

The Challenges of Wartime Polling in Ukraine

At the core of every conflict lies a paradox: political elites claim to be acting on behalf of the people, but violence means that measuring public opinion is incredibly challenging. This is evident today in Ukraine. Given the challenges posed by Russia's war in Ukraine, how reliable are wartime polls?

By Kit Rickard

In all wars, politicians and military leaders—be they formal state militaries or fragmented insurgent networks—claim to be acting on behalf of their supporters. They justify their acts, legitimize their use of violence, and pursue wartime objectives by leaning heavily on the will of their constituents. Today, this is clearly visible in war-ravaged Ukraine.

While there are fundamental differences between the political regimes in Ukraine and Russia, political elites on both sides of this war claim to be pursuing goals that align with the will of the Ukrainian people. Even Russian President Vladimir Putin, in what is now his infamous predawn speech of 21 February 2022, claimed that it was the “aspirations, the feelings, and pain” of people in Ukraine that led his state to recognize the independence of the so-called People's Republics in the Donbas.

This poses an important challenge for the international community, policymakers, and practitioners. How can we know what the Ukrainian people really want? How reliable are efforts to collect public opinion data during conflict? How can we, as onlookers, reconcile conflicting claims?

The preferences of the Ukrainian people are likely to come into sharper focus over the next months and years as they and their Western backers begin to show signs of



A woman at a polling station during a presidential election in the village of Kosmach, Ukraine in March 2019. *Kacper Pempel / Reuters*

wartime fatigue. While wartime polls continue to show high levels of support for Ukraine's continued resistance to Russian aggression, recent polls suggest that support is decreasing. This is to be expected as the human costs of the war increase every day.

Beyond Ukraine, the UK recently committed a further 3.2 billion USD of aid, which includes humanitarian, financial, and military support. However, US

President Joe Biden's plan to send a further 60 billion USD is being held up by Republicans in the US Congress. Furthermore, contestation is simmering between Ukraine and some of its staunchest allies. As recently as December 2023, Ukraine and Poland committed to resolve “problematic” issues, including a protest blockade of several border crossings by Polish truck drivers. This protest caused bottlenecks for vital military supplies to the frontline in Ukraine.

The external dimension of the Ukrainian war is crucial. Partly to avoid direct military escalation with Russia, Western backers are providing enough military support for Ukraine to survive the war, but not to win it. This became abundantly clear during the much-touted but largely unsuccessful counteroffensive in 2023. Debates around the quantity and quality of military aid to Ukraine will in part hinge on the will of the Ukrainian people, especially in terms of their appetite to continue fighting and, ultimately, what would be an acceptable outcome of the conflict.

This piece presents three challenges in collecting public opinion data during war. Combined, these challenges caution against the naïve interpretation of surveys and call for heightened awareness from those who consume polling data.

Public Opinion in Ukraine

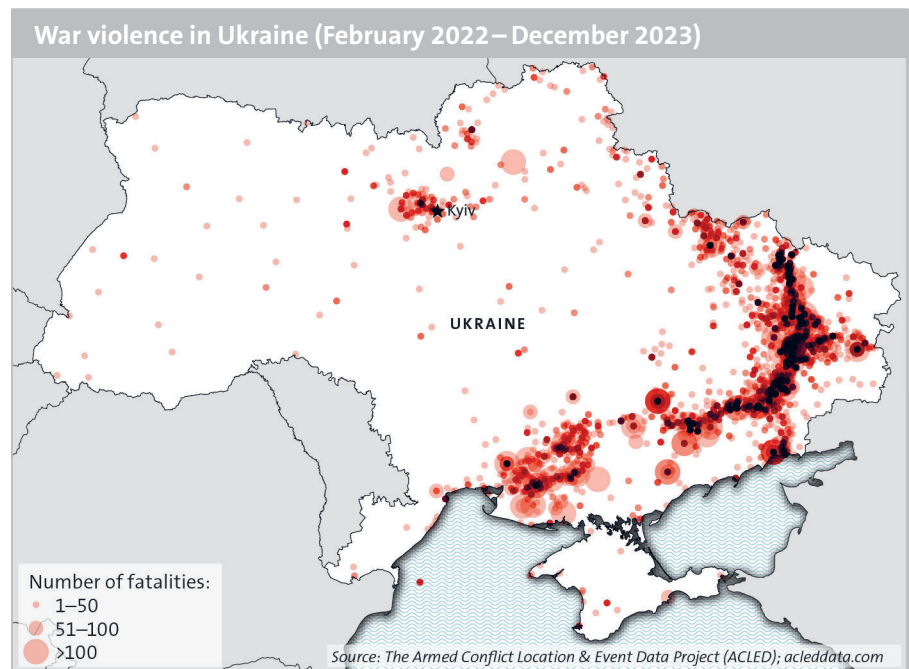
Popular support is an important resource for states fighting wars. Authoritarian states such as Russia can restrict the media landscape and employ repressive tactics to foster public support. Democracies, on the other hand, must justify the human and economic costs to their electors.

Public opinion has already played an important role in Russia's war in Ukraine. First, Russia's aggression in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in February 2022 caused rally-around-the-flag behavior among Ukrainians. The unified Ukrainian opposition surprised many. Their ability to resist and repel Russia's attempt to topple

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Kyiv in February 2022 was testament to the will and resistance of the Ukrainian people. The patriotism of Ukrainians and their support for their leader Volodymyr Zelensky were underestimated by Putin on the eve of his "Special Military Operation." Western experts who predicted a swift Ukrainian defeat made the same error.

Second, Ukrainian public opinion has become an important tool in how both sides justify their war aims. For example, writing for the *Washington Post* in January 2023, former UK prime minister Boris Johnson claimed that support for NATO membership in Ukraine was "stratospheric." To justify the process of admitting Ukraine to NATO, Johnson cited a poll conducted in October 2022 where 83 per cent of



Ukrainian respondents claimed that they would support membership in a referendum. This poll was one of many that registered historic highs in support for NATO membership in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion.

In September 2022, Russia held referenda in occupied Ukrainian territory. According to Amnesty International, the votes "took place at gunpoint in the presence of Russian soldiers and their proxies." They were also largely considered illegal by the international community. The official Russian results were that over 90 per cent of the participating electorates in the oblasts of Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhzhia had voted to join the Russian Federation. On Telegram, the former prime minister and president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, claimed that "the results are clear. Welcome home, to Russia!" Writing on the same platform in May 2022, Medvedev claimed that his country "doesn't care about [the] G7's non-recognition of the new borders [of Ukraine]; what matters is the true will of the people living there."

Why Public Opinion Matters

Why conduct referenda that are not taken seriously by most Western observers? There are military reasons. As consequence of the results, Western support to Ukraine is no longer only being used against Russian

military forces operating in foreign lands but also in places that Russia claims as its own. This increases the risks of conflict escalation and deters further Western support. The referenda are also useful for Russia domestically. Russia uses these "results" to foster domestic support for an increasingly costly war. Ultimately, the purported will of people living under occupation serves to justify Russia's war aims.

But polling during war is important beyond its usefulness to those on the opposing sides. For the international community, wartime polls perform two important roles. First, wartime polls are used to estimate humanitarian needs, optimize the provision of aid, and tailor responses by actors who aim to relieve the suffering of the civilian population. For example, the United Nations' International Organization for Migration conducts surveys to assess the needs of internally displaced persons and estimate the demand for humanitarian assistance. Without reliable estimates derived from wartime polls, aid would struggle to reach the people and places that need it most, and this could ultimately cost lives.

Second, and the primary focus of this report, surveys allow the international community to monitor public preferences and attitudes towards war goals. While both needs- and opinion-based surveys are affected by challenges central to wartime

polling, these challenges are especially manifest when it comes to conducting public opinion polling. This article outlines key challenges facing public opinion polling which will grow in importance as the Russia-Ukraine war enters its third year and the preferences of Ukrainian people come into sharper focus.

Where Do Enumerators Have Access?

The first challenge that those conducting public opinion polls face is the question of access. There are three characteristics of war that reduce access. First, there are often areas controlled by armed groups that refuse access to pollsters. This is the case in Ukraine where pollster do not have access to approximately one fifth of the country that is under Russian occupation at the time of writing.

Second, people flee conflict and become hard to reach. The historic movement of people within and beyond Ukraine's borders since 2022 means that polls in the country are less likely to include some Ukrainians. Refugees—displaced people who have fled conflict across international borders—are particularly difficult to survey. In the war in Ukraine, we must also not ignore the significant number of people who were forced to go or who voluntarily fled to Russia.

Third, polling is often not possible in areas where there is active fighting due to the risk posed to the enumerators who physically collect surveys. In Ukraine, this problem was particularly evident during 2022. As this phase of the conflict matured into its second year, an increasingly static front line developed and violence became more localized. Nevertheless, the task of

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collecting survey data remains difficult across Ukraine due to continued Russian ariel attacks.

In sum, enumerators' limited access means that all surveys in Ukraine today suffer from under-coverage, where survey samples lack representation from some groups in the population.

Under-coverage becomes particularly problematic for public opinion polls about

war support when those excluded from surveys have preferences that differ from those who can participate. There is a regional divide within Ukraine. Historically, people in the eastern and southern parts of the country tended to be more sympathetic towards Russia, while those in the west were more Western-oriented. Recent research found that this divide became less salient between 2014 and 2022 as Ukrainians adopted a more civic national identity. Nevertheless, due to under-coverage, no survey can currently represent the views of all Ukrainians, many of whom are displaced or living under Russian occupation. This situation is made particularly problematic because Russia's occupation is in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine (as is made apparent by the areas covered by the larger clusters of fatalities depicted on p.2). Therefore, respondents from these regions, along with their current preferences and the extent to which they differ from those of others in the country, are largely excluded from surveys. There is no solution to the under-coverage caused by Russia's occupation. All polls conducted in Ukraine, including those cited by former prime ministers, suffer from this problem.

A second issue emerges in areas where pollsters do have access—the refusal to take part. It is common that people refuse to participate in surveys, and this is known as unit nonresponse. In fact, research shows that refusal is growing across the globe, and polling companies are increasingly resorting to financial inducements to boost participation rates.

Unit nonresponse is problematic if the reasons for refusal are related to the topic of the survey, which can lead to unit nonresponse bias. For instance, take the example of a survey interested in the views of people with a low income. If people belonging to this income group are less likely to take part in the survey, this could skew the results. The same can also be true in conflict contexts. Consider the example of Ukrainians who oppose NATO membership. If, due to Russia's war in Ukraine, they are less inclined to participate in surveys about NATO accession, this could skew the results. In this example, estimates derived from a survey could suggest that support for NATO membership is higher than it actually is.

Assessing the impact of unit nonresponse is difficult. Generally, surveys are used to

Definitions

Under-coverage: When part of the population is excluded from the study sample.

Unit nonresponse bias: When people who refuse to take part in a study are systematically different from those who participate.

Item nonresponse: When a person takes part in a study and responds to some but not all questions.

Social desirability: The tendency to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others.

collect data from many individuals at one point in time. Surveys with the same respondents at several points in time are less common. It is unethical to compile data on people who refuse to take part in a study. Therefore, when someone refuses to be part of a survey, enumerators only record that an individual did not wish participate. Pollsters then rely on overall participation rates to assess how unit nonresponse changes over time. This is the case for the Levada Centre, one of the few reputable survey firms in Russia. Their overall participation rates have not changed significantly. Therefore, this indicates that unit nonresponse is probably not having a drastic effect on the results of their surveys.

However, the surveys may have involved varying levels of participation by the different groups that exist within the population. For instance, war may cause some people to refuse to take part while others accept to take part more. If this were the case, overall participation statistics would show, on average, an insignificant change in overall participation rate.

What Opinions Are Recorded?

Finally, even when respondents take surveys, wartime often aggravates common issues faced by those conducting polls. The first issue is item nonresponse, which relates to when respondents refuse to answer a question or respond that they “don't know” the answer. High levels of item nonresponse could indicate that a question is sensitive. The second issue is preference falsification, where respondents answer questions in a way that does not reflect their true preferences.

Why do people refuse to answer certain questions or falsify their preferences? There

are a host of reasons. For item nonresponse, common explanations include survey questions being unclear or that respondents lack knowledge on a specific topic. The latter is particularly likely when questions pertain to topics that may require special-

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ized knowledge. Item nonresponse and preference falsification are also aggravated by respondents' attempts to portray themselves in a positive light, which is known as social desirability bias.

Social desirability bias is particularly pronounced in wartime polls because of a perceived risk of punishment. Respondents may avoid answering politically sensitive questions or provide responses that align with what they think is socially acceptable. For example, in Ukraine, those who favor non-alignment may nevertheless state that they support NATO due to social desirability.

Steps Forward

What can be done in light of these challenges?

First, there is no panacea for under-coverage. Therefore, when it comes to Ukraine, anyone reading about levels of support for NATO membership or war aims must recognize that a sizeable population is excluded from surveys. Researchers have a duty to communicate the uncertainties that may be inherent in their work. However, consumers of surveys must also be attentive to the quality of polling research and how statistics can be taken out of context.

Second, existing research suggests that unit nonresponse bias is currently not having a

large effect on polling in Ukraine. However, it is important to remain aware of this challenge as the situation may change.

Finally, there are new survey techniques that can overcome biases caused by item nonresponse and preference falsification. When applied correctly, these methods can provide more accurate statistics. The methods often rely on some form of randomization. This is similar to medical trials where, for example, patients are randomly split into groups, with some receiving a new drug and some receiving a placebo. In the case of surveys, this approach commonly comes in the form of different formulations of the survey question. The differences between how both groups answer the question can then provide an accurate measure on sensitive issues such as NATO membership. While these techniques may be the way forward, they are costly to implement and rarely employed in public opinion polls.

Conclusion

In sum, public opinion is crucial during war. In Ukraine, the will of the Ukrainian people was crucial in resisting Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Political elites on both sides of the conflict now claim to be acting on behalf of the people of Ukraine. The Ukrainian people and the Western alliance that is supporting Ukrainians is starting to show signs of wartime fatigue. The will of those most affected by this brutal conflict will be central to discussions around the provision of military support and an acceptable end to the war.

Considering this, it is important for policymakers and practitioners to approach public opinion data with caution. For the reasons outlined here—including issues related to under-coverage, unit and item nonresponse, and preference falsification—there are high levels of uncertainty around public

Further Reading

Dominique Arel / Jesse Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*, (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Janina Dill / Marnie Howlett / Carl Müller-Crepon, "At Any Cost: How Ukrainians Think about Self-Defense Against Russia," *American Journal of Political Science* ajps.12832 (2023).

Onuch Olga / Henry E. Hale, "Capturing Ethnicity: the Case of Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34:2–3 (2018), pp. 84–106.

Kit Rickard et al., *Polling During War: Challenges and Lessons from Ukraine*, (Helsinki: UNU-WIDER, 2023).

Bryn Rosenfeld, "Survey Research in Russia: In the Shadow of War," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39:1–2 (2023) pp. 38–48.

opinion in Ukraine. It is incumbent on pollsters and researchers to employ methods that overcome these limitations and to be transparent around levels of uncertainty. However, consumers of polling results can also help themselves by treating such information with a healthy dose of skepticism.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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