	Skills mismatch; high structural unemployment; informal economy complicates conscription	Situation of full employment	Labour shortages limit capacity; inflationary risk
Monetary stability	Relatively stable inflation-adjusted interest rates; hard currency inflows	Ongoing inflation risk due to war; dependency on allies for aid inflows	High inflation-adjusted base rate; initial petro-financed stability	Risk of credit crunch; "dual economy" trade-offs becoming more pronounced
Geopolitical alignment	Deepening EU integration; embedded in institutional norms and reform incentives	Dependencies on some US military tech and intelligence systems that cannot be replaced by European allies	Maintains strong economic relations with economies not implementing sanctions; the Trump White House	Dependent on unstable global oil diplomacy; geopolitically isolated from large majority of European states
Long-term sustainability	High potential for post-war transformation via EU accession trajectory	Dependent on continued alignment with Western reform incentives	Large reserves (e.g. gold); state-capitalist structures allow flexibility	Long-term erosion of state capacity due to oil dependency and global transition
Negotiation leverage	Coherent democratic state with clear public mandate; stable political institutions	Cannot secure favourable terms without on-going western aid	Leveraging relationship to the Trump administration to negotiate over Ukraine's head	Hubris in negotiations out of kilter with domestic economic challenges

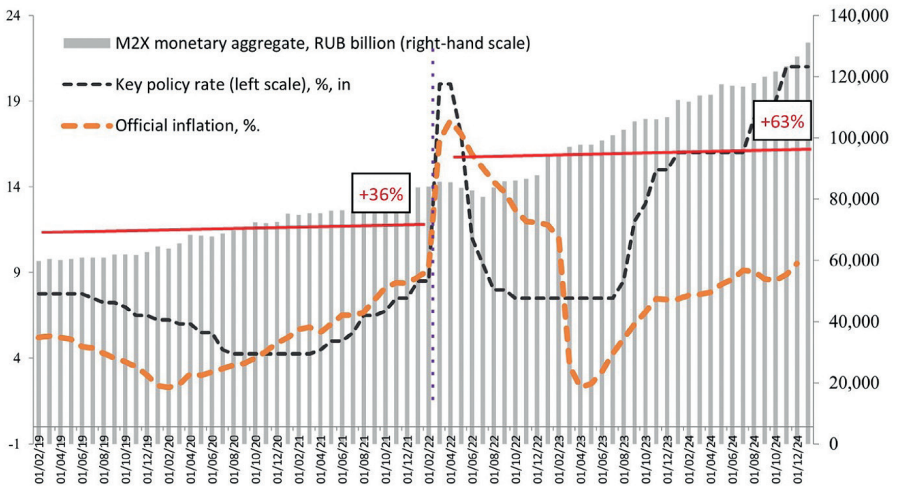
Why the clock is ticking on the Russian war economy

In one of the last reports for the PeaceRep-Ukraine programme we offered a comprehensive analysis of the Russian economy,⁹⁰ identifying the critical contradiction between the military and civilian economies in conditions of economic stagnation and high inflation. This report assessed the impact of the war on the Russian economy through an analysis of macroeconomic indicators, its sectoral structure, the dynamics of foreign trade, the federal budget revenues and expenditures, household income and changes in Russia's financial reserves. We argued that, while Russia has so far successfully avoided a severe economic crisis under the pressure of full-scale war and Western sanctions, the foundations of its wartime economic model are becoming much harder to sustain as acute funding challenges loom.

Since 2021, Russian military expenditure has almost tripled, rising from 5.9 trillion to 16.2 trillion rubles per year and reaching around 40% of the federal budget. This surge has been financed largely through the National Welfare Fund, more than three quarters of which has already been spent. At the same time, Russia's export revenues have weakened, with total exports falling by more than 13% as sanctions bite and energy windfalls fade. While oil and gas income initially cushioned the shock of sanctions, this buffer is narrowing under the effects of tightening economic sanctions on the Russian oil industry and declining demand in global markets, putting downward pressure on oil prices.

The rapid expansion of war-induced demand and the low capacity of the economy to meet it would generally be expected to create inflationary pressure. Russia sharply expanded the money supply into the economy with the Central Bank of Russia, in turn, seeking to cool inflationary pressures by raising the policy rate. However, the official rate of inflation has remained remarkably low relative to the conditions facing the Russian economy. The disjuncture between the policy rate and the inflation rate is particularly noticeable,⁹¹ making the inflation-adjusted cost of borrowing in the economy exceptionally high (see Figure 3).⁹² This poses a question around whether the official inflation rate is accurate. How we answer this directly impacts the calculation of household income during the war and indirectly impacts the GDP deflator used to calculate inflation-adjusted, year-on-year economic growth.

Figure 3: Dynamics of money supply, official inflation and the key policy rate in Russia in 2019–2024

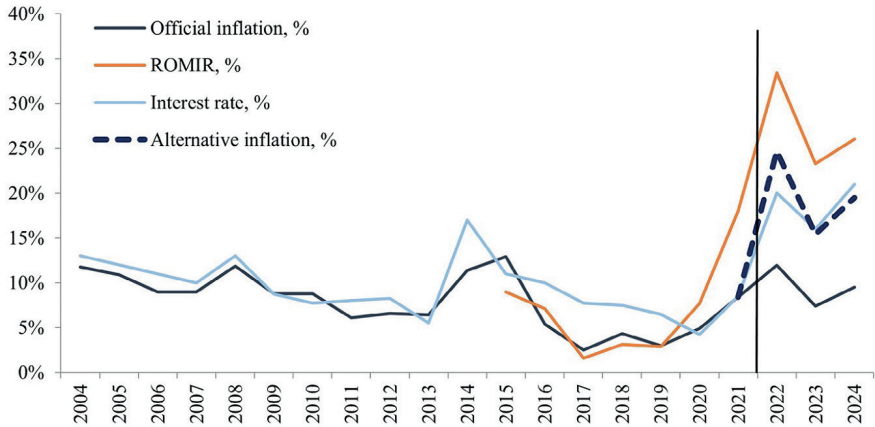


Source: Central Bank of Russia

If inflationary pressures in the economy are greater than suggested by official statistics, then the story of headline GDP growth and rising household incomes from 2021 to 2024 can be called into question.

Drawing on an independent estimate of inflation from the marketing agency ROMIR and contrasting its relationship to the official inflation rate and the central bank policy rate from the pre-war to post-war periods, our research report developed a simple two-factor regression model to offer an alternative “best guess” of inflation in the Russian economy in the period of the full-scale invasion (Figure 4).⁹³

Figure 4: Official and calculated inflation in Russia in 2004–2024



On this basis, we drew the conclusion that inflation is likely to be somewhere in the region of double the official rate, from 2022 to 2024. Taking into account the relationship between price increases and the calculation of GDP growth, this estimate would suggest that since 2022 Russia has experienced a modest GDP contraction and a fall in real household incomes. The costs of the war and sanctions must therefore be weighing heavily on the revenue generating capacity of the wider Russian economy.

The effects of the war on the incomes of the population are, however, extremely uneven. Our research highlighted the profound social polarisation generated by militarisation. Around 20% of the population (primarily soldiers, arms-industry workers and their families) have seen their nominal incomes increase quite dramatically, while the remaining majority has on average experienced real income losses.⁹⁴ Civilian sectors such as healthcare, education and local public services are being squeezed as resources are redirected toward the war. At the same time, the military-industrial build-up remains dependent on imported components, limiting the scope for self-sustaining wartime growth.

Looking forward to 2026, Russia's economy is not on a stable footing. The war has been funded by diminishing financial reserves augmented with inflationary sources of fiscal expansion. As Russia is fundamentally a petrostate, lower oil revenues due to sanctions alongside reduced global demand means that it faces a significant challenge in maintaining current levels of military spending. This analysis points to a need for policymakers to focus on intensifying sanctions and conversely highlights the benefits to Russia were sanctions to be lifted by the more Russia-sympathetic administration in the United States. At the same time, policymakers need to prepare for potential instability in Russia as the trade-offs between the military and civilian economies become harder for the regime to manage.

The changing contours of state-citizen relations: the case of military crowdfunding

Our research analysed the implications of the full-scale Russian invasion for Ukraine's post-2014 democratic pathway of development, with a particular focus on security sector governance (SSG). From 1991 to 2014, internal division, political volatility, and pervasive corruption prevented meaningful security sector reform, generating vulnerabilities that would be exploited by Russia. The transformation in the external threat environment in 2014 catalysed progress in parallel to and indeed as part of Ukraine's democratic development. The full-scale invasion has not thrown backwards this progress despite the extraordinary challenge that it poses to Ukraine's security sector and the vast increase in the size, capability and resources of the Ukrainian armed forces. Yet, some vulnerabilities, including in civil-military relations, professional military education and defence procurement processes, persist. We have made a number of policy proposals to address these issues, including expanding civil society scrutiny, modernising defence procurement practices, and undertaking a comprehensive SSG risk assessment.⁹⁵

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme also cooperated with and supported the Mapping Actors and Networks in Ukraine project (primarily funded by a separate FCDO grant). This work situated the challenge of SSG in Ukraine in the political economy of war-financing. It has created a large dataset on crowdfunding networks in the war economy; an archive of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of these networks; and analysed the data to understand the impact of crowdfunding on Ukraine's political economy.

This research has highlighted the scale of crowdfunded resources mobilised for the war effort and how this intersects with the informal character of relations within the armed forces. The scale of this popular resource mobilisation has been such that it has led Ukrainian military and state actors to systematically rely on crowdfunded resources as one among several key forms of revenue generation for the war effort.⁹⁶ The resources generated by crowdfunding brokers constitute flexible extra-budgetary funds that soften fiscal constraints on military units and state actors.⁹⁷ While actors across Ukraine's political spectrum have unified around the goal of resisting the Russian invasion, no single organisation has established a monopoly on supply of crowdfunded resources. Meanwhile, individual actors at different hierarchical levels within military units have cultivated their own connections in order to secure their supply of crowdsourced funds and resources.

This competition in the war-financing ecosystem has in turn driven organisational change. As a part of Ukraine's political and military landscape, crowdfunding has been a key enabler of innovation. Crowdfunding networks flexibly broker funds, organise labour, disseminate skills, and coordinate production and supply processes to enable provision of critically important military technology to the frontline. Crowdfunding networks are integrated into the military ecosystem in multiple, important ways. Within these networks, struggles over publicity and recognition derived from supporting the war effort – rather than struggles over control of such support per se – have emerged as a distinctive dynamic of Ukraine's military crowdfunding networks. Donations are solicited and mediated predominantly via social media platforms, and access to audiences of donors is a key resource of crowdfunding activists.⁹⁸

As this ecosystem of fundraisers-cum-producers have adapted and innovated, they have driven change in production networks and slowly consolidated among a smaller group of key players. Some crowdfunding organisations have emerged as formal actors in the war economy, capable of negotiating and funding large orders that support domestic arms manufacturing. This is particularly visible in the provision and production of reconnaissance drones. Crowdsourcing of finance, information and labour has been critical to the development and production of small drones, and is, in turn, driving commercial production. Crowdfunding brokers are going into production of drones, and producers seek to cut out intermediaries and set up their own foundations for collecting donations. This dual foundation-company model is an organisational innovation that responds to funding shortages. Innovation is driven by people, information, and money moving across the domains of the state, civil society, and business, as well as direct feedback from military users. This cycle of drone development contributes to innovation.⁹⁹

Furthermore, this domain of social activity somewhat external to, but interacting with, the state, has also catalysed change in the traditional military industrial complex. The state has learned from non-state crowdfunders, collecting donations via United24 (coordinated by the Ministry of Digital Transformation). These donations are used, in part, for UAV purchases and the "Army of Drones" project. This attention to small military drones contributes to the growing importance of the ministry, which has seen steep year-to-year budget increases in the all-out-war phase. In response to bottom-up activism from the military, crowdfunders, and local elites, and in anticipation of budget cuts, local government also sharply increased procurement of drones to show their importance in the field. In doing so, localities illustrated the competitive institutional and state/non-state dynamics present in Ukraine's pattern of state transformation – which may contrast with the more repressed (owing to its autocratic regime) character of these intra-institutional and network-based competitions on the Russian side.

The role of (trans)national civic networks in supporting Ukrainian resilience

Our research has highlighted the role of civic mobilisation as a key foundation of Ukraine's resilience in the war. These networks, arising out of Ukraine's culture of active citizenship and do-it-yourself¹⁰⁰ mentality, constituted a societal support system. This system was particularly important in the context of the shock of February 2022, and has remained important as the "rally around the flag" effect diminished.¹⁰¹

PeaceRep's research has tracked the transnational dimensions of this civicness – as formalised and informal networks based on mutual obligation towards fellow citizens – and its role in generating public goods. We observed the role played by Ukrainian diasporic communities and forced migrants in Poland as a factor – albeit a highly complex one – in supporting Ukraine's political security and defence "at home". We analysed the mobilisation of transnational civic ecosystems on the frontlines of war in the space between Poland and Ukraine,¹⁰² extending the concept of civicness to include business and entrepreneurial actors active in this space in 2023–2024.¹⁰³ This civic mobilisation encompasses a diverse range of business-led innovations – from grassroots social enterprises to large multinational firms – that have restructured their activities to address both humanitarian and economic needs amid ongoing conflict and displacement.

Many entrepreneurs have integrated civic-oriented goals into their business models, contributing to reconstruction initiatives while also tackling the challenges of social integration in host communities. Enterprises in Poland that have developed connections to Ukraine – either Ukrainian-run or through the affective connections of employees – have been particularly significant in the early delivery of humanitarian support, offering financial assistance, in-kind donations, and the coordination of relief operations. By leveraging their professional expertise, these businesses complemented the efforts of established NGOs and international actors, helping to fill gaps in humanitarian provision. As the conflict continued, many companies redirected their efforts from short-term relief toward longer-term development goals, such as rebuilding infrastructure in Ukraine, employing displaced Ukrainians and supporting the armed forces through personal and professional networks. Some incorporated these initiatives into formal corporate social responsibility strategies, while others focused on integrating forced migrants into their workforce through innovative, collaborative organisational practices. As a result of this work, we argued that it was important to recognise that Poland's successful efforts in the first year of the war to host forced migrants in private homes and provide humanitarian aid and support should be understood as a function of the pivotal role played by Ukrainians in Poland's civil society. Its activities are led predominantly by women, some of whom have fled from the war since the full-scale invasion. This developed transnationally, in part, thanks to Ukraine's own active culture of citizenship.

Our research supports findings from the wider scholarly literature¹⁰⁴ that identifies the role of informality and “ad hoc” methods as drivers of a decentralised or semi-centralised model of societal support and mutual aid. Distribution of aid generally occurs not through hierarchical chains of command and equitable processes of redistribution, but via decentralised, bottom-up and personalised connections. We have observed this at work within grassroots civil society structures away from state-level and supranational actors.¹⁰⁵ Our research identified the role of ad hoc, informal networks in supporting those fleeing Russian occupation to undertake exceptionally long journeys to return to government-controlled Ukrainian territory.¹⁰⁶ These groups and activists maintain connections with citizens in Russia, providing a key informal dimension to international civic space critical to supporting the evacuation process. Given the costs involved in evacuation processes, micro-economies have emerged around them, with taxi drivers, for example, sometimes favoured over volunteers owing to the logic of plausible deniability – they can always maintain that they were simply providing a commercial, apolitical service. Volunteer activists coordinate these journeys – usually remotely – from Ukrainian-controlled government territory.

A tendency can also be observed in the blurring of humanitarian and business activity. The mass mobilisation has facilitated the entry of businesses and entrepreneurial actors into the civic space. Businesses have played a crucial role in supporting and facilitating emergency aid.¹⁰⁷ New business practices and alternative modes of "doing humanitarian aid" have been observed, from virtual tagging of material goods to cryptocurrency crowdfunding, and B2R (business to recipient) logistics. The role that business and civic actors have played in both recovery and humanitarian sectors, and particularly in supporting defence – mainly in the form of auxiliary military equipment – underscores the entanglement of all these sectors in the Ukrainian war effort. The "triple nexus" approach¹⁰⁸ advocated by the UN, meaning the cooperation between humanitarian, peace/security and development aid, is happening organically on the ground and in business networks, often in lieu of any top-down structures.

Since 2022, business engagement in support of Ukraine has been driven by solidarity, a sense of social responsibility, and endorsement of the country's sovereignty and European aspirations.¹⁰⁹ The research demonstrates that civic values have significantly influenced humanitarian and business responses, with solidarity standing out as a key principle uniting public, grassroots, and business initiatives. In the aftermath of the initial wave of goodwill, companies began adapting to both internal and external pressures to aid Ukrainian staff and safeguard their interests within Ukraine. As the full-scale conflict persisted beyond the early months, corporate perceptions of their role evolved toward sustained support for Ukraine's reconstruction, framed through commitments to social responsibility. Ultimately, the affirmation of Ukraine's sovereignty and European trajectory has underpinned long-term business involvement in the country's recovery and modernisation.

Life under occupation in the Russo-Ukrainian War: analysing survivor testimonies

The work of civic networks underpinning evacuations from occupied territories provides a vital insight into life on the ground. These networks can provide insights that help overcome the poor quality of the information environment in occupied territories, which results from the repression's impact on freedom of speech and the propagandistic character of Russia's media channels. Our findings observe how the line of control's lack of porosity (which contrasts with the situation between 2014 and 2022 when ecosystems of activity developed around crossing points)¹¹⁰ and its general militarisation is reflected in how occupied territory is itself ordered and securitised. Those closest to the frontline can expect to face regular questioning and militarised intrusion into their everyday lives.¹¹¹

Testimonies from survivors and those organising evacuations describe extremely repressive conditions, including arbitrary detention, torture and killings. The regime keeps lists of veterans of the 2014–2022 Anti-Terror Operation (as it was described in Ukrainian political discourse at the time) and targets these individuals for particularly harsh repression. A number of survivors discuss civilians being taken to “the basement”, a colloquial term used in occupied territories to refer to the illegal detention and torture of citizens by the authorities.¹¹² Testimonies also describe the extent of the enterprise of russification at work in the occupied territories.

The occupying authorities force Ukrainians to take out Russian passports (“passportisation”) to access basic services, a timeworn tactic of the authorities to enforce control. According to one of our interlocutors, there are cases of seriously ill citizens being denied treatment on the basis of showing a Ukrainian passport. For those that take out a Russian passport on pragmatic grounds this does not however represent something akin to the classical social contract (whereby citizens agree to observe institutional rules like tax collection in return for certain public goods). Russification also entails the attempted erasure of Ukrainian civic identity, whether through systematic repression of activism and resistance or through the suppression of ordinary, everyday expressions of nationality and identity. The totalitarian regime of occupation allows occupying authorities to operate according to lawlessness, arbitrariness and criminality;¹¹³ from the Russian army looting independent shops, to the influx of protected Russian citizens that act with impunity and the general absence of protection for existing Ukrainian property rights over their assets.

Peace negotiations amid fragmented geopolitics: February 2022 as a critical juncture

In the first phase of the Russian invasion (2014–2022) conflict management on the contact lines in Eastern Ukraine or at the de facto border to the illegally annexed Crimea was shaped by a combination of official direction/micromanagement and the practices of local agents.¹¹⁴ In this phase of the war, it more closely resembled a situation of intractable violence rather than a conventional interstate contest, i.e., characterised by high informality, which, in turn, shaped the negotiation process. Russia attempted to maintain the posture of a “third party”, despite its de facto involvement as an aggressor and critical sponsor of client networks. This reflected Russia's de facto state playbook (see above), i.e., the weaponisation of local grievances to foment externally-backed separatisms, its careful cultivation of proxies and criminal networks, utilising ethnonationalist identity politics and “exporting” its domestic authoritarianism, in order to expand its perceived strategic interests in its near abroad.¹¹⁵ Such a playbook embeds a condition of “formalised political unsettlement” that keeps breakaway territories in perpetual limbo, prolongs Moscow's influence, forecloses viable resolutions, and preserves sufficient levers to reignite conflict whenever it sees fit.¹¹⁶

However, the informality of the peace and negotiation resolution process also reflected the interests of the Ukrainian side. The latter would have considered the agreement of formalised arrangements as a form of political and even legal recognition of the status quo, i.e., the occupation of Ukrainian territory by Russia and its proxies. This recent history underlines the importance of February 2022 as a critical juncture in the legal transformation of the war. It became overnight an unambiguous international armed conflict resulting from Russia's aggression against the territory of Ukraine.¹¹⁷ This impacts the nature of the negotiation process and the prospects for any form of resolution in two critical ways.

First, the proxies that had previously been cultivated as “independent” agents by the Russian side were formally absorbed in September 2022 through the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory as well as the assertion claims on unoccupied territory in and around Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia. This represented a transformation in Russia's self-understanding of its strategic aggression away from client-based interventions towards a more formalised imperialism.¹¹⁸

Second, the Ukrainian side pursued a multipronged negotiation strategy in this context, which presented a suite of demands for peace negotiation including the full withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, but also lower order demands which sought to achieve immediate humanitarian goals and mobilised geopolitical pressure from Russia-aligned and non-aligned states (e.g., on grain exports, prisoner exchange, nuclear and environmental safety, etc.). This model can be referred to as seeking islands of agreements short of a full settlement¹¹⁹ that nonetheless deliver practical gains for citizens.

The turn to negotiations in 2025 and the role of the human dimension

As part of our methodology of civic network research, PeaceRep's Ukraine programme convened a meeting in December 2024 with civil society representatives from Ukraine, Russia and the wider international community to discuss the likely development of negotiations to end the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2025 (see foregoing section, "Research-policy-practice in action"). Drawing on language associated with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), workshop participants proposed the framework of the human dimension to prioritise civic and humanitarian demands in the talks to end the war, focusing talks above all on issues of rights, dignity and security, and not Russia's expansionist, revanchist claims on Ukrainian territory. Through a participatory discussion and brainstorming, the workshop developed 31 proposals for critical civic demands that were then clustered around five thematic blocs: (a) safety and security; (b) justice and accountability; (c) participation and inclusion; (d) socioeconomic recovery and (e) culture and identity (see Table 3).

Table 3: 31 points to project the human dimension as a minimal framework for talks to end the war¹²⁰

Security and safety		
Measures to address personal insecurity, environmental safety, threats to life and wellbeing, especially for those residing in occupied territories.	1	Release and repatriation of all prisoners of war by complete exchange
	2	Return of illegally displaced children to their families
	3	Freedom of movement for civilians in occupied territories
	4	No mandatory conscription of citizens in occupied territories into occupying armies
	5	Upholding nuclear and radioactive safety across the entire territory of Ukraine; IAEA access
	6	De-mining of territories, including international cooperation and monitoring
	7	No "demographic engineering", population displacement or colonial settlement in occupied territories
	8	Immediate release of all deported and illegally detained civilians

Justice and accountability		
Measures that seek to strengthening the rule of law, ensure redress for past abuses, and prevent impunity for abuses to and including war crimes and crimes against humanity.	9	Facilitating the identification and reinterring of the deceased
	10	Cooperation on searches for missing persons
	11	Release of political prisoners and rejection of political persecutions
	12	Lifting bans on so-called non-desirable and extremist organisations
	13	Monitoring of agreements, including access of Ukrainian ombudsman and international organisations
	14	Recognition of and compliance with the UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR
	15	Transitional justice; investigation of war crimes, reparations for victims, including sexual and gender-based violence
	16	Guarantees for human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers
	17	International presence in occupied territories for monitoring human rights and guarantees

Participation and inclusion

Measures ensuring diverse and meaningful representation in the peace negotiations process and post-conflict governance	18	Gender representation in negotiating teams; gender-sensitive analysis; civil society consultation
	19	Full compliance with the Women, Peace and Security agenda
	20	Guarantees for the rights of indigenous peoples in occupied territories
	21	Guarantees against discrimination (women, disabled people, LGBT+, ethnic/national minorities)

Socioeconomic recovery in global context

Measures to address livelihoods, infrastructure, economic access, and global public goods such as food security and environmental protection	22	Protection of property rights in occupied territories
	23	No mandatory "passportisation"; no denial of services
	24	Protection of social and trade union rights in line with ILO conventions
	25	Ensure global food security is not compromised; protect international trade/shipping routes
	26	Address environmental damage; uphold the Black Sea Convention
	27	Ensuring access to telecommunications, media, banks, and public infrastructure

Culture and identity and media freedom

Recognition and protection of cultural, religious, and identity-based freedoms	28	Return of seized cultural artefacts and obligations to protect cultural heritage
	29	Recognition of the right to cultural identity and freedom
	30	Religious freedom
	31	Internet freedom and media access in occupied territories

This participatory method of developing research with civic actors was then combined with a tracking and monitoring of the subsequent negotiation process, highlighting how Ukraine's government tended to converge around such humanitarians demands (for example, focusing in particular on prisoner exchange and giving public support to the advocacy of the People First human rights coalition), while also, in proposing a ceasefire, stepping back from their previous core aim of "peace through victory".

The 2025 talks encapsulate the fragmented nature of the global order and its impact on peace resolution. This created an impetus to multimediation in recognition of the sheer range of numbers and tracks involved in resolving the war (despite it formally involving only two core belligerents, a contrast to many situations of intractable conflict where non- or sub-state actors are involved). Our research¹²¹ on the "China factor" demonstrated for example how the ambiguous stance taken by the world's biggest industrial power significantly complicates Ukraine's foreign policy and post-war planning – and has been a source of tension and ambiguity within Ukraine's domestic policymaking, a sign of the deep interconnection and entanglement between national and international politics. At the centre of the new geopolitical fragmentation and crisis-driven disorder has, however, been the emerging divisions in the western alliance with the coming to power of the second Trump administration. Our research contrasted a Ukraine-Europe proposal with the equivalent United States one and Russia's maximalist demands.¹²² This revealed that, while a human dimension-based framework was present in the Ukraine-Europe proposal in the form of demands for the release of civilian prisoners, PoW exchange and the return of kidnapped Ukrainian children, this was strikingly absent from the American proposal¹²³ – a sign of how the administration's propensity for great power thinking translated into its focus on Ukrainian territorial concessions to Moscow as the critical base for delivering a peace that would entrench authoritarianism.

This case illustrates the broader point that in an age of global geopolitical fragmentation and growing authoritarianisation, peace negotiations can become vehicles for the prosecution, and entrenchment, of "bad actor" demands. To address and overcome this challenge, it is vitally important that spaces are developed within negotiations, as well as the wider public policy ecosystems that surround them, for civic actors to seek humanitarian and rights-based concessions from the "bad actors" within the talks. If this does not occur, the risk is that peace deals become predatory and simply entrench authoritarianism.

Conclusion

PeaceRep-Ukraine was established as a programme within the existing PeaceRep consortium following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its suite of activity was therefore enabled by UK Government funding with the aim of generating new data and research in order to improve the quality of policymaking and link Ukraine's security in the war to its longer-term development and wellbeing.

We would argue that findings and approaches from the programme have generalisable implications for the design and assessment of future research programmes funded by the UK Government/UK FCDO.

The methodology of civic network research (also utilised across PeaceRep teams) tends to be expensive, as it requires the development of strong and well-funded international partnerships with in-country researchers and institutions, and may also involve (as was the case with the Ukraine programme) creating a broader network feeding in granular data on local conditions to support policymaking. However, these costs can be justified when they are assessed against concrete, qualitative programme outcomes of the types that we have demonstrated through the work of the PeaceRep-Ukraine team (see Research-policy-practice in action); whether it is providing evidence bases to support inclusive policymaking or concretely contributing to the strengthening of national and international civic space.

While there is a trend to the metrification of programme assessment, which is, to a large extent, inevitable given funding constraints and associated pressure to robustly justify spending, we would argue that this needs to be supplemented with benchmarks and KPIs that value qualitative outcomes. To deliver these outcomes there should be a recognition of the reciprocal relationship between academic research, policymaking and civic space. Programmes should therefore actively support the creation of research-policy-practice ecosystems drawing together key stakeholders and institutions for open discussion on challenging policy issues. These ecosystems can create transmission pathways between evidence-based academic analysis and the formulation of public policy. Universities are well placed to fill this function of cohering such ecosystems due to their strong protections on academic independence.

To mitigate the risks that this model simply reproduces or reinforces hierarchies between north/south and west/east, programmes can be designed with a requirement for in-country partnerships. This orientation is not simply a moral issue, but a necessary requirement to protect research and output quality – as without such partnerships delivering on the ground data research will likely become ungrounded and speculative. A similar requirement could be developed around transnationalisation. Programmes could require the active development of transnational networks and ecosystems, or identify specific existing initiatives, organisations or geographically dispersed (e.g. as a result of forced migration from conflict) communities.

For the UK Government, the creation of strong research-policy-practice ecosystems around major conferences like the Ukraine Recovery Conference also has an overt self-interest function. It puts UK educational and research institutions at the centre of the wider information space, showcasing the UK's strengths in this area and supporting its policymakers to exercise a strategic, "soft power" influence.

Endnotes

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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