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The Secret of the Ukrainian Resilience

National Identity and Will to Fight

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Abstract: This article examines Ukrainian national identity as the foundational driver of the nation's will to fight against Russian aggression during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Drawing on identity frameworks and will-to-fight models, the author traces the historical and cultural dimensions of Ukrainian identity that underpin national resilience, including collective society, self-organization, existential struggle, and a "return to Europe" social purpose. The article demonstrates how these identity dimensions have shaped Ukrainian policymaking, civic engagement, and national resilience, offering broader lessons for small states seeking to build resilience against revisionist major-power aggression.

Keywords: will to fight, national identity, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukrainian resilience

Kostiantyn Maltsev spent 23 February 2022, celebrating his wife's birthday with his family in their hometown of Kherson, a southern Ukrainian port city. The next morning, Maltsev woke to the sounds of explosions and a new nightmare reality—Russia's full-scale invasion had begun, and enemy forces were already at the city gates. A working-class civilian with no prior military service, Maltsev snapped into action. He evacuated his family from the city and then stayed behind to help resist the Russian onslaught. He single-handedly built

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barricades and conducted reconnaissance missions to support local Ukrainian military units. Despite his lack of training, he even took part in combat, fighting with a discarded rifle that he had picked up after a local battle. Kostiantyn Maltsev died on 1 March 2022. Armed with his rifle, he was riding his bicycle when a Russian armored vehicle spotted him.¹

More than four years have passed since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite the hybrid aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, continuous information operations, and the eventual full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Ukrainian nation continues to stand in its fight for Ukrainian freedom. Despite a numeric disadvantage against the Russian Army and the presumed historical connection of the Ukrainian and Russian nations, the Ukrainians chose not to surrender and prevented the collapse of the Ukrainian state. Why has such resilience manifested, and what lessons can be gained from the Ukrainian example?

This article argues that the secret of the Ukrainian will to fight can be uncovered not through a mere analysis of policy initiatives, but by studying Ukrainian identity and its history. National identity and cultural dimensions are often cited as factors in national resilience. Yet, they are often neglected in analytical frameworks, and their effects are rarely considered in analyses of the will to fight. This article fills this gap and examines how Ukrainian national identity strengthens resiliency by first establishing key analytical frameworks of will to fight, then analyzing the historical and cultural dimensions of Ukrainian identity that enable national resolve, exploring how these identity aspects have shaped defense policy, and finally assessing national identity's broader role in bolstering will to fight.

Analyzing Will to Fight

Will to fight is integral to the military, political leadership, and the nation they serve, enabling them to achieve their political objectives through war as politics by other means. History has shown that nations and groups determined to fight have successfully resisted and defeated opponents with much higher military capabilities but lesser determination and morale.² This led many military leaders and researchers to conclude that the “will to fight” can be considered as one

¹ Anastasia Ivantsiv, “За Херсон До Останнього. Історія Подвигу Та Загибелі Оборонців Бузкового Парку” [For Kherson until the End. The Story of the Heroism and Death of Defenders of Buzkovy Park], *Suspilne*, 24 August 2023.

² Patricia L. Sullivan, “War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 3 (2007): 496–524, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707300187>.

of the cornerstone factors of military engagements and war.³ The United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies' strategic documents have outlined breaking the enemy's will to fight as the ultimate goal in war.⁴

Despite a broad consensus on the importance of fighting resolve, the United States and its allies lack a generally accepted definition, conceptualization, or model of will to fight.⁵ Assessing will to fight is also challenging, prompting military leadership, policymakers, and the intelligence community to focus on more material aspects of warfare, thereby missing an integral aspect of military capabilities: the intertwined relationship between a nation's will to fight and its capability to fight.⁶ However, there is academic and policy literature that addresses such a lack of conceptualization and proposes will-to-fight analysis frameworks.

Two primary analytical frameworks that offer both classificatory taxonomies and evaluation methodologies can be noted. Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and LtCol Andrew Johnson outline three analytical elements of will to fight: *physical*, encompassing the material capability to conduct warfare; *psychological*, reflecting morale, leadership, and esprit de corps that contribute to mental strength and cognitive determination; and *ideological*, a belief system that motivates individuals and groups to continue fighting.⁷ Ben Connable's research group at Rand present a comprehensive, foundational framework for understanding will to fight, building models that explain the elements of fighting resolve from the individual to the national level.⁸ Their 2019 report focuses on two categories of will to fight: *military unit and organizational* will to fight, defined as the disposition and decision to fight, act, or persevere as needed; and *national* will to fight, defined as the determination of a national government to conduct sustained military and other operations for some objective, even when the expectation of success decreases or the need for

³ *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1993); Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10040>; and Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and LtCol Andrew Johnson, "Will to Fight: Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Military Review* 104, no. 3 (2024).

⁴ *Operations; Army Doctrine Publication: Operations* (London: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, British Army, Ministry of Defence, 2010); and Michael Shurkin, "Modern War for Romantics: Ferdinand Foch and the Principles of War," *War on the Rocks*, 8 July 2020.

⁵ Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*; and Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, "Will to Fight: Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

⁶ Josh Cheatham, "Intelligence and Intangibles: How to Assess a State's Will to Fight," Modern War Institute at West Point, 27 July 2022; and Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, "Will to Fight: Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

⁷ Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, "Will to Fight: Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

⁸ Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

significant political, economic, and military sacrifices increases. The academic and policy literature provides a comprehensive, foundational understanding of will to fight, capturing its primary aspects and key elements. However, while outlining a foundational framework, these works either negate the influence of national identity as a foundation of will to fight or call for further exploration of national identity as an aspect of will to fight.⁹

While scholars have begun examining will to fight in the Russo-Ukrainian War, these analyses have fallen short in explaining the deeper foundation of Ukrainian resilience, rooted in its history and national identity. This limitation reflects a broader deficiency in will-to-fight scholarship: the systematic neglect of cultural dimensions in analytical frameworks.¹⁰ Nevertheless, understanding culture and identity often proves to be essential to making substantive conclusions about a nation's will to resist. As Janis Berzins argues, Ukraine exemplifies a case in which the willingness to fight is fundamentally shaped by national identity rather than by institutional attachment to the state and its political and economic model.¹¹ Without incorporating these cultural and historical foundations, existing analyses cannot adequately account for the sustained Ukrainian resistance that has surprised many observers and defied conventional predictions based on material power asymmetries.

This article focuses on three main objectives. First, it will explain the historical background and manifestations of Ukrainian identity as the foundation of its will to fight. The second objective is to explain how Ukrainian identity fostered the Ukrainian will to fight and, thus, to expand existing frameworks by introducing and exploring an additional variable that contributes to fighting resolve. Third, the article will demonstrate how national identity operates as an aspect of will to fight across policymaking, civic engagement, and national resilience.

Identity Foundations of Will to Fight

There was a famous video circulating on the internet during the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹² An ITV News reporter asked one of the Ukrainian military volunteers when he expected the Russians to reach the center of Kyiv. “Never” was the answer. This best illustrates an overview of Ukrainian

⁹ Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

¹⁰ Ben Connable, “Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will-to-Fight Models,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, SI (2022): 153–67, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.2022SIstratcul009>.

¹¹ Janis Berzins, “Ukraine and the Willingness to Fight for One’s Country,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 33, no. 4 (2025): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2503945>.

¹² ITV News, “ITV News Witnesses Fighting between Ukrainian and Russian Troops Closing in on Kyiv,” YouTube video, 25 February 2022, 3:11.

identity, including their resolve to resist. Such identity can be considered the backbone of the Ukrainian will to fight and can be traced through the history of the Ukrainian resistance and fight for self-determination.

Historical Background of the Ukrainian Resistance

The foundational elements of Ukrainian identity and will to fight are rooted in the history of the Ukrainian nation. Ukraine's geographic position between east and west has historically placed it at the intersection of competing imperial powers: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the west, and the Ottoman Empire and the Tsardom of Muscovy to the east. This strategic location subjected the region to persistent conflict, with Ukrainian-populated territories repeatedly partitioned among major powers. Despite its land being divided and many Ukrainians emigrating, the idea of Ukrainian identity persisted, carried by people who strongly identified with the Ukrainian land.¹³

This powerful notion of identity and lack of statehood defined the Ukrainian resistance movements throughout the centuries. From the Cossacks of the fifteenth century to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrainska Povstanska Armiia* or UPA) during World War II, Ukrainian resistance movements tended to be decentralized, bottom-up, self-organized, defiant of foreign authoritarian rule, and strongly reliant on the civilian population as their base. Ukrainian national ideals—encompassing religious identity, self-determination, and language—formed the foundation of these movements. The grassroots, autonomous, and inclusive nature of this resistance to foreign occupation, however, transcended ethnic boundaries, attracting non-Ukrainian populations in Ukrainian land who not only joined the struggle but also adopted the Ukrainian national idea. The Ukrainian liberation movements of the early and mid-twentieth century often included ethnic units composed of Russians, Jews, Belarusians, and up to 28 other ethnic groups, united in their struggle.¹⁴ Overall, the idea of national unity and belonging became the overarching theme among Ukrainian freedom fighters who resisted foreign rule.

The history of the Ukrainian fight for self-determination has deeply rooted notions of Ukrainian resilience and can be summarized in two primary factors. First, the Ukrainian resistance to occupation tended to be self-organized and

¹³ Iryna Teleuz and Andrii Teleuz, “Українська Ідентичність у Часі Та Просторі: Історична Пам’ять, Інтерпретація Минулого Та Сучасні Виклики Війни,” *Scientific Papers of the Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsyubynskyi State Pedagogical University Series History*, no. 51 (March 2025): 79–87, <https://doi.org/10.31652/2411-2143-2025-51-79-87>.

¹⁴ I. V. Bihun and A. V. Kentii, “Ukrainska Povstanska Armiia (UPA)” [Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)], in *Entsyklopediia Istorii Ukrainy: Ukraina—Ukrainci* [*Encyclopedia of the History of Ukraine: Ukraine—Ukrainians*], vol. 2, ed. V. A. Smolii (Kyiv, Ukraine: Naukova Dumka, 2019).

autonomous. Ukrainians fought for a national idea rather than for a leader against an occupying government, giving authority to local stakeholders who controlled areas they perceived as their land. This decentralized, volunteer-based structure, which also facilitated the formation of various factions, led to general hesitancy toward a central authority, as self-organization promoted self-sufficiency and grassroots agency.¹⁵

Second, the Ukrainian century-long struggle for self-determination blurred the lines between civilian and military life. Ukrainians historically identified as a farming nation with deep connections to their land as a means of survival, but they were ready to take up arms and resist, transitioning from farmers to warriors, an aspect that is frequently highlighted in Ukrainian traditional songs and tales, including Taras H. Shevchenko's "Заповіт" (Testament) and one of the most famous Ukrainian resistance songs of the early twentieth century "Ой у лузі червона калина" (Oh, the red viburnum in the meadow).¹⁶ Importantly, women were actively involved in the Ukrainian resistance, not only keeping the homes safe while the men were fighting, but also directly engaging as medics, intelligence and communication liaisons, and soldiers.¹⁷ The most famous Ukrainian resistance song of UPA, "Лента за лентою" (Belt after belt), tells a story of a Ukrainian female medic who, after a male machine gunner got wounded, treated him and took on the machine gun to continue fighting. This historical legacy reflected elements of a comprehensive defense and a whole-of-society approach to resistance in which the civilian population and family members of resistance fighters are engaged in the fight for national self-identification.¹⁸

The historical experience that shaped Ukrainian identity has shaped and continues to shape Ukraine's geopolitical reality. Ukraine is situated between Europe and Russia, ultimately existing between Western civilization and Russia's self-perceived imperial sphere of influence. The Ukrainian Soviet legacy and russification policy during the Soviet occupation have obscured some of the historic resistance traits.¹⁹ Decades of Soviet integration, intermarriage, and cultural overlap led many Ukrainians to perceive armed conflict with Russia as

¹⁵ Anastasiia Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 513–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2258620>.

¹⁶ Serhii Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette, 2015).

¹⁷ Лілія Володимирівна Трофимович, "З ІСТОРИЇ УЧАСТІ ЖІНОК В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ ПІДПІЛЬНО-ПОВСТАНСЬКОМУ РУСІ (Середина 1940-х–Початок 1950-х Років)," *Військово-Науковий Вісник*, no. 38 (November 2022): 131–48, <https://doi.org/10.33577/2313-5603.38.2022.131-148>.

¹⁸ Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion."

¹⁹ Plokyh, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*.

unthinkable, even after Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich speech and the Russian invasion of Georgia. However, once Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and subsequent 2022 full-scale invasion shattered this assumption, Ukraine's deeply rooted historical foundations of autonomous resistance reasserted themselves, prompting nationwide mobilization that drew on centuries-old patterns of grassroots opposition to foreign domination.

Contemporary Ukrainian Identity and Will to Fight

What are the contemporary aspects of the Ukrainian identity that underpin the nation's will to fight? To analyze the influence of Ukrainian identity on the resilience of the Ukrainian nation, this article examines the Ukrainian identity employing Rawi Abdelal et al.'s *Measuring Identity* framework.²⁰ The approach classifies a collective identity as a social category characterized by its content and contestation. The content outlines the meaning of identity and includes constitutive norms (rules within a group), social purpose (the goals of a group), relational comparisons (definition of the group by what it is not), and cognitive models (worldview). Contestation refers to the degree of agreement within a group regarding its content.

When asked about their identity in July 2022, 85 percent of Ukrainians selected "citizen of Ukraine" as their main social identity characteristic, among other available options, such as residents of a particular city or village, their ethnicity, etc. This has risen drastically since the 1990s, when less than one-half chose "citizen of Ukraine" as their main identity marker, and preinvasion, with 60–65 percent selecting this identity marker.²¹ The threat and the subsequent Russian invasion became a unifying event in the Ukrainian society, reinforcing its identity. For many, this identification buries a unique and essential set of characteristics that define them as Ukrainians, many of which are directly linked to Ukrainian resilience and will to fight.

Viktor Kotygorenko, a Ukrainian scholar of ethnonational studies, argues that the Ukrainian nation comprises individuals for whom the vital values are the state independence of Ukraine, patriotism, a sense of pride in belonging to the community of Ukrainian citizens, and respect for Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian language.²² Ukrainians are a collective society without strong individualistic principles, which promotes the need to support its fellow citizens and condemns the pursuit of egoistic self-interests at the expense of the collec-

²⁰ Rawi Abdelal et al., ed., *Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²¹ "Indicators of National-Civic Ukrainian Identity," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 16 August 2022.

²² As discussed in Artur Hmyria, "Ідентичність: Як Зрозуміти, Що я – Українець?" [Identity: How to Understand That I Am a Ukrainian?], Radio Svoboda, 25 July 2022.

tive good. The main obligations or unwritten rules for Ukrainians are derived from these notions—Ukrainians feel a sense of obligation to serve their country. In terms of resiliency, this includes military service, paramilitary service, volunteering, and army support from the rear.

Such notions reflect the Ukrainian historical legacy of resistance and its key aspects of self-organization and a whole-of-society approach. In February, before the invasion, around 60 percent of Ukrainians expressed their determination to actively resist the Russian occupational forces, which rose from 50 percent in 2021 despite the escalating Russian aggression.²³ The Russian invasion strengthened the Ukrainian will to fight through the rally-around-the-flag effect. Nevertheless, this commitment has proven remarkably durable: even in 2024, 62 percent of Ukrainians were willing to fight for their country, while only 31 percent of citizens in European Union and G7 countries expressed a similar willingness.²⁴

More than 100,000 Ukrainians joined the armed forces during the first weeks of the full-scale war.²⁵ One-half of Ukrainians have volunteered, and three-quarters have donated and financially supported the Ukrainian military.²⁶ Ordinary Ukrainians managed to support their army with military gear, first-person view drones, medical aid, and even a satellite purchased through a fundraiser. Such behavior is seen as the norm and duty of any Ukrainian citizen and has laid the foundation for a resilient society.

It is important to note that this dedication to serving the country stems from Ukrainian society's devotion to the nation and the idea of the motherland, rather than from loyalty to the government or political leadership. Similar to their historic resistance fighters, Ukrainians are motivated by the idea of national unity and fight for their self-determination, without a strong dedication to a political ideology or leader. This differentiates the Ukrainian and Russian motivations, with Russians associating their fight with their leader, such as fighting for the emperor in World War I, for Joseph Stalin in WWII,

²³ “В Україні Зростає Готовність Чинити Опір Російським Інтервентам: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 5–13 Лютого 2022 Року” [Ukraine's Readiness to Resist Russian Invaders Is Growing: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted February 5–13, 2022], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 25 February 2022.

²⁴ “Fewer People Are Willing to Fight for Their Country Compared to Ten Years Ago,” Gallup International, 25 March 2024. G7 refers to the Group of Seven countries that represent the leading industrialized democracies: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

²⁵ Olena Bohdahiuk, “В Міноборони Розповіли, Скільки Добровольців Пішли До Тероборони у Перші Тижні Повномасштабної Війни,” *Suspilne*, 14 March 2023.

²⁶ “Ukraine's Resilience Formula: The Essential Components during War and Post-War (6–11 June 2023),” Rating Group, 27 June 2023; and Ilona Hromliuk, “Українці Стали Менше Донатити На ЗСУ: Пояснюємо Причини” [Ukrainians Have Begun Donating Less to the Armed Forces: Explaining the Reasons], BBC News Україна, 25 April 2024.

or for Putin in the Russo-Ukrainian War.²⁷ Moreover, Ukrainians are typically distrustful of the government, a distinct aspect of the Ukrainian identity, and often prefer to take matters into their own hands without relying on the government to lead.²⁸ Ukrainians did not wait for the government to establish the resistance, adequately supply troops with military gear, or organize logistics. They stepped up and self-organized to meet those needs, serving as a strong rear for Ukrainian soldiers, much as the civilian population supported resistance fighters during the twentieth century. While in the later stages of the war, the Ukrainian government has become efficient in performing those duties, this Ukrainian self-organization proved crucial during the first weeks of the war and the initial chaos caused by the Russian invasion.

The main social purpose of Ukrainians, as with most European nations, is the prosperity and security of their country and its citizens. Although more importantly, Ukrainians are also fighting for the survival of their national identity. This was especially critical during the first months of the full-scale Russian invasion. The Russo-Ukrainian War was perceived as a battle for survival, often invoking the Ukrainian “Воля або Смерть” (Freedom or Death) slogan from the early twentieth century and building on the legacy of Ukrainian resistance fighters.²⁹

As the war entered its attritional phase, however, perceptions changed. Once the imminent existential threat diminished, the nationalist boost inevitably waned, and Ukrainian society began to feel exhausted by the war. Ukraine has faced challenges with recruitment, ammunition shortages, and unstable support from its Western allies, hindering the Ukrainian ability to fight. Despite this change, no defeatist ideas are floating in Ukrainian society, and the will to fight remains robust. Ukrainians understand that Russians are waging a genocidal war with the main aim of absorbing or even fully eliminating the Ukrainian nation, and, thus, the notion that reinforces Ukrainian resilience and maintains morale despite the dragging of the war.

Up to 90 percent of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine will eventually win the war, and three-quarters are ready to endure the war for as long as it takes.³⁰ An

²⁷ Håvard Bækken, “Merging the Great Patriotic War and Russian Warfare in Ukraine: A Case-Study of Russian Military Patriotic Clubs in 2022,” *Political Research Exchange* 5, no. 1 (2023): 2265135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2265135>.

²⁸ Kudlenko, “Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion.”

²⁹ Mariia Spaliek, “Документальний проєкт «Воля або смерть» позбавляє глядачів рятівних ілюзій” [The documentary project “Freedom or Death” deprives viewers of saving illusions], Detector Media, 31 July 2023.

³⁰ “Сприйняття Перебігу Війни Росії Проти України Через Майже Два Роки Широкомасштабного Вторгнення” [Perception of the Course of Russia’s War against Ukraine After Almost Two Years of Full-Scale Invasion], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 21 February 2024.

overwhelming majority of Ukrainians reject any territorial concessions, even if this means that the war will last longer.³¹ These figures remained relatively stable throughout the first two years of the war, though with a declining trend in 2024–25, with a majority still rejecting any territorial concessions, indicating that these cognitive models are deeply embedded in society.³² To fight until the sovereignty is restored and Ukraine joins the Western world in the EU and NATO is the only accepted option, as any territorial concessions would mean the elimination of Ukrainians on those territories, and any unjust “peace” would give Russia time to recover and strike again. Ukrainians witnessed the war-crime atrocities committed by Russian forces in Bucha and Irpin, the complete annihilation of Ukrainian cities, and rocket terror on civilians. These atrocities are perceived as the continuation of the Russian attempts to subjugate Ukrainians, erase their national identity, and commit genocide.³³ Continuing to fight until sovereignty is secured and security guarantees are in place is thus the only acceptable choice, and despite the growing attrition, there is no major push in Ukrainian society for defeatism or an unjust settlement with Russia.

Since the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv and the start of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014, Ukrainian society has been undergoing a transformation, moving from the Soviet past to the European future. Such cultivation of European society is an end in itself. Ukrainians are experiencing the “return to Europe” purpose, characterized by a desire to detach from the Russian sphere of influence and rejoin the European sociopolitical world, a phenomenon also observed among other post-Soviet states that have already joined the EU and NATO.³⁴ A strong willingness to fight and resist Russia is thus perceived by Ukrainians as integral to both completing the social transformation and preserving identity, as well as moving toward European integration. At the same time, Ukrainians have been rediscovering their historical roots of resistance, with many parallels being drawn between past resistance movements and the current struggle. It is especially prominent in how Ukrainians perceive

³¹ “Динаміка Готовності До Територіальних Поступок Для Якнайшвидшого Завершення Війни: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 26 Травня–5 Червня 2023 Року” [Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions for the Fastest Possible End to the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted May 26–June 5, 2023], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 9 June 2023.

³² “Динаміка Готовності До Територіальних Поступок Для Якнайшвидшого Завершення Війни: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 26 Травня–5 Червня 2023 Року” [Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions for the Fastest Possible End to the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted May 26–June 5, 2023].

³³ Gregg W. Etter and David H. McElreath, “Why the Ukrainians Fight: The Holodomor (1932–33),” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 16, no. 1 (2025): 96–108, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.20251601005>.

³⁴ Abdelal et al., *Measuring Identity*.

the Russo-Ukrainian War not as a conflict that began in 2022 or a confrontation that has lasted since 2014. It is viewed as a part of the broader Ukrainian fight against Russian imperialism, spanning more than four centuries.

The Russian full-scale invasion and the war crimes committed by the Russian forces have shattered all perceived closeness, cultural connections, and even family ties between the Ukrainian and Russian nations. An overwhelming majority of Ukrainians believe that Ukrainians and Russians are no longer culturally and historically united, as only 3.8 percent of Ukrainians view Russians as a brother nation, which is a significant drop from 27.2 percent in 2017.³⁵ Moreover, 98 percent of Ukrainians view Russia as an enemy, and only 5 percent disapprove of Ukrainian accession to the EU and NATO.³⁶ There is a high level of contestation and agreement on the outlined principles within the Ukrainian nation, which is not only fighting against another country but also against another identity that is opposed to theirs and represents the “other” that is characterized by notions of aggressive reimperialization and barbaric aggression.³⁷

Applying Abdelal et al.’s *Measuring Identity* framework to Ukrainian national identity reveals specific content and contestation dimensions that underpin the Ukrainian will to fight. The primary constitutive norms include the notions of a collective society without strong individualistic principles, hesitancy to rely on the government, and a tendency toward self-organization, which all facilitated Ukrainian proactiveness and engagement in society. The Ukrainian identity’s social purpose is two-fold: to win the fight for national survival and achieve prosperity and security of their country and its citizens through Euro-Atlantic integration. The relational comparison is characterized by de-Russification, de-Communization, and decolonization, or detachment from the so-called “Russian world” with a “return to Europe” social purpose, positioning Russians as the “other,” adversarial culture. Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Ukrainian foundational cognitive model has been the notion of a war of survival, an existential struggle against the “other,” and the pursuit of integration with the West. Most importantly, however, there is a high level of contestation in Ukrainian society over its content, reinforcing the primary aspects of Ukrainian identity.

³⁵ “Війна Росії Проти України Остаточнo Розвіяла Міф Про Братерство Російського Та Українського Народів—Соцопитування [Russia’s War Against Ukraine Finally Dispelled the Myth of Brotherhood Between Russian and Ukrainian Peoples—Poll],” Інтерфакс-Україна [Interfax-Ukraine], 21 August 2023.

³⁶ “The Fifth National Poll: Ukraine during the War (March 18, 2022),” Rating Group, 20 March 2022; and “Ukraine’s Resilience Formula: The Essential Components during War and Post-War (6–11 June 2023).”

³⁷ Andrew Wilson, “Ukraine at War: Baseline Identity and Social Construction,” *Nations and Nationalism* 30, no. 1 (2024): 8–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12986>.

Policy Implications of the Ukrainian Identity

After 2014, Ukraine implemented national defense reforms that not only began the transition from the Soviet military style to NATO standards but also targeted resilience-building. The escalating Russian hybrid aggression and the subsequent full-scale invasion prompted the Ukrainian government and civic initiatives to develop new policies and approaches to national defense, many of which were shaped by aspects of national identity. To examine the influence of the Ukrainian identity on key aspects of its nation's will to fight, this article will employ Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson's three analytical elements of will to fight: physical, psychological, and ideological, augmented based on Connable et al.'s typology of outlining the two classification levels of will to fight: military unit and organizational and national will to fight.³⁸

Physical Will to Fight

Military resources, including personnel and equipment, are critical for initiating and sustaining military operations. Without adequate material capabilities and reinforcements, even the most motivated forces cannot engage in protracted conflicts. Traditional national defense policies, such as national mobilization and state development of the military-industrial complex, and massive military and economic support from Ukraine's Western allies, proved vital in building Ukrainian physical capacity to defend against the Russian invasion. However, policy decisions and civic initiatives that exemplified aspects of Ukrainian identity have also proved instrumental, especially during the initial stages of the war and in critical areas that were not adequately addressed by traditional national defense policies or by Western support. Four primary national-level policies reflect how Ukrainian identity shaped these efforts: the establishment of the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), the integration of volunteer brigades, innovative approaches to recruitment, and civic-led support for the armed forces of Ukraine.

The conscription service in Ukraine proved ineffective and failed to establish a pool of trained personnel before the invasion.³⁹ More than 500,000 Ukrainians held veteran status before the Russian invasion in February 2022, but many of them left military service due to systematic problems, low pay, and

³⁸ Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, "Will to Fight: Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War"; and Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

³⁹ Volodymyr V., "Строкова Служба: Пережиток Минулого Чи Потреба Майбутнього?," *Militarnyi*, 19 December 2023.

inadequate management.⁴⁰ Ukrainian security benefited greatly from a substantial reserve of citizens with combat experience. Still, it failed to use this advantage to the fullest extent possible due to institutional issues, attrition among experienced personnel, and slow, inefficient reforms in the Ukrainian military. As the Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border, however, many of them, in addition to tens of thousands of other Ukrainian men and women, stood up to protect their homeland.

The TDF of Ukraine were established in 2014 following the Russian hybrid aggression in Eastern Ukraine.⁴¹ One TDF brigade was created in each of the 25 Ukrainian administrative regions and, after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the TDF is estimated to have totaled 350,000 servicemembers, although official figures are not publicly available.⁴² While the TDF was initially established to serve the conventional military as a support force in the rear, many TDF brigades now operate on the front lines and have become a recruiting base for other units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF).⁴³ TDF units played an integral part in the initial phase of the Russian invasion, in some cases even being the first to engage in unequal battle with the invader in their territorial defense zones. They continue their service on the front line, showcasing the ability to adapt to the ever-changing nature of the Russo-Ukrainian War.⁴⁴ The TDF brigades' connection to a specific region or city from which servicemembers were recruited played on Ukrainians' historical connection to their land, their determination to protect their families, and the idea of national unity and belonging.

The Ukrainian tendency toward self-organization, coupled with a slow government response, prompted the creation of many volunteer battalions. The phenomenon of volunteer formations can be traced throughout the history of the Ukrainian resistance, from the Ukrainian war of independence of the twentieth century to the initial phase of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014–15, and is a direct outcome of the unique aspects of the Ukrainian national identity. The 10-year experience fighting in Eastern Ukraine also allowed Ukrainian

⁴⁰ Yulia Zabelina, “За Тих, Хто у Бою. Міністерка Ветеранів—Про Гроші і Квартири Фронтівикам, «негативний» Звіт Рахункової, Мобілізацію Та Своє Звільнення” [For Those Who Are in Battle. The Minister of Veterans—About Money and Apartments for Frontline Soldiers, the ‘Negative’ Report of the Accounting Chamber, Mobilization and Her Dismissal], *New Voice*, 22 January 2024.

⁴¹ “Історія ТРО [History of TDF],” TDF, 2024.

⁴² *The Military Balance 2024* (Washington, DC: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

⁴³ “Работы Много, Людей Мало”: ВСУ Не Хватает Бойцов и Снарядов | Донбасс Реалии [There's a Lot of Work, Few People: The Armed Forces Lack Fighters and Shells | Donbas Realities], YouTube video, 21 April 2024.

⁴⁴ Anatoliy Varhulevych, “Територіальна Оборона: Уроки Війни, Поточні Виклики, Шляхи Їх Вирішення,” *Армія Inform*, 1 December 2023.

veterans and TDF to serve as an invaluable force-multiplying resource for Ukraine, supplementing the national will to fight among civilians with a core cadre of battle-tested troops who effectively mentored these passionate but untrained volunteers during their first days of battle. This tendency toward self-organization also led to a high degree of agency and decision-making at lower levels, including among noncommissioned officers, in contrast to the Russian military, where decision-making tends to be highly centralized.⁴⁵

It is also important to note the integral role of women during the Russo-Ukrainian War, as they comprise 15–20 percent of the UAF and 5,000–7,000 women serve directly on the frontline.⁴⁶ Ukrainian women serve as medics, snipers, infantry, assault troops, and drone operators, building on the historical legacy of Ukrainian women's active engagement in armed resistance.⁴⁷ This allowed Ukraine to broaden its recruitment pool, enlist highly motivated and specialized servicewomen, and address personnel shortages. The number of women in UAF continues to grow, in part due to the Ukrainian notion of collective society fighting together and the history of women's armed resistance.⁴⁸

Ukrainian hesitancy on the part of the government and a tendency toward self-organization prompted the Ukrainian government to modernize its recruitment approaches. Skepticism toward governmental processes and distrust of state service centers discouraged many Ukrainians from enlisting in the military. To address these concerns, the Ukrainian government modernized recruitment procedures by enabling online completion of administrative steps and permitting direct brigade recruitment, allowing volunteers to join units of their choosing rather than being randomly assigned. This approach also enabled the development of innovative recruitment strategies and marketing techniques. Brigades that demonstrated strong unit cohesion, treated soldiers well, and maintained lower casualty rates proved most successful in attracting volunteers.⁴⁹ Conversely, recruitment initiatives that violated aspects of Ukrainian identity frequently provoked social backlash. For example, in 2025, the Ukrainian government released an advertising campaign targeting 18–24-year-olds that emphasized financial incentives by illustrating how many

⁴⁵ Gilbert W. Merckx, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 13–33, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.20231402001>; and SgtMaj Boerre Langum, "Adapt, Lead, Win: NCO Lessons from Ukraine," *NCO Journal* (October 2024).

⁴⁶ Maksym Kalnyk, "Скільки Жінок в ЗСУ: Актуальна Статистика 2025 Року Та Історичний Огляд," *Nfront*, 22 November 2025.

⁴⁷ "Понад 5 500 Жінок Сьогодні Служать На Передовій—Сергій Мельник," Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 8 March 2026.

⁴⁸ "Понад 5 500 Жінок Сьогодні Служать На Передовій—Сергій Мельник."

⁴⁹ "«Людині Треба Дати Впевненість у Собі»: Як Третя Штурмова Білецького Рекрутує Добровольців" ["People Need to Be Given Confidence in Themselves": How Biletsky's Third Assault Recruits Volunteers], *TSN*, 8 November 2024.

cheeseburgers could be purchased with the enlistment bonus.⁵⁰ While financial motivation is vital to motivate recruits, this materialistic framing contradicts the Ukrainian ideological framing of military service as a sacred duty, prompting widespread public criticism.

Despite implementing NATO standards and modernizing Ukrainian military equipment, at the start of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian military still faced shortages of adequate gear and weaponry, further exacerbated by the need to equip hundreds of thousands of recruits. In this critical moment, when even supplying basic gear like uniforms became a challenge, the Ukrainian society quickly mobilized to take on a leading role in areas where the government lacked capacity and activity. The established civic initiatives and volunteer organizations not only supplied basic gear but also acquired sophisticated, expensive equipment, from drones to heavy military machinery. One of the most prominent stories is the People's Satellite project, by which a charity foundation raised funds to purchase the satellite, which was donated to the Ukrainian Defence Intelligence directorate.⁵¹ Ukrainian cultural predispositions toward self-organization and civic duty proved instrumental to these efforts, revealing national identity as the fundamental driver of voluntary civic engagement that prompted Ukrainian citizens to volunteer, donate funds to support their armed forces, and establish organizations to manage these efforts.

Psychological Resilience

Psychological factors are an important aspect of national resolve, incorporating morale, leadership, sense of purpose, motivation, and national determination. Cognitive resilience equips nations and their armed forces to withstand protracted conflicts, overcome material disadvantages, and achieve victory against larger adversaries. Ukrainian psychological will to fight was rooted in and heavily influenced by Ukrainian identity. The Ukrainian perception of the war as an existential conflict against the “other,” imperial aggressor, combined with hope for a prosperous European future following victory, motivated Ukrainian civilians and troops to endure the brutal war conditions.⁵² Though devastating, Ukrainians accept power outages, deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure by Russia, and substantial casualties as necessary costs of resistance, recognizing that surrendering and a subsequent Russian occupation represent a far worse option, characterized by mass atrocities and genocidal violence evident in liberated territories.

The policy initiatives and communication campaigns thus integrated as-

⁵⁰ “Контракт 18-24 [Contract 18-24],” Ministry of Defense of Ukraine [@ministry_of_defense_ua], TikTok post, 20 March 2025.

⁵¹ “People's Satellite,” Prytula Foundation, 18 August 2022.

⁵² Wilson, “Ukraine at War.”

pects of Ukrainian identity, including its social purpose, relational comparisons, and cognitive model, to build Ukrainian cognitive resilience before the full-scale invasion through paramilitary-patriotic education and to reinforce it as the conflict began through strategic communication and information campaigns.

Paramilitary and patriotic education became one of the foundational aspects of the Ukrainian national defense strategy. Building national resilience was among the primary objectives of Ukrainian paramilitary-patriotic education, as it was integrated into Ukrainian secondary education.⁵³ Additionally, grant funding was allocated to nongovernmental organizations working on national-patriotic education and the affirmation of the Ukrainian national and civil identity of youth, allowing for self-organization and detachment of the government from such efforts in accordance with Ukrainian constitutive norms.⁵⁴ Paramilitary and patriotic education was deeply grounded in appeals to Ukrainian history, culture, and identity, with its integral mission being the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation and strengthening the level of contestation over identity markers in Ukrainian society.

The Ukrainian government and civic initiatives have conducted a variety of information campaigns that appeal to aspects of Ukrainian identity to reinforce the Ukrainian psychological will to fight, both at the national and military unit levels. Ukrainian government officials and President Volodymyr Zelensky frequently referenced Ukrainian historical struggles and the fight for self-determination, positioned Russians as the “other,” emphasized the existential nature of the battle for survival, and appealed to a sense of duty to the nation in their addresses to Ukrainians. For example, “Slava Ukraini” (Glory to Ukraine), a historic greeting used by Ukrainian resistance fighters in the twentieth century, became widely adopted in government and military communication, serving as a slogan that reinforced the historical legacy of Ukrainian resistance.⁵⁵

However, several governmental strategies failed to achieve their objectives because they conflicted with core elements of Ukrainian identity. For example, the 24-hour news marathon “Єдині новини #УАразом” (Single News #UA-together), which was established to ensure the Ukrainian information security at the start of the war, failed to gain credibility among the Ukrainian public due

⁵³ Ivan Beh et al., *З Україною в Серці (Тренінг з Патріотичного Виховання Дітей Та Молоді): Посібник [With Ukraine in the Heart (Training on Patriotic Education of Children and Youth): Manual]*, no. 2 (Національна академія педагогічних наук України, Інститут проблем виховання, 2016), 140.

⁵⁴ “Проект Державного Бюджету України 2024: Фінансування Молоді і Спорту Збільшать Удвічі” [Draft State Budget of Ukraine 2024: Funding for Youth and Sports Will Double], Parliament of Ukraine, 18 September 2023.

⁵⁵ “Про Внесення Змін До Деяких Законів України Щодо Вітання ‘Слава Україні!— Героям Слава!’: Закон України № 2587-VIII,” Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 4 October 2018.

partly to the civic distrust in government-led communication channels, with more Ukrainians getting their news and updates through civic-led Telegram channels.⁵⁶

The Ukrainian civic initiatives took on a leading role in informing and boosting the morale of Ukrainian society during the initial stages of the Russian invasion. Telegram channels became a primary source of updates for many Ukrainians, and it was primarily in cyberspace that Ukrainian civic activists and social groups ran information campaigns to boost morale and psychological resilience. By dissecting these social media and information campaigns, clear patterns in their foundation in Ukrainian identity emerge, which framed the war narrative and mobilized society. Even unconventional tools such as memes appealed to Ukrainian heroism by referencing historical struggle, mocked Russian leadership, in part through a type of relational comparison, and used self-irony to reflect on governmental shortcomings and build cohesion and unity.⁵⁷

These governmental and civic efforts greatly influenced the Ukrainian psychological will to fight. By appealing to and being grounded in aspects of Ukrainian identity, policy initiatives and communication campaigns not only resonated more with Ukrainian society to reinforce its will to fight but also bolstered the level of contestation over the content of national identity. As a result, at the national level, society became more resilient in the face of war conditions, more engaged in supporting the military, and more tolerant of government-imposed restrictions. At the military unit level, it boosted soldiers' morale and cohesion, though the effects have waned as the war dragged on and army reforms have not been adequately implemented.

Ideological Conviction

Ideological convictions transcend material calculations, grounded in political or religious belief systems that imbue the struggle with more profound significance and motivate the nation and its troops by situating their fight within a larger historical or moral narrative. Grounded in ideology, a war becomes sacred as the nation fights not for mere political or economic gains, but for a higher purpose. Religious conquests or expansive and imperialist political ideologies are often brought up as examples of ideologies that motivate people to stand till the end. The Russian ideological convictions based on its imperialist past, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Soviet Union's WWII legacy are well

⁵⁶ N. Syvak, "Politics by Other Memes: Ukrainian Memetic Warfare During the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Journal of Information Warfare* 24, no. 3 (2025): 65–88.

⁵⁷ Syvak, "Politics by Other Memes: Ukrainian Memetic Warfare During the Russo-Ukrainian War."

researched.⁵⁸ However, an ideology rooted in national spirit and the fight for national identity is often overlooked, especially in Ukrainians' ideological convictions during the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Ukrainians view their war against Russia as a fight for their collective identity, incorporating their culture, language, and the right to self-determination. The goal goes beyond the Ukrainian victory over its adversary. It is seen as a continuation of a century-long struggle of the Ukrainian nation to free itself from the grasp of the so-called "Russian world" and "return to Europe" as its social purpose.⁵⁹ This serves as the foundation of the Ukrainian ideological conviction—a sacred fight passed down through generations and a pursuit of a long-awaited, hard-earned future. In this fight, Ukrainian troops often associate themselves with Cossacks and UPA freedom fighters, fighting against an imperialist enemy in the final war for national survival.⁶⁰

This war goes beyond the battlefield, as Ukrainians are actively detaching from the so-called "Russian world" culturally, religiously, historically, and linguistically. De-Russification, de-Communization, and decolonization became important aspects of this fight, as the Ukrainian government and civic initiatives are implementing policies, information campaigns, and cultural initiatives to promote Ukrainian national identity separate from Russian imperial and Soviet legacies. This ideological struggle is rooted in Ukrainian patriotism and historical legacy, having an immense influence on the Ukrainian will to fight.

The Lessons Learned

Several nations are currently under threat of a potential invasion by a major power, including the Baltic states, Poland, and Taiwan. While these states are small and lack a conventional numerical military advantage over their potential adversaries, building a resilient population and its will to fight could not only bolster their military capacity in the event of war but also deter a potential aggressor from invading. How can the lessons learned from Ukraine's will to fight be applied in other countries, and what are the broader implications of the study of Ukrainian identity as an aspect of its will to fight?

Many states have already implemented military reforms using the Ukrainian experience during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Estonia and Poland have developed their Territorial Defense Forces and successfully implemented the Ukrainian

⁵⁸ Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

⁵⁹ Wilson, "Ukraine at War."

⁶⁰ Volodymyr Viatkovych, "Чому Український Націоналізм Потрібен Україні Та Світу?," *Ukrinform*, 18 June 2022.

example.⁶¹ Lithuania, Latvia, and Sweden are reintroducing conscription, modernizing it to reflect the demands and challenges of the twenty-first century.⁶² Besides military reforms, NATO states have also integrated lessons drawn from the civilian components, with Sweden assessing and developing initiatives to foster the participatory culture of Ukraine's war effort in its society, Poland and Finland integrating paramilitary and preparedness training into the school curriculum, and EU countries, more broadly, integrating the Ukrainian experience into their civic resilience-building.⁶³ Nevertheless, it is even more important not just to copy the Ukrainian example, but to understand why such measures were successful and the underlying foundation of the Ukrainian will to fight.

The Ukrainian identity plays a crucial role in its determination to fight, as demonstrated by the fierce Ukrainian resistance against Russian forces. The collective nature of Ukrainian society, a sense of duty and obligation toward the country, the notion of a war of survival, and the fight against the "other" as aspects of Ukrainian identity had a tremendous effect on the Ukrainian ability to resist the invasion. The impact of Ukrainian identity was prominent at the military unit, organizational, and national levels across the physical, psychological, and ideological realms. The Ukrainian government and civil society capitalized on aspects of Ukrainian identity by developing policies and approaches grounded in identity's foundations and by fostering prominent traits to bolster Ukrainian resilience.

Examining national identity as a dimension of will to fight reveals three main conclusions about national identity and its resilience. First, identifying prominent aspects of national identity is a critical part of evaluating a nation's will to fight. Analyses often neglect the cultural and ideological dimensions, but an evaluation of identity aspects reveals national potential and helps explain social resilience. Second, national identity considerations should be incorporated into the development of national security and defense policies and approaches. The example of Ukraine shows the value of capitalizing on identity features, but it also illustrates how neglecting them can lead to policy failures. Third, a high level of contestation in society over the content of identity reinforces

⁶¹ Thorir Gudmundsson, "10,000 Reservists Hone Their Skills during Estonia's Biggest Military Training," NATO Multinational Corps Northeast, 12 October 2023; and Waldemar Skrzypczak, "Poland's Territorial Defence Force—Its Role, Significance and Tasks," Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 10 April 2017.

⁶² Štěpánka Štastníková, "Rethinking Conscription: The Scandinavian Model," Security Outlines, 13 July 2023.

⁶³ Eric Adamson and Jason Moyer, "In from the Cold: Rebuilding Sweden's Civil Defense for the NATO Era," *War on the Rocks*, 9 April 2024; Alicja Ptak, "Poland to Add Civil Defence Elements to School PE Classes," Notes From Poland, 12 March 2025; Veronika Slakaityte and Izabela Surwillo, "Strengthening Civil Preparedness in the Baltic Sea Region," Danish Institute for International Studies, 29 August 2025; and *War in Ukraine: Lessons Identified and Learned* (Prague, Czech Republic: European Values Center for Security Policy, 2023).

its elements and results in a strong national will to fight. After identifying the critical aspects of national identity for resilience-building, states should focus on strategic communication, awareness campaigns, and educational reforms to strengthen the level of contestation and capitalize on these aspects.

As most analyses of national defense capabilities and resilience primarily focus on material aspects of warfare, further research is needed on the topic of identity and will to fight. Each nation has its unique elements, and by understanding and considering its strong and weak identity factors, a more well-rounded resilience-building strategy can be developed to ensure a coherent national defense policy and deter potential invasion.