

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Youth in Ukraine before the War

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July 2022



The election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019 as president of Ukraine was a particularly important watershed moment in Ukrainian politics for young people. His electoral support was highest in the 18 to 29 age group and Zelenskyy symbolised a new beginning after the disappointing political developments of the previous decades.



Young Ukrainians express a strong sense of national identity referring to their country's departure from a Soviet mentality, a distinct linguistic identity and an explicit rejection of Russian influence.



Since February 2022, notably, the younger generation has been involved in various support activities. Young people are participating as soldiers and are organising support behind the frontline.



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# FOREWORD

The nationwide poll »Youth of Ukraine 2017« conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the New Europe Center in cooperation with the sociological company GfK Ukraine was one of the first and most comprehensive attempts to understand and assess the sentiments of Ukrainian youth not only in recent years, but perhaps also for the entire period of Ukraine's independence.

For 2022, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung had originally emphasized another comprehensive quantitative and qualitative survey in Ukraine in order to draw a comparison with the 2017 study: Did the trends emerging in 2017, which range from a longing for further political change and reforms following Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, a desire for a stronger fight against corruption, a stronger reflection and re-orientation on the Ukrainian nationality, culture and language, an increasing desire to join the EU and NATO and a softening of conservative values towards a more open society continue or follow another direction? What distinguishes today's Ukrainian youth from the previous generation? What are their wishes, dreams, and values in the early 20s of the twenty-first century?

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has prevented this large-scale study for the moment. However, February 24<sup>th</sup> of 2022, will also mean a caesura, or turning point especially for young people in Ukraine, for sure the biggest since Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. The focus group interviews in Dnipro and Lviv, which could be carried out before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, already indicated this upcoming turning point. For this reason, we have decided to publish this paper based on the pre-war focus groups. A later, more extensive study will hopefully shed light on how the war has changed the perceptions and values of young Ukrainians, what hopes and wishes they have for the future, and also whether and how a future between Ukraine and Russia is even conceivable.

We hope that this paper will allow some conclusions to be drawn in the meantime and that we will soon be able to carry out the second comprehensive study, which will hopefully deepen the food for thought of this paper.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019 as president of Ukraine with more than 70 per cent of the vote was a watershed moment in Ukrainian politics, in particular for young people. Zelenskyy's electoral support was highest in the 18 to 29 age group, ranking at around 80 per cent. For many young people, Zelenskyy's election as Ukrainian president symbolised a new beginning after the disappointing political developments of the previous decades, developments which led to an extremely low level of trust in most state institutions, notably among the young.
- This report studies the political and social attitudes of young people expressed in eight focus groups conducted with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in October 2021. The views expressed by the more than 60 young participants shed important light on attitudes among the younger generation and its outlook on Ukrainian politics, helping us to think about the social and political atmosphere that underpins the remarkable endurance of the Ukrainian population in the face of Russian aggression, and to appreciate the profound changes that have occurred in Ukrainian society since February 2022. To what extent did young people expect such an escalation and support or feel alienated by their government before the war? What relationship to Ukraine did they articulate?
- Since February 2022, notably, the younger generation has been involved in various activities in support of Ukraine. Young people are participating as soldiers and are among those organising support behind the front-line. Although too early to be determined, it is expected that the experience of war will have profoundly changed their relationship with Ukraine – the discussions from late 2021 illuminate the expectations and fears of young people, views which will inform their interpretation of the ongoing war and its aftermath.
- Young Ukrainians express a strong sense of national identity across the focus groups. They explain their sense of belonging to Ukraine with reference to their country's departure from a Soviet mentality, a distinct linguistic identity, and an explicit rejection of Russian influence. For the young participants, Ukraine's relationship with Russia had already been shattered before the end of 2021. The war in Donbas and the 2014 annexation of Crimea were omnipresent in the focus group discussions, and the young expressed great resentment when discussing these topics. Meanwhile, young Ukrainians see themselves as unambiguously part of Europe. This involves an appreciation of a European mentality and of European values, alongside expectations relating to socioeconomic development and national security. Young people also state their desire to become part of the European Union.
- In late 2021, young people's high expectations of Zelenskyy's presidency had not been fulfilled. While some of the participants in the focus groups praise the president, young people, in general, insist that their country's political institutions are dysfunctional, and complain in particular about the everyday reality of corruption they face. The military is the most positively discussed institution, reflecting the high level of trust in the military repeatedly shown by opinion polls.
- Young Ukrainians consider informal political engagement to be useful. They express a sense of being involved in the public sphere and show a desire for their fellow citizens to become active in the political and social realm. Civic engagement is discussed approvingly, as are political protests.

# YOUTH IN UKRAINE BEFORE THE WAR

## INTRODUCTION

Today's youth in Ukraine may still have grown up under the shadow of communism; however, many of those who were born after 1991 self-consciously position themselves in opposition to the Soviet heritage, instead, looking to their country's future as a sovereign European country. For today's young population, the 2014 Euromaidan, as well as the protests and violence that accompanied it, was a politically defining moment. In their view, this event symbolised Ukraine's exit from the post-Soviet sphere of gravity, even if this meant the loss of Crimea and an ongoing war in parts of Donbas.

With the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the hope for a future as a politically modern European country has been derailed. Just as the uncertainties faced by young and old since early 2020 as a result of Covid-19 were about to give way to a new normal, the full-scale war has raised the level of uncertainty for Ukrainians to an unprecedented level. Young people in transition from education to labour market or in the early stages of their career are undoubtedly the most severely affected by the current war.

This publication is part of the FES International Youth Studies series. The FES has conducted numerous youth studies across the globe since 2009. As of 2018, Youth Studies concentrate on Southern Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Central Europe, and the Baltic States. Additional studies are planned for the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as for specific nations around the world. The International Youth Studies are a flagship project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in its efforts to research, shape, and strengthen the democracy of the future.

This perspective draws on eight focus group discussions conducted among young people aged 14 to 29 in the two cities of Dnipro and Lviv in late October 2021.<sup>1</sup> Each group had eight participants, equally split between the sexes.

The groups in Eastern Ukrainian Dnipro were moderated by a native Russian speaker, and those in Western Ukrainian Lviv by a Ukrainian speaker based on a very detailed questionnaire developed by a team of researchers in close consultation with FES. The questionnaire itself included prompts for the moderator to stimulate the discussion if required, and a number of visuals were used to facilitate the discussions with young people.

The discussions opened with an exchange over how young people assess the management of the coronavirus in their country to then explore the perception of domestic politics and the state of democracy, social inequality, views on the Soviet Union's collapse, and belonging to Europe. The group discussions were fully transcribed, then coded and analysed in MAXQDA using an extensive coding scheme designed by the researchers. The following discussion contextualises the focus groups within their wider political and social context in Ukraine. The analysis is cautious with its conclusions about the current situation given the extraordinary circumstances of the ongoing war. Rather, it hopes to contribute to our understanding of the attitudes in Ukraine that form the basis of the remarkable resistance of Ukrainian society in the face of the Russian onslaught.

## A SELF-CONSCIOUS NATIONAL IDENTITY

»70 YEARS OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME  
WILL TURN ANY NATION INTO CATTLE.«

Young Ukrainians have an overwhelmingly positive attitude to the Soviet Union's breakdown, one that mirrors the mostly critical attitude expressed by the general population.<sup>2</sup> The participants in the focus groups state that they strive to overcome a Soviet mentality, but stress that this is more easily said than done. For a 26-year-old programmer in Dnipro, »70 years of the communist regime will turn any nation into

<sup>1</sup> A complementary reading for the present analysis is a FES youth study on Ukraine, drawing on survey data from 2017 (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/13873.pdf>), and a comparative analysis including youth in Belarus and Russia (<https://www.fes.de/en/beitraege/comparative-study-youth-in-russia-ukraine-and-belarus>).

<sup>2</sup> Ukraine and Russia: Two Countries Whose Memories of a »Shared« Past Could Not Be More Different, The Conversation, 27.01.2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-and-russia-two-countries-whose-memories-of-a-shared-past-could-not-be-more-different-175570>

cattle. Now we have just begun to revive our culture, as most of what is Ukraine today used to be part of various European countries.« For this participant, Ukraine is clearly a European country, since it is composed of lands that were historically divided between various European powers, and the programmer welcomes the current government's attempts at articulating more clearly what it means to be part of the Ukrainian nation.<sup>3</sup>

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»I THINK IT'S GOOD  
THAT IT HAPPENED.  
ESPECIALLY UKRAINIANS  
WERE AFRAID TO LIVE  
IN THE SOVIET UNION.«

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Even if the younger participants lack, by definition, a first-hand experience of Soviet times and the Union's collapse, in both cities, they express a generally positive attitude to the independence gained by their country. A 15-year-old girl in Lviv, for instance, compares the Soviet times negatively to the generally higher level of social and political freedom and the possibility of expressing one's national identity in today's Ukraine, »I think it's good that it [the Soviet Union's breakdown] happened. Especially Ukrainians were afraid to live in the Soviet Union. To take the example of my great-grandfather, I can't say exactly what happened in those days, but when I hear stories from my relatives, I would say it's clearly good that now you don't need to be afraid to live as a Ukrainian national.«

Still, even the youngest respondents, born more than a decade after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, mention the endurance of a Soviet mentality. A 17-year-old in Dnipro remarks, »We probably have more of a Soviet than a European mentality. Look, for instance, at our lack of tolerance: if you wear different clothes, you're considered crazy.«

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»IT'S JUST UNPLEASANT  
WHEN RUSSIAN IS SPOKEN  
IN YOUR COUNTRY.«

»OUR GREAT-GRANDPARENTS  
FOUGHT FOR US TO LIVE FREELY  
AND SPEAK UKRAINIAN.«

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One of the most important markers of national independence has become the Ukrainian language. The desire to speak Ukrainian is closely linked with questions of identity

and national belonging, which participants discuss vigorously in Lviv.<sup>4</sup> The youngest participants in the focus groups in Lviv, when reflecting on their experience in educational institutions, mention the Ukrainisation of the curriculum and the increased visibility of Ukrainian in public life and the administrative sphere. A rejection of the Russian language is not uncommon in these groups. For a 16-year-old participant, for instance, »It's just unpleasant when Russian is spoken in your country.« And for a 15-year-old girl, one of the most important things for the government to focus on is, »more people speaking Ukrainian«, which another boy backs up, observing, »Our great-grandparents fought for us to live freely and speak Ukrainian.«

The sense of belonging to Ukraine strengthened noticeably in the aftermath of the Euromaidan, which some have even coined as the »birth« of a nation.<sup>5</sup> In July 2021, surveys found that an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians considered themselves to be patriots, with young people expressing a slightly higher sense of patriotism.<sup>6</sup> Despite important regional differences (self-identification as Ukrainian is lower among respondents in the eastern and southern regions), the trend for a growing civic self-identification with Ukraine is nationwide.

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»IT'S NECESSARY TO DEFEND  
THE RIGHTS OF UKRAINE.  
AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT  
NEEDS TO BE DONE WITH THE  
UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE:  
IT NEEDS TO BE MORE  
RESPECTED.«

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Participants in the focus group discussions express this strengthened national identity in both cities and across all age groups. Some of them express an essentialised view of who they are as Ukrainians and attach great importance to knowing their national history and culture. A 17-year-old student in Dnipro, when discussing the government's priorities, emphasises, in Russian, the need for »the preservation of our distinct national culture. Everyone should know where they come from. They can't feel part of our culture if they don't know themselves.« Similarly, a 17-year-old girl in Lviv explains in Ukrainian that the government's priority should be the strengthening of nationalism, »It's necessary to defend the rights of Ukraine. And that's exactly what needs to be done with the Ukrainian language: it needs to be more respected.«

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3 On Zelenskyi's emphasis on »civic identity«, see Zelenskyi's First Year in Office: Successes, Failures, and Outlook for the Future, Wilson Center, 28.05.2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/webcast-zelenskyi-first-year-office-successes-failures-and-outlook-future>

4 On the multi-ethnic history of Lviv, see Amar, Tarik Cyril. 2016. *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

5 Kulyk, Volodymyr. 2016. »National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War«. *Europe-Asia Studies* 68(4):588–608.

6 Kazhdyi desyaty v Ukraini na schytaet sebya patriotom, — opros, *Narodna Pravda*, 06.08.2021, <https://narodna-pravda.ua/ru/2021/08/06/kazhdyi-desyatyj-v-ukrayne-na-schytaet-sebya-patryotom-opros/>

When discussing the political priorities of the Ukrainian government, the emphasis on nourishing a distinct national identity is also prominent among older respondents who are no longer in the educational system. Mirroring findings in surveys, this view is particularly strong in Lviv. In the 25 to 29 age group, there is a consensus on the need for an awareness of a common national culture, »I want our people to become one state, rather than everyone being for themselves. Because if that's the case, there's no Ukraine.«

A 29-year-old Lviv-based tourism manager, who wants to become a tour guide in the Zakarpattia Oblast, links the sense of national identity with various symbols of the state and the idea that »in our hearts, we have something to be patriots about«. For him, not switching to Russian is an important way to express pride in his Ukrainian identity, complaining that »people come to us [...] and expect us to switch to Russian«. Instead, he claims that, »Ukrainians should be more patriotic and prioritise the Ukrainian people over foreigners.« Furthermore, a stronger national identity is thought to protect against territorial disintegration. A 29-year-old supermarket cashier remarks that, with a better developed national culture, »There would be no war in the East. [...] I would want there to be many more nationalists.«

The strong anti-Russian sentiment that is expressed in Lviv illustrates a lack of recognition of the bilingual reality of large parts of Ukraine. Residents beyond the Western regions of Ukraine are significantly more likely to identify as both Russian and Ukrainian speakers, a fact that has become a topic of political contention, notably when in April 2019 the Ukrainian parliament defined language as a security issue and made Ukrainian the compulsory language in all official administrative affairs.<sup>7</sup>

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»IT'S STUPID TO IMPOSE  
NATIONALISM ON OTHER  
PEOPLE. [...] I'M NOT A PATRIOT,  
BUT I LIVE IN UKRAINE.«

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In all focus groups, there was overarching support for a distinct Ukrainian identity; however, a few participants expressed doubts about the imposition of patriotism from above. A 17-year-old student in Dnipro, for example, critically remarks that, »patriotism is being imposed on us now. I'm inclined to believe that we are different people, that we have different tastes and views. [...] But if we restrict ourselves to borscht with pampushky patriotism, then we will limit ourselves regarding what we can become.« Such an idea of patriotism as being misguided and not shared is also expressed

by a 16-year-old girl in Dnipro, who stresses the importance of economic conditions, »It's stupid to impose nationalism on other people. [...] I'm not a patriot, but I live in Ukraine. And for me it's more important to have a free economy.«

## IN EUROPE AND PART OF THE WEST

The metaphor of Ukraine representing the heart of Europe resurfaced quickly after the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine – and without doubt, the heart is a crucial organ and deserves special protection.<sup>8</sup> Even if this idea is not prevalent among participants in the groups, they increasingly feel themselves to be part of Europe. While national and regional identities have remained overall more important for participants in the focus groups, a clear narrative of belonging to Europe can be identified among half of them, a view that is restricted neither to one of the two cities nor to a particular age group.

Being cut adrift from Europe, for some participants, would be an unnatural situation for Ukraine – a perspective that recalls the notion of a »return to Europe« that was so prevalent in the aftermath of the Cold War when talking about post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. This view is supported by respondents' rejection of the Soviet era, when Ukraine was excluded from Europe. A 29-year-old manager, for instance, speaks about the deep and important connection with Europe for which the Soviet Union was an obstacle, »The Soviet Union has slowed down our development completely. [...] We gave our resources and everything that we produced to Moscow. That's wrong, I think. As a result, we collapsed, and ever since, we have remained on the same level. As a result, Europe considers us to be a Third World country, despite the fact that we have always been part of Europe.«

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»WE'RE PART OF EUROPE.«

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And in the same group, a 26-year-old driver also states, »We're part of Europe«, referring later in the discussion to the possibility of travel and job opportunities. In the same vein, a 17-year-old girl in Lviv remarks, »We look up to them, we identify ourselves as being part of Europe.«

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»I CONSIDER MYSELF  
PART OF EUROPE.  
BUT THEN AGAIN, NOT QUITE.«

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<sup>7</sup> Public Perceptions in Flux: Identities, War, and Transnational Linkages in Ukraine, ZOIS Report, 06.12.2018, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/public-perceptions-in-flux-identities-war-and-transnational-linkages-in-ukraine>; Way, Lucan. 2019. »Ukraine's Post-Maidan Struggles: Free Speech in a Time of War«. *Journal of Democracy* 30(3):48–60.

<sup>8</sup> One example among many is a speech given by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen on 1 March 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_22\\_1483](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_1483)

On the other hand, two groups in Dnipro, a city that since 1991 has retained a much more pronounced Russian influence, discussed their lack of a European mentality. A 19-year-old student refers to the general culture and mentality in Dnipro when she observes, »The difference is in the people themselves; they [Europeans] are more inclined to enjoy the moment, and we postpone everything for later. This is due to the salary levels. We want to save up and enjoy ourselves at some later stage, in old age – but then it doesn't work.« And a 25-year-old chemist, contrasting Ukraine with Europe, states, »The mentality is not the same. [...] We, as a country, are boors. And Europe is tolerant.« Meanwhile, other participants express their uncertainties about where Ukraine stands in relation to Europe, mentioning the ambivalence resulting from the country's geographic position and multifaceted history. A 29-year-old secretary for a car dealer remarks, »I consider myself part of Europe. But then again, not quite. I have my doubts, even if there are already some improvements, such as an improvement in our living standards.«

As the last statement shows, young Ukrainians in the focus group associate their belonging to Europe with material well-being and the possibility of traveling to the Schengen Area without a visa. The material dimension is an important part of what Europe signifies, and a 22-year-old participant who works in the hotel business in Dnipro remarks, »We work to survive, and they work to enjoy life. They have no need to survive. They have higher salaries and they feel good about themselves.« Ukraine's accession to the EU is desirable for the overwhelming majority of focus group participants, with no significant difference between the two cities. In the general population, around 70 per cent indicated that they wanted Ukraine to become an EU member before February 2022,<sup>9</sup> a value that rose to nearly 90 per cent in May 2022 among the population in central and western Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

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### »WE'RE CONSIDERED THE GATEWAY TO EUROPE, POSITIONED BETWEEN ASIA AND [EUROPE].«

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As an alternative to the potentially abstract and broad sense of being part of Europe, a 17-year-old boy in Dnipro discusses the idea of a Central European identity and of Ukraine being a gateway between East and West, remarking, »We are a central European state. Historically, [...] we are no different from them [Europeans]. We are part of the same economic zones [...] and strategic partners.« For him, this was clearly an asset for Ukraine, as the country could function between

different cultural, political, and economic spheres, »We're considered the gateway to Europe, positioned between Asia and [Europe].«

But being a gateway is not necessarily a blessing. A 22-year-old computer engineer expresses his disappointment in the way Europe exploits Ukraine's strategic geopolitical situation while refusing its full integration, »It's beneficial for Europe if we aren't in the EU now. They see the aggression from Russia and they know they have a buffer between Europe and Russia. They sort of help, but without really doing so.«

Nevertheless, the idea of belonging to Europe does not go unchallenged, even if only a small minority of participants question this idea. One 15-year-old in Lviv, who sees Ukraine as not being a democracy and remarks that his parents think life in the USSR was better, is particularly pronounced in his views. He stresses Ukraine's deep roots in the East, and has a positive picture of Russia, »Geography is no indication for me personally. Because our state does not belong to Europe. And historically, we have always reached out to the East. Historically, our land has always been controlled by very different people, and that was normal, and nobody said it was bad.«

The higher standard of living in European countries sets a frustrating benchmark for young Ukrainians, one that reaffirms their perceived distance from Europe. This narrative is particularly pronounced in a discussion in Dnipro. Here, a 16-year-old girl states, »In Ukraine, we can't get what we could get abroad [referring to Europe]. And if you compare a life abroad and a life in Ukraine, then it's much more advantageous to live abroad.« And another 16-year-old in the same group points out that in Ukraine the »quality of life is bad«, complaining that Europe is primarily interested »in buying raw materials from us«.

With respect to the socioeconomic dimension, a 14-year-old boy in Lviv points out the close economic ties that exist between Ukraine and EU countries, in particular Poland. But he also thinks that Ukraine has not benefited from sending its better-qualified young people abroad, »We provide labour. Why do they say that Poland has become great? Because it was built by Ukrainians, and a lot of people have moved there.« The reality of Ukrainian labour in Poland is accompanied by an awareness of the difficulty of realising one's ambitions abroad. A 27-year-old engineer who works for a construction company and spent two years in Poland remarks, »I didn't succeed [in Poland], but I'm slowly realising my potential here.«<sup>11</sup>

In the discussions, an affirmation of Ukraine's belonging to Europe is linked with Ukraine's national emancipation and its recognition on the world stage. It is clearly impor-

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<sup>9</sup> Foreign Policy Orientations, Rating Group Ukraine, 17.02.2022, [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/dinamika\\_vneshnepoliticheskikh\\_orientatsiy\\_16-17\\_fevralya\\_2022.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/dinamika_vneshnepoliticheskikh_orientatsiy_16-17_fevralya_2022.html)

<sup>10</sup> How the War Changed the Way Ukrainians Think About Friends, Enemies, and the Country's Strategic Goals, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 30.05.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/how-the-war-changed-the-way-ukrainians-think-about-friends-enemies-and-the-countrys-strategic-goals>

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the migration dynamics between Poland and Ukraine, including the potential of return migration, see The Impact of Labour Migration on the Ukrainian Economy, European Commission, April 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp123\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/dp123_en.pdf)

tant – including for the youngest participants in the focus groups – that Ukraine is recognised as an actor in the international arena. A 14-year-old in Lviv expresses his satisfaction with the fact that the world has started to look at Ukraine, »I have to say that even while the coronavirus was spreading, we started to be mentioned. And just this year, while the pandemic continued, meetings and summits took place to which Ukraine was invited. The world has started to look at Ukraine and to pay attention. Everyone wants changes, and the pandemic changed our political world.«

## RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

The meaning of belonging to the Ukrainian nation has changed significantly over the last decade. One particularly noteworthy development, not only among the young, is an increased sense of alienation from Russia, including a conscious rejection of the Russian language, most pronounced in a city like Lviv. However, the development of a distinct understanding of their identity as Ukrainians did not mean that Ukrainians, in general, ceased speaking Russian, as the share of those using Russian in their everyday communication remains stable.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the war, however, a more conscious shift away from Russian can be observed also on the level of everyday communication, in particular among the younger population.<sup>13</sup>

When discussing Russia, the war that has been ongoing since 2014 has been the main focus across all groups in both cities. The profound distancing from everything Russian stands out clearly and acts as a catalyst for the reorientation of identity towards Ukraine. It is no surprise, therefore, that in Dnipro and Lviv, across the age groups, the narrative of two brotherly nations that the Russian side stresses is so thoroughly absent. The full-scale attack on Ukraine that Russia unleashed in February 2022 will have only exacerbated a trend that was already flagrant at the end of 2021, since the majority of Ukrainians in central and western regions blame the Russian leadership for the war.<sup>14</sup>

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»WITH THE MONEY WE USE FOR EVERYTHING THAT WE BUY FROM RUSSIA, WE SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR MILITARY STRUCTURES.«

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Young Ukrainians explain how their rejection of Russia is translated into an everyday practice, notably by refusing to buy Russian products. A 16-year-old boy in Dnipro, for example, remarks, »After the war started, I decided to exclude household items from the occupation regions. Because with the money we use for everything that we buy from Russia, we support the development of their military structures.« And a 20-year-old mentions that she has »stopped watching Russian television«. Similarly, several participants in Lviv mention that they have completely ceased buying Russian products as a conscious choice for Ukraine. A 24-year-old nurse in Lviv clarifies, »I prefer Ukrainian products. There are such things as Italian pasta, but I prefer to buy from Ukrainian producers, and everything Russian is excluded.«

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»THE [PEOPLE IN] POWER WHO SEEK RECONCILIATION WITH RUSSIA ARE, I THINK, A BIG PROBLEM, AT LEAST FOR ME AND FOR ALL THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE. I'M A NATIONALIST«

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The rejection of everything emanating from Russia is profound, and already before the escalation in February 2022, several young Ukrainians remark that they do not see any room for negotiation with Russia. An 18-year-old participant in Dnipro, when asked about the biggest problem facing his country, mentions »war and power. The [people in] power who seek reconciliation with Russia are, I think, a big problem, at least for me and for all the Ukrainian people. I'm a nationalist.« And one participant in Lviv says that he will leave Ukraine if the city falls under Russian control, »I would say that, if, God forbid, Ukraine is captured by Russia, I will leave quickly. [...] I don't want to have anything to do with them.«

In early February 2022, a plurality of 39 per cent of Ukrainians believed that a full-scale Russian invasion was very likely or inevitable.<sup>15</sup> The same poll also found that more than half of the Ukrainian respondents assisted the army either financially or by fighting themselves, and the number of young people age 29 or younger who supported

<sup>12</sup> Kulyk, Volodymyr. 2019. »Identity in Transformation: Russian-speakers in Post-Soviet Ukraine«. *Europe-Asia Studies* 71(1):156–178; see also *The Displaced Ukrainians: Who are they, and what do they think?*, ZöIS Report, 23.03.2017, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/the-displaced-ukrainians-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-think>

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, first reports such as *For Russian-Speaking Ukrainians, Language Clubs Offer Way to Defy Invaders*, *The New York Times*, 29.05.2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/29/world/europe/ukraine-russia-language.html>; *War impels many in Ukraine to abandon Russian language and culture*, *The Washington Post*, 12.04.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/12/ukrainians-abandon-russian-language/>

<sup>14</sup> In February 2022, 61 per cent of Ukrainians blamed the Russian leadership for being primarily responsible for the growing threat of war, 25 per cent blamed the Ukrainian and 20 per cent the US leadership. Blame for the Russian leaders was at 96 per cent in May 2022. See: *How the War Changed the Way Ukrainians Think About Friends, Enemies, and the Country's Strategic Goals*, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 30.05.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/how-the-war-changed-the-way-ukrainians-think-about-friends-enemies-and-the-countrys-strategic-goals>

<sup>15</sup> *No to Russia's Aggression: the Public Opinion of Ukrainians in February 2022*, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 22.02.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/no-to-russias-aggression-the-public-opinion-of-ukrainians-in-february-2022>

the armed forces was even 70 per cent. Moreover, the young people who expressed their opposition to Russian influence in Ukraine were prepared to put that resistance into practice and defend Ukraine.

## HOPES FOR DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Asked about their country's biggest achievements, several focus group participants mention the development of democracy in Ukraine after the 2014 Maidan demonstrations. Young Ukrainian participants affirm they voted in the last elections and that they believe their vote was a meaningful political act. Rare are the participants who see elections as pointless, such as a 17-year-old boy in Dnipro, who remarks, »Nobody believes in our elections. Everybody thinks they are rigged.«

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### »MR. ZELENSKY [...] IS A BEACON OF HOPE.«

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Participants in both cities are evenly split in their views on whether Ukraine is developing in the right direction. Surveys conducted in late 2021 found that the young generation had a more positive view of their country's development,<sup>16</sup> whereas 70 per cent of Ukrainians believed that, overall, things were heading in the wrong direction.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, even if, at the end of 2021, young people applauded the new political direction their country was taking, they had no illusions about Ukraine's persisting problems.

For most young Ukrainians, Zelenskyy remains different in every way from the hungry hordes of the old elites. A 25-year-old office manager in Dnipro stresses the more liberal political climate that Zelenskyy has brought to the country, and states with approval, »We can joke about our president.« A 17-year-old in Lviv expresses his hopes regarding the new president when mentioning the, »overpowering influence of the oligarchy« as one of the biggest problems facing Ukraine; for this participant, »Mr. Zelenskyy [...] is a beacon of hope.«

For more than two years following his election, Volodymyr Zelenskyy enjoyed unusual popularity. Between the election and the moment of the focus group discussions in late 2021, however, the general optimism associated with his arrival decreased.<sup>18</sup> His approval rating dropped from 33.3 per cent in

September 2021 to 24.7 per cent in October that same year, separated from Petro Poroshenko's approval rating by fewer than 10 percentage points. Nevertheless, at the end of 2021, Zelenskyy remained the most trusted politician in Ukraine, even if surveys found that 45 per cent trusted and 52 per cent did not trust him,<sup>19</sup> and his approval ratings were just under 30 per cent, although higher among the young.<sup>20</sup>

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### »WE HAVE NO STABILITY AT ALL AND NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE. EVERYTHING IS GETTING WEAKER. EVEN THE ECONOMY IS WEAKER.«

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The complexity of young Ukrainians' assessment of their country's leadership is echoed in the focus group discussions. Despite the positive baseline and general support for the changes that have occurred under Zelenskyy, by the end of 2021, young people had a long list of grievances. In the discussions, the older participants are decidedly more critical of their government than the other groups. A 29-year-old cashier in Lviv complains, »We have no stability at all and no confidence in the future. Everything is getting weaker. Even the economy is weaker.« The two focus groups with respondents aged 18 and older frequently criticise political institutions and, in particular, the management of the pandemic. A 19-year-old who works at a recreational resort complains, »We are called a democratic state, but this is the case only on paper. The government doesn't share anything with us. They decide everything themselves.« And a 16-year-old in Dnipro states that Ukraine is »far from being a democracy.«

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### »POLITICS AND PEOPLE ARE ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE BARRICADES.«

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The impression the participants have that there is no connection between society and the political elite, between those who govern and those who are governed, is a sign of the bitterness young people feel towards their political system. A 29-year-old salesperson in Dnipro complains, »Politics and people are on opposite sides of the barricades. Politicians should act for the people, but they act for themselves, and do very little for the people.«

<sup>16</sup> Pereyezd, politika i Instagram, zn.ua, 25.06.2021, <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/pereezd-politika-i-instagram-chem-interesu-etsja-sovremennaja-molodezh-issledovanie.html>

<sup>17</sup> Obshchestvenno-politicheskiye nastroyeniya naseleniya ukrainy, KIIS, 02.11.2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=1069&page=1&y=2021&m=11>

<sup>18</sup> Just Like All the Others: The End of the Zelensky Alternative?, Wilson Center, 02.11.2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/just-all-others-end-zelensky-alternative>

<sup>19</sup> Zelensky Leads Rating of Trust in Politicians, Ukrinform, 09.04.2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3224659-zelensky-leads-rating-of-trust-in-politicians.html>; also Dva goda prezidenta Zelenskovo, Rating Group Ukraine, 20.05.2021, [https://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/dva\\_goda\\_prezidenta\\_zelenskogo\\_ocenki\\_grazhdan.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/dva_goda_prezidenta_zelenskogo_ocenki_grazhdan.html)

<sup>20</sup> Obshchestvenno-politicheskiye nastroyeniya naseleniya ukrainy, KIIS, 02.11.2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=1069&page=1&y=2021&m=11>

Beyond the Ukrainian president, participants share an overall disapproval of Ukrainian politicians, whom they consider to be »incompetent« and only serving their own economic interests. A 23-year-old waiter in Dnipro agrees with other participants in her group about »this choice of incompetent people in power. They are businessmen rather than rulers.« And a young man in her group agrees, commenting, »We voted the incompetent people into power.«

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### »WE LACK A LITERATE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND LITERATE POLITICIANS.«

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The lack of political competition is mentioned across groups, and the participants link this feature to the stagnation they see in Ukraine's politics, with the frequent creation of new parties in the run-up to elections and a highly unstable political landscape. As one participant states, »We lack a literate political environment and literate politicians. Our government is constantly changing, but absolutely nothing happens. Political forces are good, but they lack experienced and competent politicians. At least, they don't seem to exist in our country. [...] If experienced politicians were invited from abroad, this would probably be a good thing.«

As a result, institutional trust in Ukraine has been traditionally very low, and the young generation does not seem to diverge significantly from the older generation in this respect.<sup>21</sup> The glimmer of hope symbolised for many in the focus groups by the arrival of Zelenskyy, someone who was undoubtedly not part of the political class, and therefore not politically literate, met with the harsh reality of a country that was resistant to reform. A 22-year-old courier driver remarks, for instance, that it is unclear what taxes in Ukraine are being used for, »I support high taxes on infrastructure, but high taxes only work when there's a high level of trust [in the authorities] and lower levels of corruption. Only then can people trust that taxes are going to make their life easier.«

The way President Zelenskyy and his entourage have handled the war since February 2022 has profoundly affected the way Ukrainians of all ages think about their country's political leadership. As commander-in-chief, Zelenskyy has rallied his country, with an overwhelming majority expressing support for their president, who, against advice from Western partners and expectations from Russia, did not flee the country on 24 February 2022.<sup>22</sup>

But leaving aside the current extraordinary situation, the remarks of young people in the focus groups convey their preoccupation with specific problems and issues that they con-

sider unresolved. These include flaws in the political system, the country's geopolitical orientation, the state of education, infrastructure, and health care. The overarching topic that connects discussions in the different groups, however, is rampant corruption.

## RAMPANT CORRUPTION

All focus groups are unanimous in believing that their government has engaged in a »fake fight« against corruption. Young people in both cities and across the different age groups stress just how frustrated they are with the everyday reality of corruption. A 14-year-old in Dnipro, for example, remarks, »The fight [to end corruption in Ukraine] is fake. There used to be bribes, but now the fines have been raised. That is, before, it was possible to give a bribe, but now you pay a fine.« The assessments of young people hardly differ from those of the general population, who express little confidence that politicians in general and the Verkhovna Rada, in particular, are engaged in a serious effort to limit corruption.<sup>23</sup>

The everyday reality of corruption is so disastrous since it shatters young people's confidence in their potential for social mobility. In the youngest age group in Dnipro, one participant is particularly disillusioned, mentioning that only »rich parents« matter when it comes to getting an interesting job and progressing in society. His view is not exceptional, however, and underlines the lack of social mobility. Among the older participants, explanations about and experiences with corruption were more precise, and in the 25-to-29 age group, participants provided detailed accounts of tax evasion, also drawing on examples from their own professional life.

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### »THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION WAS VERY LAZILY FOUGHT BEFORE MR. ZELENSKYY.«

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Nevertheless, the older respondents grant President Zelenskyy some credit for having tried to tackle corruption. Indeed, a 27-year-old engineer in Dnipro remarks, »The fight against corruption was very lazily fought before Mr. Zelenskyy. The state apparatus grew, and everything flourished. Now the EU is demanding that we get rid of the tax authorities, and in September this was completely abolished, and now a new structure is being created, and those who worked there before will not be given a post. That's the right thing to do.«<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ukraine's Youth: Politically Disinterested and Low Trust in the EU, Carnegie Europe: Strategic Europe, 29.06.2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75372>

<sup>22</sup> The Collective Zelensky, Meduza, 13.05.2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/13/the-collective-zelensky>

<sup>23</sup> The Fight against Corruption in Ukraine: Public Opinion, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 01.06.2018, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/the-fight-against-corruption-in-ukraine-public-opinion>

<sup>24</sup> The respondent is probably referring to the reform of the State Tax Service.

Participants in the 16-to-17 age group in Lviv believe that there has been some improvement, which they illustrate with examples from their own personal experiences. A 16-year-old boy, for instance, states, »30 years ago, you couldn't get a driving license without paying a bribe. Now you can get a driving license, you even must have one, and there is no more corruption in this regard. New schemes are being created, but this is not what it was 30 years ago.« And a 17-year-old girl remarks, »There's less corruption. And it's clear, since people can open their own businesses, and everything is not just done for the state.« In the same group, however, another girl points out that »a lot of Ukraine's economy is now in the shadow sector. And I don't know whether this is something left over from the Soviet Union or something recent.« Later in the discussion, however, she says that she sees no progress in the fight against corruption.

When it comes to the reality of corruption, the very young convey a feeling of resignation, even seeing it as part of the natural state of things. In the group of very young participants in Lviv, a girl sarcastically remarks, »These same politicians, even the president, say they will fight corruption. All presidents, when they are elected, say they will fight corruption. But once someone is in power, nothing changes. [...] We have a good society that is ready to fight for independence and so on, but everyone has become tired. The same corruption wears everyone out.« In the same group discussion, a 14-year-old girl questions whether any political authority has the power to tackle corruption, which she goes on to deny vehemently, stating, »The president has no power to fight corruption. [...] The president has almost no power to do anything. And the president's promises are simply empty.« And in the same group, a girl complains that »the government makes people believe, and pretends to change something, but in fact, there is no change at all. And if it [corruption] continues, it will ruin everything.«

## RESPECT FOR THE MILITARY

Across a number of different surveys, the level of institutional trust in Ukraine is found to be highest for the military, followed by volunteer organisations, ordinary people, and the church.<sup>25</sup> Among the general population, 72 per cent express trust in the army, even if the subnational differences hidden by these national averages should also be taken into consideration. For instance, trust in Western Ukraine is significantly above the national average. Tellingly, the 29-year-old tourism manager in Lviv, who expresses his support for a strong Ukrainian nationalism and for extensive state involvement in economic and social matters, also believes that

the Ukrainian army ought to be seriously strengthened, even if, as he says, he would not personally fight to oppose a Russian attack.

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»I WILL PARTICIPATE [IN MILITARY ACTIVITIES] IF ANY ACTIONS ARE TAKEN THAT UNDERMINE THE INTEGRITY OF UKRAINE.«

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Between 2020 and 2021, the level of trust in the military increased across the country, with participants in the focus groups praising the increased fighting capacity of the Ukrainian army. Meanwhile, young people in Dnipro in particular emphasise that they are personally prepared to fight in the event of a Russian attack. Accordingly, a 17-year-old student in Dnipro states, »I will participate [in military activities] if any actions are taken that undermine the integrity of Ukraine.« And similarly, another 18-year-old student affirms that he is ready »to fight if the authorities decide to make peace with them or, on the contrary, just do nothing, or something like that, which will aggravate the situation in the East – then I will take action.« The question of Ukraine's territorial integrity is a salient topic in all focus group discussions, and since February 2022, the view that territorial concessions should be made if they would end the war finds very little support, being acceptable to only ten per cent of those who participated in a May 2022 telephone survey.<sup>26</sup>

Tellingly, some participants in the focus groups even criticise the territorial concessions made before February 2022. One 18-year-old in Dnipro observes that »Crimea was given up without any opposition.« This participant was only ten years old when Russia annexed Crimea; his comment, therefore, speaks to the political and social mood in which young people have been brought up.

## PROTESTS AND CIVIC ACTIVISM

Young Ukrainians consider themselves to be active members of civil society. To explain this position, young respondents in a 2021 survey mentioned their personal involvement in public affairs, such as organising, or at least attending, cultural and sporting events, as well as the signing of electronic petitions or volunteering.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, young Ukrainians have been particularly involved in various protests,<sup>28</sup> and the participants in the focus group discussions agree in general that they find protests to be useful for influencing their country's politics.

<sup>25</sup> Dinamika doveriya sotsial'nym institutam v techeniye 2020–2021 godov, KIIS, 26.01.2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=rus&cat=reports&id=1093&page=2&y=2022>; see also State and Social Institutions: Who Do Ukrainians Trust and Who Don't?, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 30.03.2021, <https://dif.org.ua/en/article/state-and-social-institutions-who-do-ukrainians-trust-and-who-dont>

<sup>26</sup> Readiness for Territorial Concessions to End the War as Soon as Possible, KIIS, 24.05.2022, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1111&page=1>

<sup>27</sup> Pereezd, politika i Instagram, zn.ua, 25.06.2021, <https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/pereezd-politika-i-instagram-chem-interesuetsja-sovremennaja-molodezh-issledovanie.html>

<sup>28</sup> Emeran, Christine. 2017. New Generation Political Activism in Ukraine, New York: Routledge.

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»WHEN THERE ARE RALLIES  
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INTO ACCOUNT AND ONLY DO  
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POLITICIANS.«

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In the discussions, several young participants applaud the fact that they have the freedom to express their opinion on the street without any restrictions. In the group of participants aged between 16 and 17 in Dnipro, there is consensus that »the authorities can listen [...] when there is a gathering on the street.« However, a 19-year-old in Lviv, who thinks that, overall, her country is developing in the right direction, is very critical of the state of politics. Even though she agrees that people have the freedom to express their political views, she claims that nobody listens to them, referring to her experience with Covid-19, »When there are rallies and people protest, politicians do not take this into account and only do what is beneficial to politicians. There was the quarantine, businesses collapsed, people had nowhere to go, and no one opposed such decisions.«

On the other hand, the participants are clear about their rather critical views regarding political activities taking place online. One participant states, »You can't convince on the Internet. It makes no sense to argue on the Internet with someone who has a different position. They won't listen to you anyway.« In the eyes of young Ukrainians, the political expression that takes place online is a statement of personal opinions, not a form of political involvement. In several focus groups, young people also say that they avoid political discussions online in order to prevent conflict in their personal networks.

Some young Ukrainians show awareness of protests that take place in neighbouring countries, treating these as a benchmark to assess the situation in Ukraine. In a discussion in Dnipro, participants complain about the limited influence that protests have on Ukrainian politics and applaud the social diversity that is expressed during protests in neighbouring Poland, »But in Poland, there is more freedom. They wanted to ban abortion, but the people came out in the street. And also the people who wanted the ban, they came out in the street and did the same thing.«

## CONCLUSION

By looking at Ukraine through the prism of focus group discussions in the cities of Lviv and Dnipro, as well as through various surveys and other sources, this report conveys the social and political conditions young people were living under prior to the escalation of the war in February 2022. The discussions convey the aspirations young Ukrainians have for their country and its political institutions, as well as their frustration with the status quo. The young participants openly discuss a wide set of problems

they identify in contemporary Ukraine, only some of which they see being addressed in a credible manner by the country's leadership.

At the same time, young people express a sense of agency related to their social and political surroundings, identifying unambiguously with their Ukrainian nationality. They largely approve of civic engagement and political protests and take their elections to be meaningful political acts. They also articulate a coherent and distinct idea of Ukrainian identity, perceiving their country as part of European civilisation and largely in opposition to Russia.

The self-identification with Ukraine includes a sense of responsibility for their country, a feature that plays a crucial role in understanding the resistance that Ukrainians have shown in the face of Russian aggression. As a result, also young people have largely supported President Zelenskyy, who embodies for them the struggle to defend Ukraine's independence. Even if his approval ratings were low at the end of 2021, it was his leadership throughout the war that has enabled the mobilisation of Ukrainian society, which for now has also increased his popular approval.

It is undoubtedly too early to draw any conclusions about how the present situation will impact young Ukrainians beyond the current moment of crisis. The strong Ukrainian identity will certainly persist among the young, an identity that, at the end of 2021, still included a hopeful narrative about the future. The term »crisis«, in the original Greek understanding of the term, defines, among other things, a decisive turning point in the development of a disease – decisions taken at that moment determine the future course of development and have profound implications well beyond the crisis itself. Young Ukrainians have certainly been socialised into an environment of perpetual crisis, but the present situation will fundamentally change the course of their country's history. Nevertheless, the structural problems and the values that young people express today will persist beyond the current crisis. They will still be part of the society that these young people will come to shape once the tanks have returned to the barracks and the fighting has come to an end.

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## IMPRINT

Publisher:  
FES Regional Office for International Cooperation  
Reichsratsstr. 13/5  
A-1010 Vienna  
Contact: [info.vienna@fes.de](mailto:info.vienna@fes.de)

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Design: pertext, Berlin | [www.pertext.de](http://www.pertext.de)

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ISBN 978-3-98628-206-6

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## A GLIMMER OF HOPE

### Youth in Ukraine before the War



Young Ukrainians express a strong sense of national identity across the focus groups. They explain their sense of belonging to Ukraine with reference to their country's departure from a Soviet mentality, a distinct linguistic identity, and an explicit rejection of Russian influence. For the young participants, Ukraine's relationship with Russia had already been shattered before the end of 2021. The war in Donbas and the 2014 annexation of Crimea were omnipresent in the focus group discussions, and the young expressed great resentment when discussing these topics.



Young Ukrainians see themselves as unambiguously part of Europe. This involves an appreciation of a European mentality and of European values, alongside expectations relating to socioeconomic development and national security. Young people also state their desire to become part of the European Union.



Young Ukrainians consider informal political engagement and participation in elections to be useful. They express a sense of being involved in the public sphere and show a desire for their fellow citizens to become active in the political and social realm. Civic engagement is discussed approvingly, as are political protests.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<https://democracy.fes.de/>